

Female Headteachers' Lived Experiences of Challenges in Public Basic Schools in Assin South Municipality, Ghana

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Abstract

Anchored in the Standpoint Feminist Theory and complemented by the African Feminist Theory, this study examined the challenges faced by female headteachers in public basic schools in Ghana's Assin South Municipality. Guided by an interpretivist paradigm and employing a phenomenological qualitative design, purposive sampling was used to select twelve full-time female headteachers with at least two years of experience in their current roles. Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide that focused on school-related, student-related, and personal-related challenges. Trustworthiness was ensured through confirmability, credibility, dependability, and transferability, while ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent, maintaining confidentiality, ensuring anonymity, and encrypting data. The results revealed key school-related challenges, including teacher absenteeism, work overload, inadequate teaching and learning resources, low teacher motivation, and ineffective use of instructional time. Student-related challenges included a lack of commitment and irregular school attendance, indiscipline, and emotional burdens. Personal challenges identified were psychological pressure and tension, work-life imbalance, unclear educational policies and regulations, and discrimination and stereotyping. Addressing these interconnected challenges is crucial for strengthening female school leadership and enhancing educational quality. It is recommended that the Assin South Municipal Education Directorate develop and enforce gender-responsive policies, combat societal biases, and ensure clear communication on educational reforms to support female headteachers.

KEYWORDS: Challenges, female headteachers, personal-related, school-related, student-related

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Ghanaian education system has implemented reforms to improve access to quality education in public basic schools, resulting in increased student enrollment. However, challenges in effective school management and leadership persist (UNESCO, 2020). Globally, there is growing attention to gender equality in educational leadership, with female headteachers playing a key role in promoting educational success and inclusive learning environments (Abonyi et al., 2022; Lazaridou, 2024; Miralles-Cardona, 2025). The percentage of female educators in developing nations has markedly increased (Iyekolo et al., 2020). Despite this, females are significantly underrepresented in leadership roles (Segkulu & Gyimah, 2016), primarily due to socio-cultural impediments, a lack of qualified applicants, and male-dominated, biased appointment systems (Alhassan & Duorinaah, 2020; Segkulu & Gyimah, 2016). Cultural stereotypes in Ghana perpetuate the belief that men are more appropriate for leadership roles (Agezo & Hope, 2011; Djan & Gordon, 2020). Generally, female headteachers frequently encounter administrative difficulties (Yeng et al., 2024), including stress and burnout (Abonyi et al., 2024; Yeng et al., 2024), which are exacerbated by insufficient support (Yeng & Carrington, 2024; Yeng et al., 2024).

Although the number of female teachers in developing nations has risen, women continue to face discrimination and remain underrepresented in school leadership positions (Brion & Ampah-Mensah, 2021; Iyekolo et al., 2020). Female leaders frequently face disparaging remarks from male counterparts, which perpetuate gendered perceptions of women's roles (Mensah & Mensah, 2015; Sikweyiya et al., 2020). Brussino and McBrien (2022) observed that insufficient female representation diminishes their impact on educational policies. This disparity is exacerbated by cultural norms, societal expectations, and limited access to professional growth (Dako-Gyeke & Owusu, 2013). Female headteachers also face leadership challenges, resource limitations, and inadequate support systems and mentorship (Akuka, 2021; Kissi & Issaka, 2023; Koberling, 2024; Mcilongo & Strydom, 2021), as observed in Assin South Municipality. Some female headteachers face persistent gender and institutional biases, high societal expectations, patriarchal systems, and systemic barriers that affect their advancement and well-being (Ghamrawi, 2023; Day et al., 2020; Amakye et al., 2021; Segkulu & Gyimah, 2016). Female headteachers in Ghana often encounter resistance, poor coordination, challenges from teachers, and misunderstandings with parents, which undermine their authority, limit growth, and hinder the achievement of SDG 5 (Yeng et al., 2024; Nave, 2021). These challenges further complicate leadership effectiveness for female headteachers, particularly in relation to school-related, student-related, and personal-related factors. However, Dampson (2021) argued that female headteachers demonstrate resilience through emotional intelligence, adaptability, and authenticity.

School-related challenges are internal barriers that hinder effective leadership, teaching, and learning, including poor infrastructure, inadequate resources, student indiscipline, teacher absenteeism, low motivation, administrative overload, lack of authority support, financial difficulties, and conflicts (Benewaa, 2020; Mgimba & Mwila, 2022; Sibuyi et al., 2024). In Ghana, Ibrahim et al. (2024) identified limited male support, societal pressure, and restricted authority for female headteachers in Sekyere East District, while Akuka (2021) found similar issues in Bolgatanga. Moreover, Mensah (2017) reported gender bias and inadequate professional

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development in Kumasi. Globally, Schwab et al. (2017) linked moral issues to scepticism, but Chityori et al. (2018) argued that such challenges are preventable.

