



Exploring Female Perspectives of Political Leadership Pressure and its Influence on Students' Mental Well-Being; A Case Study of Ghana Christian University College, Ghana.

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Abstract

Inclusivity and mainstreaming are considered the order of the day when it comes to the contemporary educational experiences of tertiary students. This implies that all spheres of learning must include every learner irrespective of gender, skin colour, race or religion. Female leaders are by extension considered a vulnerable class of students who ought to be protected especially when it comes to the learning experiences related to leadership. By exploring the female perspectives of political leadership pressures and how these influence female students' mental well-being, this paper seeks to generate enough discussions and possibly bring about a change in how tertiary institutions assist female leaders in terms of caring for their mental well-being. The study therefore found that female students' perceptions of the challenges faced by female contestants in the SRC elections have a profound influence on their levels of stress, anxiety, and overall mental health. The study also underscored the need for higher education institutions like Ghana Christian University College to prioritize the mental well-being of their female students and to address the systemic barriers that hinder women's participation in political leadership.

Keywords: Female perspective, Female leadership pressure and Mental well-being.

Introduction

The influence of political leadership and its election-related pressures, particularly from a female perspective, on student mental well-being, is an area that is yet to be fully explored in academic research (Xu, Luke & Short, 2021). The main aim of this study is to shed light on how female political leadership can shape students' perceptions, attitudes, and ultimately, their mental well-being, within an academic setting (Tatum, Thompson & Yates, 2022). This article will explore the unique challenges and opportunities that female leaders face in the political sphere, and how these experiences can affect students' mental health. This study would also examine how female leaders can influence students' beliefs about gender roles and leadership, and the implications this has for their mental well-being.

The intertwining of politics, gender, and mental health is a complex but essential area of research. By studying it, we hope to contribute to the growing body of knowledge and stimulate further discussions and research in this field (Nyunt, Koo, Witkowsky, & Andino, 2023). Our ultimate goal is to help educational institutions, such as Ghana Christian University College, better support the mental well-being of their students in the face of political and societal changes.

Statement of the Problem

In the dynamic socio-political landscape of today's world, the impact of political leadership on various aspects of society is undeniable (Pierzchalski, 2017). One of these aspects is the mental well-being of the youth, particularly those in higher education institutions. While there has been a growing body of research on the influence of political leadership on students' mental health, there is a noticeable gap in the literature when it comes to examining this issue from the perspective of female political leaders (Ono & Endo, 2024).

The mental well-being of students is crucial, given the formative nature of their time in higher education institutions, like Ghana Christian University College (Douwes, Metselaar, Pijnenborg, & Boonstra, 2023). However, little is known about how the leadership style, policies, and gendered experiences of female political leaders influence students' mental health. This gap in research is particularly significant in the context of Ghana, where societal norms and expectations about gender roles may intersect with political leadership in unique ways (Schneider & Bos, 2019). Therefore, the problem this article seeks to address is the lack of understanding about the influence of female political leadership on students' mental well-being in the context of Ghanaian higher education institutions. This includes an exploration of how female political leaders, their policies, and their representation impact students' mental health, attitudes, and perceptions.

The independent variable in this study is female perspectives about political leadership while the dependent variable is the state of mental health of learners in Ghana Christian University College. The hypothesis that premised this study is that the negative perception of political leadership among female students at Ghana Christian University College, coupled with the lack of effective stress management strategies and mental health support services, pose a significant threat to the mental well-being of these students, potentially leading to increased stress, anxiety, and depression. Therefore, this study aims to explore the influence of female perception of political leadership on the mental well-being of female students, to identify effective strategies for mitigating the negative impacts on female students' mental health and promoting a healthier school environment (Singh, Kumar & Gupta, 2022).

The ideal political environment in tertiary institutions should be one where learning experiences are equally accessible and political leadership is undertaken irrespective of gender, class or status (Alkhazalah & Lahiani, 2021). An experiential analysis of Ghana Christian University College indicates that most learners are under one pressure or the other, most of which can be attributed to political leadership, especially those female students who venture into school leadership. The lack of significant mental health support for female learners who compete in the various leadership roles compounds the issue, putting learners at significant risk of increased stress, anxiety, and possible depression in certain instances (Mofatteh, 2021). This paper therefore seeks to explore the extent to which political leadership pressures are impacting female students' mental well-being as well as seek to unearth remedies to the situation.

Research Question

The main research question was how does female perspective of political leadership influences students' mental well-being. The sub-questions that guided the study are;

1. What are the perceptions of female students at Ghana Christian University College regarding the representation of women in political leadership positions and how do these perceptions impact their mental well-being?
2. How do female students at Ghana Christian University College perceive the challenges faced by women in political leadership positions?
3. What strategies do female students think can be employed to overcome these challenges?

