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Changing Cultural Norms Through Education: Voices from Ghanaian Women Principals

Corinne Brion
A. Ampah-Mensah

Abstract:

The purpose of this phenomenology study was to understand the experiences of women principals located in Komenda Edina Eguafo Abrem (KEEA) district of the Central Region of Ghana, a patriarchal and traditional society. Specifically, this study examined how cultural factors positively or negatively influenced women access to the principal role and influenced their leadership experiences. Using Hofstede et al.'s (2010) six dimensions of national culture as a conceptual framework, this study elucidates the experiences of 12 women school leaders. Findings revealed that these women navigated cultural norms and beliefs in order to exercise their own leadership style and pursue their careers in education. These women leaders were also able to gradually change the teachers' and community members' mindsets on women and leadership. This study is significant because it informs educational reforms on gender equity and leadership preparation programs and sheds light on culturally informed leadership practices unique to women.

Keywords: Gender equity, educational leadership, woman leaders, Ghana

Introduction

Giving equitable access to leadership positions and building the leadership capacity of women to execute their roles as leaders will not only benefit women themselves, but will also transform societies (Wakahiu & Keller, 2011). Wakahiu and Keller (2011) assert that women educational leaders in developing nations have a fundamental role to play towards eradicating global poverty, and fulfilling the African Charter on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR). Article 183 of the ACHPR reads: "The State shall ensure the elimination of every discrimination against women and also ensure the protection of the rights of the women and child as stipulated in international declarations and conventions" (African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, n.d.).

However, in patriarchal societies, such as Ghana (Sikweyiya et al., 2020), some persistent cultural mindsets, behaviors and practices seem to undermine the attainment of ACHPR goals.

These attitudes are oftentimes extended beyond the communities to schools, where women sometimes experience discrimination simply because they are women and as such are expected to play second fiddle to men.

Currently, the majority of empirical work on the experiences of women educational leaders coming out of the African continent is from South Africa (Diko, 2014; Mestry & Schmidt, 2012; Moorosi, 2010). In Ghana, quantitative studies have focused on factors accounting for gender disparity in education leadership in specific districts (Segkulu & Gyimah, 2016) and stereotypical perceptions of women principals (Pwadura, 2016). However, there are a limited number of qualitative studies that explored the experiences of women principals. This study is designed to address this knowledge gap by employing a qualitative design to explore the experiences of 12 women school principals located in the Komenda Edina Eguafo Abrem (KEEA) municipality in the Central Region of Ghana. This research is significant because it provides an understanding of how women principals navigated stereotypical cultural norms that undermined their leadership in schools. Additionally, this research contributes to the literature on women educational leaders in Ghana.

In Ghana, public school principals are appointed based on the ranks of staff within the Ghana Education Service (GES), an agency under the Ministry of Education that implements educational policies. As such, both men and women who meet the qualifications stand, on paper, an equal chance to be appointed as school-heads. However, in a patriarchal society such as Ghana, the reality is often different from the theory. In the district where this study took place, there were 54 men principals and 38 women principals. This study examined the challenges the women leaders faced and how they navigated the patriarchal and traditional culture through the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of women principals in Ghanaian K-12 public schools?
2. What challenges do these women encounter in their work as principals?
3. What support exist for these women to effectively execute their leadership roles?

Given that in qualitative research, the researchers' identity and positionality are crucial, the authors wanted to provide those details at the beginning of the paper. The primary researcher is a woman assistant professor at a University in the United States and has worked for six years in Ghana and other African countries. The co-researcher is a male Senior Research Fellow at a University in the Central Region of Ghana. Because the investigators were obligated to forthrightness in relating to the participants (Wolcott, 1994), they engaged in daily reflective practices (such as journaling) throughout the process to manage their own subjectivities (Peshkin, 1988). Moreover, biases were counterbalanced by the use of a dual researcher model and reflective and reflexive practices.