According to Iqbal and Zahoor (2024), student-related challenges arise from students' behaviours, attitudes, and needs that obstruct effective school leadership and learning. These challenges include indiscipline, absenteeism, low motivation, gender sensitivity issues, and a lack of psychosocial support, often intensified for female headteachers by gender-based constraints. In Ghana, Peter (2019) identified truancy and substance abuse, while Lopez et al. (2021) highlighted negative attitudes and violence. Yeng et al. (2024) noted that gender stereotypes lead to resistance and disobedience toward female leaders. In Kenya, Nzeli (2013) linked student disrespect to cultural gender norms. Similarly, Shemahonge and Malingumu (2022) in Tanzania emphasised patriarchal attitudes and a lack of female role models as key challenges.

Personal-related challenges faced by female headteachers stem from both societal and individual influences that impact their leadership and well-being. Emotional stress, work-life imbalance, low self-esteem, and gender stereotypes are common issues shaped by cultural expectations. Oteng (2017) observed that female teachers in Kumasi, despite valuing flexibility, struggled to maintain a balance between their family and work life. Edwards and Oteng (2019) noted ineffective support systems and socio-cultural barriers as key obstacles. Akuamoah-Boateng (2020) linked stress and dissatisfaction to extended hours and a lack of policies. Attom et al. (2021) highlighted emotional strain from male resistance and spousal non-support in Cape Coast. Ibrahim et al. (2024) identified societal pressure in Sekyere East, while Shava et al. (2019) cited discrimination and domestic roles in Zimbabwe.

Schwab et al. (2017) found that successful female leaders use mentorship and support networks to overcome bias and empower others. Alhassan and Duorinaah (2020) observed that learners in female-led Junior High Schools (JHS) in Northern Ghana outperformed those in male-led schools. Female heads build stronger emotional connections with students, enhancing engagement and achievement (Arar & Abramovitz, 2013; Iyekolo et al., 2020). To address these challenges, Day et al. (2020) emphasised institutional exclusion, while Schleicher (2015), Ghamrawi (2023), and Piala et al. (2024) called for equity and capacity building. Studying these barriers in Assin South Municipality is essential for advancing female leadership. The behaviour of some female headteachers, which sometimes disrupts school administration, may stem from school-related, student-related, and personal-related challenges. Like teachers, female headteachers are affected by personal issues that influence their leadership and administrative effectiveness. Previous studies (Adongo et al., 2023; Akuka, 2021; Djan & Gordon, 2020; Ibrahim et al., 2024; Yeng et al., 2024) indicate that female headteachers across Ghana face similar challenges.

These challenges, often rooted in socio-cultural and gender biases, disadvantage female headteachers, and some male subordinates undermine their authority. However, no study has specifically examined these challenges in public basic schools in Assin South Municipality. This qualitative study, therefore, investigated the lived experiences of female headteachers, aiming to amplify their voices, inform policy, and contribute to the literature on gender and educational leadership in Ghana and beyond. This study is distinct in its focus, context, and methodology. It examines only female headteachers and investigates gender-specific barriers, such as balancing

work and family, resistance from male coworkers, and patriarchal expectations. The study, conducted in Assin South Municipality, Ghana, illustrates the local cultural, social, and economic dynamics that influence challenges such as stereotypes, community perceptions, and resource limitations. The study employed a qualitative methodology to document lived experiences, emotions, and coping strategies, transcending mere numerical data. It integrates gender perspectives, contextual realities, and narrative depth to highlight substantial challenges frequently neglected in broader studies. To achieve the purpose of the study, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What school-related challenges do female headteachers face in public basic schools within the Assin South Municipality?
2. What student-related challenges do female headteachers face in public basic schools within the Assin South Municipality?
3. What personal-related challenges do female headteachers face in public basic schools within Assin South Municipality?

This study draws on Standpoint Feminist Theory and African Feminist Theory to critically examine the lived experiences of female headteachers in public basic schools in the Assin South Municipality of Ghana. Standpoint Feminist Theory argues that women's social positions offer unique and necessary insights into inequality, power relations, and the ways structures shape everyday life (Budgeon, 2021; Harding, 2004; Collins, 2000). From the perspectives of female headteachers, the theory highlights how patriarchal norms, gender stereotypes, and institutional barriers influence leadership practice and decision-making in Ghanaian schools (Burns, 2020; Hartmann, 2015). It positions the female headteachers' voices as authoritative sources of knowledge, enabling the study to capture how they interpret, navigate, and respond to gendered constraints in their professional roles.