Literature Review

Leadership pressure refers to the stress and anxiety that individuals, particularly those in positions of authority or influence, experience due to external factors such as political ideologies, policies, or expectations (Perrewé, Rosen & Maslach, 2012). These pressures stem from several sources such as student expectations of female leaders, public scrutiny, accountability, and a political environment that is polarised on gender lines. These pressures also create an atmosphere of tension and pressure which consequently impacts the mental well-being of females who venture into school leadership or politics (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). A study by Nave (2021) which sought to explore the female leadership paradigm at Takoradi Technical University found that though a leader's gender does not matter, stereotyping, work and family balance as well as the perception that women are their own enemies were the major reasons for the underrepresentation of females in leadership positions. The study therefore recommended planning, counselling, healthy lifestyle choices and time management as useful remedies. Although the above study was apt in unearthing the role that female leadership pressure plays when it comes to students' political ventures, it failed to focus more on the mental well-being of students, a gap that this current academic exercise seeks to bridge.

These various pressures discussed above have a significant impact on the mental well-being of students, leading to stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health concerns. It is therefore vital to address these pressures and ensure students receive the necessary support and guidance to navigate through their academic and leadership journey (Mofatteh, 2021). These remedies could involve counselling services, stress management workshops, and supportive policies at the institutional level. Given the profound impact of these pressures, it is crucial to explore effective strategies to alleviate them (Agyapong, Brett-Maclean, Burbach & Agyapong, 2023). Both individual and systemic approaches can be instrumental in mitigating the effects of academic and leadership stress.

Finally, educational institutions can implement policies to reduce female leadership pressures. This could include providing mental health support, promoting a healthy work-life balance, and fostering a school culture that values diversity and individual strengths over competitiveness (Halat, Soltani, Dalli, Alsarraj & Malki, 2023). While female leadership pressures are a part of the education system, they should not be allowed to overshadow the ultimate goal of education, which is learning, growth, and development (Vallejo, 2023). By recognising and addressing these pressures, we can create a more balanced, healthy, and productive environment for all students.

Methodology

This study was guided by the interpretivism paradigm and hence the single case study approach was utilised. The total population of students at the main campus of Ghana Christian University College as at the time the study was conducted was 757. These students

belong to a total of four schools. This paper therefore narrowed its selection to female students who contested in the 2023/2024 Student Representative Council (SRC) Presidential elections. Six (6) students in level 300 contested the SRC elections, four (4) of which were females. The females who vied for the SRC position were therefore purposively selected to participate in the study. The female students who contested the SRC president and Vice positions were selected because they were the most likely to face political leadership pressures since their candidacy received the highest attention throughout the electioneering process. The selection of only SRC presidential candidates for this paper is strongly supported by a study conducted by Gwirayi (2007) who studied gender and leadership by looking at the factors influencing election into the student representative council. Similarly, the total number of female contestants for the 2023/2024 SRC presidential election was used as the total sample size, hence census sampling was utilised. The selection of participants in the study were selected via convenience.

The instrument of interview guide employed for this study was adapted from Anigwe (2014) who carried out a similar study in Nigeria. The instrument was pre-tested with level 100 female students in the School of Theology and Ministry at Ghana Christian University College. The study adhered strictly to the principles of trustworthiness throughout and employed data source triangulation as a compensation measure for the weaknesses that may arise from the use of trustworthiness (Stahl & King, 2020). The interviews were recorded and transcribed. During the transcription stage, evolving themes were noted and coded. Data that was collected was therefore analysed thematically and sequentially. During this study, the ethical consideration of obtaining informed consent from participants (orally), ensuring confidentiality and anonymity by using synonyms during the presentation of findings, avoiding harm and deception, respecting autonomy, and maintaining fairness in participant selection.

Results and Discussions

The results of the study revealed that all the respondents reported experiencing high levels of stress before and during the electioneering process for the election of the School Representative Council (SRC) leaders. All the respondents expressed their perception regarding the state of female leadership in the university. The fact that female leadership is considered on the rise and the call by all respondents for greater participation of females in school leadership was highly commendable. This milestone notwithstanding, respondents hinted that fellow females were the enemies of their fellow women trying to contest for the highest student office, which is the SRC presidency. This finding confirms a similar discovery by Nave (2021) who studied the female leadership paradigm at Takoradi Technical University. Participant One for instance hinted that

I think that most students think that the boys must run things but I do not think that is correct. I think it is now time for the women to lead. In this school, I see a lot of women trying to take up female leadership roles which is good. When I was campaigning, I realised that the men supported me more than the women although some women too were very supportive. If you ask me, it is time for the women to take charge and make things happen (IDI – S1)

It is worth noting that the general perception of participants about leadership and the role that women are expected to play was very encouraging in that all respondents hinted in the affirmative when asked about the need for more females to be represented in leadership. This phenomenon in the Ghana Christian University College could be said to be a reflection of the numerous efforts for affirmative action and other such gender equality policies in Ghana. The fact that at the time this paper was written, the SRC president and Vice who won the 2023/2024 election were both female students is a testament to the significant strides

made. The study further explored the challenges that female students face when they venture into leadership. The prevailing opinion among respondents was that the challenges are enormous ranging from work-life balance, and maintaining a “feminine” image while trying to ensure accountability and transparency. The response of Participant Two throws more light on the point earlier made.