Literature Review

Bush and Glover (2016) posited that leadership was the second most important factor influencing school and learners' results after classroom teaching. These authors claimed that leadership accounts for 27% of variation in student learning outcomes. Other scholars asserted that principals, also known as head-teachers or school-heads, play a crucial role in school improvement, teacher morale, and creating cultures of learning that positively affect student outcomes (Amedome, 2018; Donkor, 2015; Grissom & Harrington, 2010; Ingersoll, 2001; Marzano et al., 2005; Rosenholtz & Simpson, 1990).

Principals in Sub-Saharan African public schools are rarely selected because they have the skills and competencies necessary to lead schools (Bush and Glover, 2016). Rather, they are selected because of their years of service and political, religious, or tribal affiliations. As a result,

schools are often ruled by authority, seniority, and language – not by who is competent for the challenging tasks at hand (Bush & Oduro, 2006; Moorosi & Bush, 2011). However, as indicated earlier, school leadership is key to school improvement and students' learning outcomes. It is therefore imperative that whoever is placed in leadership position, irrespective of gender, political and religious affiliation or ethnicity must be supported to perform their leadership roles well.

Worldwide, there continues to be less women in positions of leadership. In pre-secondary schools, women are underrepresented in proportion to the number of women who are teachers (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). When looking at the history of gender and educational leadership, Shakeshaft et al. (2007) noted that research that dealt solely with women was labelled gender-based research, but when the research focused on all men educational administrators, it was not, thus leaving the critics to conclude that “the literature of the field is really the study of male administrative behavior” (p.105). In addition, scholars such as Kenway et al. (1994) pointed out the need “for more research on the actual processes of gender reform in schools and school systems and for more sophisticated theories to guide such research” (p.208). Blackmore et al. (2006) attributed the paucity on women leaders in education to the selection process and called it homosociability, the propensity to select people who are similar to oneself. In this case, if those responsible for the appointment of leaders are men, they are more likely to hire men as well, perpetuating the selection inequities and preventing what Blackmore (2002) called gender justice.

Research in Sub-Saharan Africa has found that women have traditionally been barred from accessing leadership positions due to the patriarchal cultures and the mindset that men leaders can do the job better than women (Bush, 2014; Bush & Glover, 2016; Mestry & Schmidt,

2012; Moorosi et al; 2018; Ngcobo & Tilky, 2010). Consequently, teachers in public schools were more accountable to men elders, such as village chiefs, than women principals (Bush & Heystek, 2006; Moorosi et al., 2018). Women in leadership positions faced challenges in exercising their leadership because they were viewed as invisible if they enacted feminine behaviors and unfeminine if they enacted masculine ones (Debebe, 2011), putting them in a dilemma. Additionally, it was not unusual for them to experience microaggressions and sexism (Moorosi et al., 2018).

In Ghana, Segkulu and Gyimah (2016) surveyed 250 respondents in 20 institutions in Tamale, the northern part of Ghana. The purpose of their study was two-fold: 1) To examine if low academic and professional qualifications were limiting factors to women leadership in educational institutions; and 2) To investigate if traditional beliefs and cultural practices in the society affect women's participation in the leadership of educational institutions within the metropolis. Though the study revealed that there were more men teachers than women and also that the men were better qualified than the women teachers, it failed to ascertain whether equally qualified men and women had the same opportunity of being school heads. Moreover, their study did not establish whether traditional and cultural undertones affected the selection of one gender over the other. Other questions that this study could have examined include 'what are the experiences of the few women who are in school leadership positions?'. The present study seeks to explore the aforementioned question.

Despite the fewer women in position of leadership, Lumby and Azaola (2014) argued that women are born to be leaders because they are leaders at home. Greyling and Steyn (2015) affirmed that women have the affective and practical skills to lead. Specifically, these authors suggested that women are more effective educational leaders than men because they are sensitive

to the needs of children, teachers, and parents. They understand the challenges of motherhood and are naturally mothers, whether they have children themselves or help raise children of family or community members. Additional characteristics attributed to women include that they have more empathy than men. Besides being caring, the authors found that women possessed other valuable attributes for leadership (Greyling & Steyn, 2015). These characteristics ranged from being able to have positive relationships with teachers and staff that in turn provides more job satisfaction for them, using a more democratic and participatory management style, and being able to liaise effectively with the community (Greyling & Steyn, 2015). Further merits ascribed to women include their ability to communicate, promote social change, and perform duties ethically (Themane et al., 2017). Researchers have also discovered that women were respectful when dealing with conflict and had the ability to transform communities because they served as role models for young girls, who were often asked to stop schooling to help their family, get married, and start families of their own (Moorosi et al., 2018). These feminine traits and dispositions often influenced women's leadership styles.