African Feminist Theory further strengthens this analysis by situating females' experiences in African socio-cultural, economic, and political contexts. Scholars (Nnaemeka, 2004; Oyěwùmí, 1997) emphasize that the realities of African women cannot be understood outside the cultural values, communal relationships, and indigenous knowledge systems that shape daily life. This perspective is particularly relevant in Ghana, where traditional gender expectations, community norms, and social hierarchies continue to influence school leadership. African Feminist Theory, therefore, provides the cultural grounding needed to understand how female headteachers in Assin South navigate expectations from chiefs, community members, parents, teachers, and local education authorities, and how they balance leadership demands with broader societal responsibilities.

Together, these two theoretical frameworks offer a comprehensive lens for analysing the experiences of female headteachers. Standpoint Feminist Theory foregrounds its positionality and the structural inequalities it confronts, while African Feminist Theory contextualises these experiences within local cultural realities. Applying both theories enables the study to capture not only the universal challenges associated with gender and leadership, such as discrimination, marginalisation, and limited support, but also the uniquely Ghanaian dimensions arising from socio-cultural norms, communal expectations, and traditional power structures. This dual lens,

therefore, ensures a holistic and culturally relevant understanding of how female headteachers experience, interpret, and navigate their leadership roles in the Assin South Municipality.

2.0 METHODS

2.1 Study Philosophy and Design

The study adopted an interpretivist paradigm, which emphasises understanding the lived experiences, meanings, and subjective realities of individuals (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This made it suitable for exploring the personal and contextual challenges faced by female headteachers from their perspectives. A qualitative research approach, which is ideal for producing empathetic, actionable findings (Addai-Mununkum & Setordzi, 2023), was used to examine the personal and professional experiences of female headteachers and the meanings they attach to their challenges within specific cultural and social contexts. This approach enabled female headteachers in the study's settings to share their experiences and perspectives. Flexible, in-depth probing revealed hidden issues and more profound insights (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Thanh & Thanh, 2015). Phenomenology was used as a research design to capture the essence of female headteachers' lived experiences (Pham, 2022). This helped to gain deep insights into how female headteachers perceive, interpret, and make sense of the challenges in their leadership roles.

2.2 Participants

The study targeted all female headteachers of public basic schools in the Assin South Municipality. Using purposive sampling, twelve female headteachers in the municipality who had held their current positions for at least two academic years were selected. Experts agree on the appropriateness of the sample size for a phenomenological study (Fraenkel et al., 2018; Stahl & King, 2020). Data were gathered through face-to-face semi-structured interviews focusing on school-related, student-related, and personal-related challenges faced by female headteachers. Data saturation was observed after interviewing ten participants. Nonetheless, interviews continued with the remaining two to explore further emerging themes. Before the interviews, participants received consent forms and were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and data security using encryption. With participants' consent, interviews were recorded for transcription and analysis.

2.3 Data Validity and Analysis

The trustworthiness of the study was established using confirmability, credibility, dependability, and transferability criteria (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stahl & King, 2020). Credibility was enhanced by spending thirty days building trust with participants, gathering detailed data, and conducting member checks through transcript and interpretation reviews to ensure accurate representation of participants' views. A thorough record of all research phases was maintained to ensure

dependability. To enhance transferability, the report included rich descriptions of the participants, the research context, and the findings, allowing others to assess the relevance of the results across different settings. Data were analysed using themes, guided by Creswell and Creswell's (2018) six-step qualitative framework. Transcribed interviews were used to generate new ideas, group them into themes, and tell the story through participants' quotes.

3.0 RESULTS

This study investigated the challenges faced by female headteachers in public basic schools in the Assin South Municipality, Central Region, Ghana. Data were collected from 12 female headteachers through face-to-face interviews, which were recorded verbatim and then thematically analysed. Emerging themes aligned with the study's objectives of school-related challenges, student-related challenges, and personal-related challenges. Pseudonyms (FHT1 to FHT12) representing Female Headteachers 1 to 12 were used to attribute quotes from the participants.

School-Related Challenges

The female headteachers in public basic schools in the Assin South Municipality reported some school-related challenges they face. These were categorised into the following themes: teacher absenteeism, ineffective utilisation of instructional hours, work overload, poor classroom management skills, low teacher motivation, conflicts, teacher resistance, and a lack of or inadequate teaching and learning resources. The following are some responses based on the identified themes.

Theme 1: Teacher Absenteeism:

Teacher and student absenteeism is a recurring challenge. When teachers or learners are frequently absent, it disrupts the flow of academic work and affects performance (FHT2; Field Interview 2023).

I encounter challenges in school administration, particularly when teachers are absent without prior notice, and informally delegate their teaching responsibilities to colleagues. This disrupts instructional planning and accountability (FHT5; Field Interview 2023).