The challenges we faced during the campaign and even after the campaign were many. The way people see us trying to contest and lead the SRC is sometimes not good. It is as if we are trying to be like men and this really puts me down. I can sometimes be sad for hours. And when the challenges of name-calling, backbiting, betrayal and misinformation started, I was very worried and tense. Unfortunately for us, we do not have counselling centres here so I had to talk to my friends and campaign team members about it. (IDI- S2).

The above response echoes the response of all the other respondents extensively. The fact that the contestants of the 2023/2024 SRC elections saw the need for a counselling centre and by extension the need for professional counsellors on campus was interesting in that it points to the deep knowledge they have about mental health. It is also a call on all stakeholders to hasten the already existing processes to establish and run a fully functional counselling unit in the university within the shortest possible time.

Participants of the study were also asked to recommend strategies that they think could be employed to overcome the challenges that female leaders in the university are facing. Respondent One for instance hinted that

We have come a long way in terms of women taking up leadership positions, but I think there is still more room for improvement. I feel that there is pressure on all female leaders to perform better than their male counterparts which to me is too much pressure and stress. We are all equal and should be given the same treatment in terms of leadership. (IDI-S1).

Participant Four also added that

I think the school has a role to play in making things easier for female leaders, especially now that both our SRC president and vice are both ladies. The school should make laws that protect female students who want to participate in leadership from all the unnecessary harassment and stereotyping. I also think that during campaign seasons, all contestants should be given professional counsellors who would help them throughout the period so that they are not all alone and suffer. (IDI-S4)

It is interesting to note that all of the participants considered the need to outperform other male contestants or leaders as a source of pressure which is alarming. The issue of stereotyping and discrimination was also echoed which calls for action by the various stakeholders including the school authorities. The school should also create avenues for constant education on the need for gender equality, transparency and accountability. The fact that most respondents believed that such interventions would reduce stress and improve the mental well-being of female leaders points to an actionable way forward, one that must be implemented as a matter of urgency.

To conclude the data collection process, participant were asked to give their general comments regarding female leadership challenges and how it is impacting their mental health. According to Participant One;

Mmmmm, all I can say is that I know a lot about mental health and the need for my mental well-being from my class in psychology. I am aware that these things can

affect my mental health and I always pray that God gives me the strength to persevere (IDI-S1).

The fact that most of the participants of the study had an appreciable knowledge about their mental health was commendable. Although most participants demonstrated a significant understanding of mental health and the need to see a counsellor, very few admitted to having actually seen a counsellor. Some participants even acted surprised when I told them there were licensed counsellors on campus they could visit for help. According to Participant Four, whose opinion was slightly echoed by all respondents;

I never knew that we had counsellors on campus. I always thought we had to go out there to see counsellors. I know counselling helps but I have never visited a licensed counsellor before. I talk to my senior pastors but I have never been to a licensed counsellor (IDI-S4).

The study thus identified that female students who are into leadership feel a lot of pressure with its associated psychological impact on their mental well-being. Similarly, female students believe that significant progress has been attained when it comes to female leadership and representation. The study however points to the need for more efforts by stakeholders to provide safe professional counselling alternatives for female leaders to help them cope with the pressures of leadership. Similarly, it came to bear that most participants saw the need for counselling as a sure way of coping with the impact that leadership pressure is having on their mental well-being.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study highlight the significant impact that participating in school leadership or politics is having on students' mental well-being at Ghana Christian University College. The results suggest that leadership-related stress is a major contributor to anxiety and depression among female students. This study however points to the need to intensify mental health education. This would aid in ensuring that students do not only cognitively recognise the need to see a counsellor but also use the counselling sessions. Similarly, this study points to the urgent need to establish a counselling unit in the university to take care of the growing mental health needs of learners, especially, female students who participate in school leadership.

Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the significant influence that female students' perspectives is having on political leadership and the resulting pressures on their mental well-being at Ghana Christian University College. The results suggest that female students' perceptions of the challenges faced by female contestants in the SRC elections have a profound influence on their levels of stress, anxiety, and overall mental health. The study underscores the need for higher education institutions like Ghana Christian University College to prioritize the mental well-being of their female students and to address the systemic barriers that hinder women's participation in political leadership. By providing mental health support services, promoting female political role models, and creating opportunities for female students to engage in political discourse and activities, institutions can help mitigate the negative impact of political leadership pressures on students' mental well-being.

Furthermore, the study emphasizes the importance of incorporating gender-sensitive approaches in the curriculum and campus culture, fostering an environment that empowers female students to develop their leadership skills and aspirations without the burden of societal and institutional biases. This holistic approach can help create a more inclusive and

supportive academic environment, ultimately contributing to the overall well-being and success of female students at Ghana Christian University College.

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