Lumby and Azaola (2014) affirmed that values of leadership differ based on context and that motherhood is a value of leadership in Africa. As a result, women should not only have access to leadership positions but should also be supported once they obtain this position. In their qualitative study in South Africa, Naidoo and Perumal (2014) explored how women principals navigated gender and cultural challenges. They observed that women's style of leadership was democratic, participatory, and more inclined than male counterparts to encourage inclusiveness and motivate others. Men emphasized individualism, duty, and rules. They typically preferred an alpha style based on command and control. Women preferred a beta-style based on social interaction. In their leadership styles, men often displayed traits such as competitiveness,

dominance, assertiveness, opportunistic, and manipulative whereas women traits were ambitious, creative, and trusting. Women had a horizontal leadership style whereby they cared about the well-being of their teachers, staff, and students (Naidoo & Perumal, 2014). Naidoo and Perumal (2014) also suggested that women's styles varied according to circumstances. For example, it can sometimes be autocratic when teachers are late and need to be disciplined. Despite their natural leadership traits, there was still a stigma in South Africa pertaining to women leaders (Naidoo & Perumal, 2014). These authors affirmed that women needed to be evaluated based on their work – not by their gender and cultural beliefs about their gender.

Women leaders experience various challenges. Scholars have found that self-esteem and self-confidence were hindrances preventing women from seeking leadership positions (Greyling & Steyn, 2015; Mestry & Schmidt, 2012). In their qualitative study, Greyling and Steyn sought to understand what role intrinsic and extrinsic factors played in the choice of South African women for leadership positions. The findings indicated that women lacked self-esteem and self-confidence. The authors contended that the men dominated culture and stereotyping affected not only the women leaders' confidence but also the confidence of their followers to obey them. Despite their lack of confidence and self-esteem, women embody unique attributes that makes them natural leaders.

In his conceptual paper on South Africa, Ghana, Nigeria, and Ethiopia, Potokri (2015) claimed that women's lives are confined by the macro culture of their countries in which marriage is an unquestionable expectation. The author asserted that women should question culture because culture benefits men and manipulates the lives of women. He noted that questioning culture is not just being inquisitive or rebellious but rather is a kind of critical awareness about one's beliefs that translates in the pursuit of human rights. Mestry and Schmidt

(2012) agreed that culture played a significant role in African women and thus defined their lives and future. As a result of patriarchal and traditional societies, there was lack of women leaders and thus a dearth of leadership theory that was not solely based on masculine perceptions. Mestry & Schmidt (2012) argued that having women leaders would challenge the one-sided views of leadership. Currently, more women seem to be taking on leadership positions. It is therefore relevant that studies focus on these women leaders to broaden the one-sided views of leadership identified by these authors. In the present study, the researchers sought to understand the experiences of Ghanaian women educational leaders in the KEEA district of the Central region.

Conceptual Framework

Given that this study aimed at understanding the experiences of women leaders in a patriarchal society, using a conceptual framework on national culture seemed appropriate to analyze the data. The researchers chose the Hofstede et al. (2010) model of national culture because it is widely accepted and studied. Hofstede et al. (2010) **defined culture as the collective mental programming of the human mind which distinguishes one group of people from another.** This programming influences patterns of thinking that are reflected in the meaning people attach to various aspects of life and become crystallized in the society's institutions. National culture is about the value differences between groups of nations (Hofstede et al., 2010). The authors conducted a comprehensive study of how values in the workplace are influenced by national culture. They analyzed a large database of employee value scores collected within IBM between 1967 and 1973. The data covered more than 70 countries. Hofstede et al. (2010) first used the 40 countries with the largest groups of respondents. Afterwards, they extended the analysis to 50 countries and three regions. Subsequent studies

validating the earlier results include commercial airline pilots and students in 23 countries, civil service managers in 14 countries, ‘up-market’ consumers in 15 countries, and ‘elites’ in 19 countries. Since 2010, scores on the dimensions are listed for 76 countries partly based on replications and extensions of the IBM study by different scholars on different international populations. The countries’ positions on these dimensions are expressed in a score on a 100-point-scale with zero being the lowest possible score. The cultural dimensions in the Hofstede et al. (2010) model represent independent preferences for one state of affairs over another that distinguish countries (rather than individuals) from each other.