I face challenges that affect school administration, such as teachers being absent without permission and delegating their classes to colleagues without my knowledge (FHT1; Field Interview 2023).

Regular teacher absenteeism is a problem because it disrupts instructional continuity, leading to gaps in student learning and, consequently, poor academic performance. Although some teachers make internal arrangements with colleagues while away, teacher absenteeism creates a negative impression of a school environment among school-community members and other stakeholders (FHT9; Field Interview 2023).

Theme 2: Ineffective Utilisation of Instructional Time

In my school, some teachers do not fully utilise their instructional time in the classroom, particularly during practical lessons such as those in Basic Design and Technology. Often, these teachers focus heavily on extended explanations and instructions, which limits students' active participation in learning activities. At times, rather than using the period effectively for teaching, they spend more time conversing with students (FHT3; Field Interview, 2023).

A significant concern in this school is the ineffective use of instructional time. Some teachers arrive late to class or leave early, resulting in valuable teaching hours being lost (FHT6; Field Interview, 2023).

Theme 3: Work Overload

Some teachers are overburdened with work, which limits their effective use of instructional time. Despite these issues, it is essential to comply with the Ghana Education Service's required teaching periods (FHT4; Field Interview, 2023).

The volume of administrative work I must handle daily is overwhelming, preventing me from focusing on my instructional leadership. My administrative work often takes up time I should be using to supervise teaching and support my staff and students in improving learning outcomes (FHT7; Field Interview, 2023).

The growing student population has led to overcrowded classrooms, stretched resources, reduced teaching quality, and made it difficult to give students adequate attention and support. This affects the overall school effectiveness (FHT8; Field Interview, 2023).

Theme 4: Poor Classroom Management Skills

Some teachers at my school struggle with classroom management due to large class sizes. This leads to frequent disciplinary issues in classrooms, with adverse impacts on instructional activities (FHT12; Field Interview, 2023).

Poor classroom management is a serious issue here. Some teachers struggle to maintain discipline, and it affects teaching and learning outcomes (FHT10; Field Interview, 2023).

Theme 5: Low Motivation for Teachers

The lack of extrinsic incentives for teachers leads to low motivation and a hostile school environment, hindering collaboration, inclusion, and professional growth. Ultimately, this situation reduces teacher productivity and affects student performance and school goals (FHT11; Field Interview, 2023).

One major challenge at this school is low teacher motivation. Many teachers feel unappreciated, overworked, and unsupported, which affects their commitment to teaching (FHT3; Field Interview, 2023).

Theme 6: Conflicts

At times, conflicts among staff members create tension and disrupt communication, making it difficult to coordinate activities and implement decisions effectively (FHT9; Field Interview, 2023).

One of the biggest challenges I face as a female headteacher is managing conflicts among teachers, students, and, at times, even parents. It disrupts the school's progress if not handled properly (FHT2; Field Interview, 2023).

Theme 7: Resistance from Teachers

I occasionally face resistance from a few teachers who challenge my authority, and these interpersonal conflicts not only affect staff morale but also hamper the smooth running of the school (FHT1; Field Interview, 2023).

Sometimes the biggest challenge is the resistance I encounter from teachers, especially male staff, who often question decisions or refuse to adapt to changes, which makes school improvement difficult (FHT9; Field Interview, 2023).

Theme 8: Insufficient Teaching and Learning Resources

One of our persistent struggles is the lack of adequate teaching and learning resources. Teachers are doing their best, but without the right materials, effective teaching becomes very difficult. (FHT8; Field Interview 2023).

Lack of basic teaching and learning resources is a significant challenge for me as a headteacher. Without adequate textbooks, furniture, and other teaching and learning resources, it becomes tough to support both teachers and students effectively in the teaching and learning process (FHT4; Field Interview, 2023).

Student-Related Challenges

According to the female headteachers, student-related challenges included a lack of student commitment, irregular school attendance, student indiscipline, and students' emotional burdens. Some of the responses from the female headteachers are indicated as follows:

Theme 1: Lack of Commitment among Students and Irregular School Attendance

A significant difficulty among students is the widespread lack of enthusiasm for studying, characterized by inconsistent attendance, unfinished work, and minimal participation. Many students skip classes and show low interest and enthusiasm in their studies, making it difficult to track progress and enforce discipline. Such behaviours hinder instruction, education, disrupt the

academic calendar, and hinder effective classroom and school management (FHT5; Field Interview, 2023).

Negative student attitudes towards learning, including ignoring homework and showing general disinterest, adversely affect academic performance and school morale. These obstacles hinder teachers' ability to maintain academic discipline and implement improvement strategies. This affects the overall school operation (FHT10; Field Interview, 2023).

Theme 2: Student Indiscipline

One of the persistent issues we face is student indiscipline. Learners disregard school rules and exhibit disruptive behaviour, creating a tense learning environment that eventually affects both teaching effectiveness and learning outcomes (FHT1; Field Interview, 2023).

Student indiscipline is a significant challenge in my school. Persistent rule-breaking, including lateness, disrespect, and defiance, disrupts teaching and daily routines. Managing such behaviour consumes valuable time and energy, making it difficult to maintain order and focus on academic improvement (FHT7; Field Interview, 2023).

Theme 3: Students' Emotional Burdens

Many students arrive at school facing emotional and physical challenges such as neglect, anxiety, low self-worth, broken families, hunger, and lack of healthcare. These issues negatively affect their focus, behaviour, attendance, and academic performance, making it difficult for them to fully engage in classroom activities (FHT2; Field Interview, 2023).

Addressing students' emotional and welfare needs requires significant time and effort, often without adequate support systems. This places an additional burden on teachers and headteachers and hinders the smooth implementation of school programmes and the achievement of academic goals (FHT2; Field Interview, 2023).

Personal-Related Challenges

From the views of the female headteachers, personal-related challenges reported included psychological pressure and tension, work-life balance, unclear GES policies and regulations, and discrimination and stereotyping. The following are some of the responses that were obtained from the data gathered:

Theme 1: Psychological Pressure and Tension

As a headteacher, balancing expectations from the education office, teachers, parents, and students often leads to significant psychological pressure, leaving me mentally and emotionally exhausted. Dealing with tight deadlines, conflicts, and limited resources further adds to the stress and impacts my well-being (FHT6; Field Interview, 2023).

The need to constantly prove myself as a competent leader, especially as a woman in a male-dominated environment, creates constant psychological tension. Indirect resistance from some staff and a lack of support contribute to mental exhaustion, reducing confidence and clarity in decision-making (FHT7; Field Interview, 2023).

Managing staff conflicts, administrative responsibilities, and teaching duties simultaneously can be overwhelming. The continuous pressure and mental fatigue interfere with my ability to lead effectively and maintain focus on school improvement (FHT8; Field Interview, 2023).

Theme 2: Work-Life Balance

Managing my duties at school alongside my responsibilities at home is challenging. I often feel like I am not meeting expectations in either area (FHT3; Field Interview, 2023).

Separating work from personal life is tough; even at home, school-related tasks occupy my mind, leaving little time to relax or recover (FHT7; Field Interview, 2023).

Hmmm! Balancing school leadership with family responsibilities is often challenging. As both a mother and headteacher, I sometimes struggle to give full attention to school matters due to pressing home duties. These competing demands can be overwhelming and occasionally interfere with my administrative focus, affecting the smooth running of the school (FHT9; Field Interview, 2023).

Theme 3: Lack of Clarity of GES Policies and Regulations

At times, I find it challenging to understand some GES policies and regulations fully. Some of the GES rules and policies are not clearly explained or communicated, so I struggle to interpret them correctly. The language used is often too technical, and without proper orientation, it becomes difficult to implement them effectively in the day-to-day administration of the school (FHT10; Field Interview, 2023).

Sometimes GES policies are not clearly explained, leaving me to interpret them on my own, which creates confusion and adds pressure to my role as a headteacher (FHT1; Field Interview, 2023).

The lack of clarity in GES directives makes implementation difficult. I am often unsure whether I am doing the right thing, and that uncertainty affects my confidence in making school-wide decisions (FHT7; Field Interview, 2023).

Theme 4: Discrimination and Stereotyping

Sometimes, I face gender-based discrimination from some male colleagues and subordinates, such as challenges to authority, passive resistance, and dismissive attitudes, which undermine leadership, fuel conflict, and disrupt school administration. This eventually affects the teaching and learning environment (FHT6; Field Interview, 2023).

As a woman in school leadership, I am often not taken seriously because some staff assume I am too soft to make tough decisions, simply because of my gender. There are times when I face subtle discrimination. Comments like, ‘this would not happen under a male head, make it clear that some still doubt my capabilities (FHT5; Field Interview, 2023).

I occasionally encounter gender-based discrimination from male colleagues and subordinates who question my authority, resist my decisions, or act dismissively. Such behaviours undermine leadership, cause conflict, and disrupt school operations, ultimately creating an uncomfortable environment that shifts focus away from quality teaching and learning (FHT2; Field Interview, 2023).

My skills and capabilities as a female headteacher do not necessarily pose a challenge, but the perception that only men must lead creates a small challenge for me. This situation makes it difficult for me to reach a consensus with my subordinates, especially in decision-making processes (FHT1; Field Interview, 2023).