The Hofstede et al. (2010) model of national culture consists of six dimensions (6D) that the investigators utilized to interpret and code the data. This framework allowed the researchers to comprehend the impact of cultural norms and values on women leaders and how women leaders work within those behavioral patterns. Utilizing this framework to map women educational leaders’ experiences provided nuances in the dimensions within this region. The model consists of the following dimensions.

Power distance index (PDI)

This dimension expresses the degree to which the less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. In societies with a large degree of Power Distance, people accept hierarchy. Ghana scored an 80 on this dimension, which indicates that people tend to accept hierarchy without questioning it (Country Comparison Ghana, 2019).

Individualism versus collectivism (IDV)

In Collectivistic cultures, people think of the needs of the group over individual needs. In such cultures, the relationships between people are valued and people define their self-image in terms of “we” versus “I.” Ghana scores 15 in IDV, revealing that they value collectivism.

Masculinity versus femininity (MAS)

In this dimension, the Masculinity represents a preference in society for achievement, competitiveness, heroism, assertiveness, and material rewards for success. Femininity embodies an inclination for cooperation, modesty, caring, and quality of life. With a score of 40, Ghana is considered a feminine country. This rating per the framework is quite interesting since Ghana is considered a patriarchal country (Sikweyiya et al., 2020). However, it is instructive to note that the framework classifies countries according to some particular traits exhibited by the general populace, rather than dominance and control by a particular sex. Therefore, it is possible that Ghana is both patriarchal and exhibit feminine traits.

Uncertainty avoidance index (UAI)

This dimension speaks to the degree to which individuals are uncomfortable with uncertainty. Ghana has a score of 65 in UAI, which means that Ghanaian people showed a preference for avoiding uncertainty.

Long term orientation versus short term normative orientation (LTO)

Long term orientation denotes a society that is focused on the future. Short term orientation societies focus on the present or past and value traditions. Ghana scored very low (4) in LTO, inferring that people value and honor traditions.

Indulgence versus restraint (IND)

Indulgence refers to a society that accepts having fun and enjoying life. In this dimension, Ghana scored a 72, signifying that the country is portrayed as a society with a propensity to enjoy life.

Methodology

Using a qualitative research paradigm and a phenomenological approach, this study explored the experiences of 12 women principals in the Komenda Edina Eguafo Abrem District (KEEA) of the Central Region of Ghana. The phenomenological approach is represented in cultural and social experiences. It enables researchers to describe the meaning of individuals' experiences (Creswell, 2007). In this case, the experiences pertained to the practice of principalship. This approach helped the researchers describe the participants' perceptions and experiences as Ghanaian women school leaders. This approach also allowed the investigators to understand the meaning participants attached to those experiences. This study sought to answer the following research questions:

4. What are the experiences of women principals in Ghanaian K-12 public schools?
5. What challenges do these women encounter in their work as principals?
6. What support exist for these women to effectively execute their leadership roles?

Sample

The KEEA district is a large district and serves over 35,000 students in 74 school communities. The economy of the region relies mainly on agriculture. The KEEA district has 54 male principals and 38 women principals. The researchers worked with the director of the local GES to select participants. The investigators used criterion and convenience sampling to select 12 women principals. Criteria included being a full-time principal at a public basic school, and having at least three years of experience as a principal in the school. It is important to note that success was not a criterion used to choose the participants. Convenience sampling was also used because the KEEA district spreads over 380 square kilometers and some roads are not accessible by car during the rainy season due to heavy rains and mud slides. As such, only principals of

schools that were accessible at the time of data collection, and who also met the sampling criteria were used for the study.