4.0 DISCUSSION

This section discusses the research findings on the school-related, student-related, and personal-related challenges faced by female headteachers in the Assin South Municipality. The study revealed that these challenges are shaped by a combination of structural limitations within schools, student behaviours and needs, and the personal pressures that accompany leadership in a culturally complex environment. Together, these interconnected factors influence how female headteachers carry out their roles, respond to daily demands, and sustain their well-being. The following discussion highlights the key issues that emerged from the data and explains how they shape the leadership experiences of female headteachers in the municipality.

4.1 School-Related Challenges

Teacher absenteeism, as a school-related challenge, significantly affects the quality of teaching and learning in public basic schools. Participants indicated that it disrupts lesson continuity, reduces instructional time, and harms student performance. This aligns with Maceke et al. (2025) and O’Sullivan (2022), who indicated that teacher absenteeism, stemming from inadequate leadership, substandard working conditions, and weakened job satisfaction, is associated with low morale and professionalism, ultimately resulting in poor educational quality in Sub-Saharan Africa. UNESCO (2017) added that it reduces learner motivation. Participants believed that

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teacher absenteeism causes academic inconsistency, rushed teaching, and poor content delivery, and that stronger supervision, attendance monitoring, incentives, professional development, and accountability measures would ensure consistent teacher presence and instructional delivery.

The ineffective use of instructional time is a primary concern affecting the quality of teaching and learning in public basic schools. Participants noted that some teachers fail to fully utilise their periods, especially during practical subjects like Basic Design and Technology. Instead of promoting hands-on learning, they rely on lengthy explanations, limiting student participation. Others spend time chatting with students rather than focusing on teaching, thereby reducing student engagement and lesson effectiveness (Adentwi, 2005; Alhawiti, 2023). Abadzi (2009) linked time-on-task to achievement, noting that poor time use leads to inefficiency. Bruns et al. (2011) and Liu et al. (2024) emphasised that maximising instructional time improves outcomes, highlighting the need for better monitoring, time management training, and professional accountability.

The participants' responses confirm that work overload significantly hinders the efficiency of teachers and school leaders in public basic schools. Excessive workloads restrict effective use of instructional time, a concern supported by Asare and Nti (2014), who observed that heavy workloads impair lesson delivery and learner engagement. Despite these challenges, adherence to GES-mandated teaching periods remains compulsory. Administrative duties also limit school leaders' focus on instructional leadership, such as supervision and staff support. This aligns with Osai et al. (2021), who found that high enrolment in overcrowded classrooms is associated with increased teacher workload, limiting their effectiveness in duties such as student assessments and support. High student-teacher ratios undermine teaching quality and school effectiveness, and they concluded that administrative overload detracts from efforts to enhance learning outcomes.

The responses indicate that poor classroom management negatively impacts teaching and learning in public basic schools. Large class sizes make it challenging for some teachers to maintain order, resulting in frequent disciplinary issues and disrupted instruction. This supports Nemine et al. (2019), who found that overcrowded classrooms increase disruptive behaviour and reduce teacher control. Again, poor discipline management impacts learning outcomes by creating chaotic environments that reduce student focus. Siddique et al. (2024) emphasised that effective classroom management is crucial for academic success, and inadequate training exacerbates these challenges.

Low teacher motivation has a significant impact on school effectiveness. Responses from female headteachers suggest that a lack of extrinsic incentives, such as financial rewards, recognition, and career advancement, lowers teacher morale, creating a hostile school climate that hinders collaboration, inclusion, and professional growth. This ultimately lowers teacher productivity and affects student performance and school objectives, placing undue pressure on teachers and headteachers, given that the quality of learners' achievement partly measures their effectiveness. Vulley (2020) and Tanaka (2010) confirmed that motivation is crucial for teacher performance and a positive learning environment. Participants mentioned that many teachers often feel unappreciated, overworked, and unsupported, which affects their commitment. Forson et al. (2021)

argued that a lack of support leads to burnout and attrition and emphasised that supportive environments sustain motivation and improve learning outcomes.

Conflict in schools poses a serious challenge to communication, collaboration, and effective functioning. Staff conflicts create tension, disrupt communication, and hinder coordination. Unresolved conflicts reduce teamwork and morale. Moreover, difficulties in managing disputes among teachers, students, and parents can disrupt school operations and compromise the learning environment. Amponsah (2020) observed that unmanaged conflicts breed distrust and distract from educational goals. Olusegun (2024) also emphasised that effective conflict resolution through open communication and emotional intelligence is key to promoting school progress.

The female headteachers' accounts demonstrate that they often encounter significant opposition from teaching staff, characterised by a persistent trend of male teachers challenging decisions or opposing change. They noted that this kind of opposition not only lowers staff morale, but it also makes it difficult for their schools to run smoothly and improve. Yeng et al. (2024) noted that female headteachers in Northern Ghana face deeply rooted socio-cultural challenges, including stereotyping, gender bias, and active resistance from teachers, which hinder their leadership effectiveness, despite their instructional practices being equivalent to those of their male counterparts. They did not discount the gender dynamics shaping these experiences, which reveal underlying power issues in school leadership.

The lack of adequate teaching and learning resources poses a significant challenge for female headteachers in public basic schools. Participants highlighted the limited access to textbooks, teaching aids, furniture, and space, which undermines lesson delivery and leadership effectiveness. These shortages, combined with inadequate support from the Ghana Education Service, compel headteachers to seek external help, causing frustration among staff and parents. The situation weakens their authority and compounds gender-specific leadership challenges. As Akuka (2021) argued, inadequate infrastructure hinders school effectiveness. Equitable resource distribution is therefore crucial to empower female headteachers and promote quality education and inclusive leadership.

4.2 Student-Related Challenges

The study revealed that a lack of student commitment and irregular attendance negatively impact academic progress and school operations. Participants highlighted issues such as absenteeism, missed classes, incomplete homework, and low participation. These behaviours disrupt instruction, require constant revision, and delay academic progress. This supports the idea that poor school attendance creates learning gaps, leading students to miss classes and lose knowledge and skills. This increases the likelihood that they will receive low grades, fail classes, and ultimately drop out of school (Ampiah & Adu-Yeboah, 2009; Ofori et al., 2018). From the responses given by the female headteachers, it is noted that low student engagement hinders reforms and teacher motivation, and that attendance issues weaken school culture. Hence, schools should enhance support systems, engage parents, and promote participation through mentorship and interactive learning (UNESCO, 2020).

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The study showed that student indiscipline is a significant challenge for female headteachers in public basic schools. Participants cited disruptive behaviours such as lateness, defiance, and disrespect, which weaken leadership and affect academic and co-curricular activities. This confirms the view that indiscipline lowers academic standards and teacher morale (Asare & Nti, 2014; Ofori et al., 2018). Managing such issues consumes time and energy, reducing focus on instructional leadership. Female headteachers reported spending more time on disciplinary issues than on supervision. Indiscipline negatively impacts the classroom atmosphere, teaching, and learning, hindering progress (Yayie & Adade, 2020). In line with this, the Ghana Education Service (2017) suggests the need for holistic interventions involving stakeholders and the implementation of effective policies (Ghana Education Service, 2017).

The female headteachers' statements indicate that students in public basic schools in the Assin South Municipality often face emotional, social, and psychological challenges such as neglect, anxiety, hunger, and peer pressure, which affect their focus, attendance, and behaviour. These issues hinder students' academic achievement and disrupt school programmes. Ametepee and Anastasiou (2015) noted that emotional instability limits learning. Asare and Nti (2014), on the other hand, emphasise the deficiency of support structures, thereby leaving headteachers and teachers to bear these burdens independently. This shifts school leaders' focus from instructional responsibilities to student welfare.

4.3 Personal-Related Challenges

The responses indicate that female headteachers face substantial psychological stress due to the multifaceted nature of school leadership. Constant demands from GES, teachers, parents, and students, coupled with challenges like staff conflicts, deadlines, and limited resources, lead to emotional exhaustion. A major contributor to this stress is operating in a male-dominated environment, where female leaders feel continually pressured to prove their competence amid subtle resistance. These findings align with earlier research on the emotional strain, role overload, and gender bias that women face in leadership (Coleman, 2005; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Shakeshaft, 1989), and underscore the need for gender-responsive professional support.

The findings revealed that female headteachers struggle to balance school leadership with domestic responsibilities, leading to emotional exhaustion and reduced effectiveness. Participants expressed difficulty in separating their work life from their home life, often feeling overwhelmed by the dual demands of leadership and motherhood. This reflects broader research showing that women in leadership, especially in patriarchal societies, face intense work-life pressures (Coleman, 2005; Eagly & Carli, 2007). Bush et al. (2022) also noted personal challenges, including low self-efficacy and work-family conflict. The finding emphasizes the need for gender-sensitive policies, mentorship, and institutional support to help female leaders manage these competing responsibilities effectively.

The findings highlight ongoing concerns among female headteachers about the lack of clarity in some Ghana Education Service (GES) policies. Participants noted that policy directives are often technical, poorly communicated, and imposed through a top-down approach, making implementation difficult. Without adequate orientation or training, female headteachers struggle

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with confidence and effective decision-making (Bush & Oduro, 2006). In male-dominated environments, unclear policies exacerbate stress and undermine leadership (Coleman, 2005; Shava et al., 2019). The findings call for the development of inclusive policies, the creation of simplified policy briefs, regular training, and the establishment of regional support centres to enhance understanding and support effective leadership among female headteachers.

The results showed that gender-based discrimination and stereotypes hinder the effectiveness of female headteachers in public basic schools. Participants reported resistance, dismissive attitudes, and challenges to authority from male colleagues and subordinates, often disrupting school leadership. These experiences align with studies by Coleman (2005), Bush and Oduro (2006), and Ndebele (2018), which highlight societal beliefs that undermine female leadership. Female headteachers also face low confidence, negative attitudes from parents, and limited institutional support (Ibrahim et al., 2024). These findings call for gender-sensitive leadership training, inclusive policies, and improved support systems to address these biases and promote gender equity in educational leadership.

4.4 Implications for Theory and Practice

The findings strengthen both Standpoint Feminist Theory and African Feminist Theory by showing that female headteachers' leadership experiences are shaped by overlapping school, student, personal, and societal challenges. Issues such as limited resources, cultural expectations, and gender stereotypes highlight the need to view leadership through the lens of women's unique positions in Ghanaian public basic schools. Their perspectives offer valuable insights into how patriarchy, institutional norms, and community expectations influence leadership effectiveness. The results also expand African Feminist Theory by demonstrating how local cultural practices and communal relationships affect women's leadership at the basic school level.

Practically, the study highlights the need to improve working conditions and support systems for female headteachers. Strengthening accountability, reducing teacher absenteeism, and improving resource allocation are critical for better school performance. Addressing student absenteeism and indiscipline requires stronger collaboration with families and communities, as well as improved guidance services. Female headteachers also need mentorship, stress-management support, gender-responsive policies, and better supervisory structures to balance professional and personal demands. Finally, reducing gender bias through sensitisation, fair promotions, and inclusive leadership training is essential for creating environments where female leaders can thrive and improve learning outcomes.

4.5 Recommendations

1. The Assin South Municipal Education Directorate should promote gender-sensitive, context-specific leadership frameworks that account for organisational, student, and societal gender influences. The Directorate should move leadership development beyond individual skills to address systemic and cultural challenges unique to female headteachers. This approach will support the creation of inclusive leadership models and targeted support systems to empower women in school leadership roles.

2. The Assin South Municipal Education Directorate and female headteachers should implement practical strategies to address both institutional and personal challenges. These include reducing teacher absenteeism, improving the use of instructional time, improving teacher motivation, and ensuring continuous professional development. Schools should also provide sufficient teaching resources and adopt holistic approaches to address students' academic and emotional needs. The Assin South Municipal Education Directorate should strengthen counselling and workload management to reduce burnout and enhance leadership effectiveness.
3. The Assin South Municipal Education Directorate should introduce and enforce gender-responsive policies that improve infrastructure, ensure adequate teaching resources, and hold teachers accountable. These policies must also promote gender equity by addressing societal biases and clearly communicating reforms. The Assin South Municipal Directorate should establish continuous professional development, mental health support, and workload management systems to build female headteachers' leadership capacity and promote inclusive school administration.
4. The findings revealed deeply rooted societal attitudes suggesting that women should prioritize domestic and family responsibilities over assuming school leadership roles. These perceptions contribute to the marginalization of female headteachers and hinder their authority and effectiveness in school administration. To address these challenges, the Assin South Municipal Education Directorate, in collaboration with the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, Non-Governmental Organizations, and local government authorities, should implement targeted community education and sensitization programmes in the Municipality. These initiatives should focus on transforming gender-biased mindsets, promoting the value of women in leadership, and encouraging equitable support for female leaders within schools and communities.
5. Further research by interested researchers should explore similar gender-related issues in other districts, municipalities, and metropolises, particularly in areas where little or no empirical data exists on school leadership and gender dynamics. This will help inform policy development and tailor interventions to specific regional contexts.

4.6 CONCLUSIONS

Female headteachers in Assin South Municipality face a range of interconnected challenges at the school, student, personal, and societal levels. Teacher absenteeism, low motivation, and inadequate resources make it difficult for schools to run smoothly. Student absenteeism, low discipline, and a lack of commitment make it difficult for students to learn. Female leaders have a hard time with emotional exhaustion, lack of support from their employers, and a poor balance between work and home life. These challenges are worsened by gender bias and stereotypes. These barriers make it more challenging for female headteachers to demonstrate effective leadership and drive school improvement. The study emphasises the critical need for policy reforms to improve the welfare of teachers and students, foster gender-sensitive leadership support, and establish inclusive environments that bolster female leadership and enhance educational outcomes in public basic schools in the Assin South Municipality.

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DECLARATION

Data Availability: Access to the anonymised dataset can be made available upon reasonable request to the authors, subject to institutional data-sharing policies and appropriate ethical approval.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest associated with this study.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate: Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the Assin South Municipal Education Directorate. Informed consent was sought and obtained from all participants prior to the administration of the data collection instrument.

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