Diversity was achieved in so far as age, years of experience of the school leaders, and whether it was an urban or rural school. As indicated in Table 1, the research team used pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants. Four women were in the 51-60 age range, seven in the 41-50 age range, and one in the 31-40 range. They had between three and 20 years of experience as principals. The schools served between 207 and 646 students. Two were urban schools while ten were rural schools. Two schools served Kindergarten through sixth grade, (Primary 6 in Ghana), two schools served middle school graders only (9-12 grade, referred to as Junior High School in Ghana), and eight served Kindergarten through 12th grade or Junior High School (JHS).

Table 1

Sample's Information

School	Principal's Name (Pseudonyms used)	Age Range	Years of Experience leadership position	Gender of Previous Principal at that School	Grade Level	Number of Students	Urban or Rural
1	Mary	51-60	20	Man	KG-6	466	Rural
2	Bethany	51-60	3	Woman	KG-6	385	Rural
3	Helen	31-40	6	Woman	9-12	450	Rural
4	Elizabeth	51-60	14	Woman	KG-12	512	Urban
5	Ama	41-50	4	Woman	KG-12	385	Rural
6	Adwoa	41-50	3	Man	KG-12	602	Rural
7	Asantewaa	41-50	4	Woman	KG-12	255	Rural

8	Doris	41-50	3	Man	KG-12	565	Rural
9	Abigail	41-50	9	Man	KG-12	350	Rural
10	Florentine	51-60	13	Man	9-12	207	Urban
11	Madison	41-50	3	Man	KG-12	428	Rural
12	Teresa	41-50	3	Woman	KG-12	646	Rural

Method

The researchers used in-depth research interviews as conversations (Kvale & Brinkman 2009). The researchers created a semi-structured interview protocol that consisted of questions such as “Tell us the story on how you became principal”, “Tell us about your challenges as a school woman principal”, and “Tell us about the support you receive as a woman school leader”. The interview questions helped the 12 participants reflect on their experiences as women school leaders. These questions were made to elicit meaningful stories of the participants’ perspectives and experiences. The interviews took place in November 2019, lasted about 45-60 minutes each, were conducted in English, recorded, and transcribed. Both researchers conducted the interviews together. This afforded us to clarify unclear issues with respondents and probe for further understanding. Moreover, the local researcher was able to ask questions based on his understanding of the context. Before starting the interview, principals signed a research consent form and filled out a Basic Information Sheet. This information sheet included details on a few personal items such as age and educational background of the principals. In addition to the interviews, the investigators wrote daily reflections in their journals, field notes, and memos to compare observational notes and corroborate the interpretation of the data.

Data Analysis

The researchers first listened to each of the recordings two times and pre-coded the data by highlighting memorable passages and quotes (Saldaña, 2016). Then, the investigators read through the journals, field notes, memos, and transcripts to make notes on them as if the investigators were “conversing with the data” (Merriam, 1998, p.179). The researchers then used thematic coding. Thematic coding is a method of analyzing qualitative data. It is applied to a set of texts, such as interview transcripts, and involves recording or identifying passages of text or images that are linked by a common theme or idea (Gibbs, 2007). This allows the coder to index the text into categories and establish thematic ideas (Gibbs, 2007). Initially, the themes were cultural dimensions of the Hofstede et al. (2010) conceptual framework. The research team closely examined the data to identify common code-topics, ideas, and patterns of meaning that came up repeatedly and would fit under those themes (Bryman, 2012). Examples of codes were as follows: challenges related to being a woman principal, home and work life balance, disrespect, defiance, leadership styles, and peer support. Finally, the researchers used the themes to answer the research questions and extracted quotes for each theme to describe the women’s lived experiences.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the interpretation of the findings, the researchers took the following precautions. Having two researchers conducting the interviews together allowed them to compare what they heard and discuss the interviews immediately after these occurred. The researchers held daily discussion sessions throughout the coding process and actively engaged in conversations that involved considering various possible codes. Eventually, the team conversed about themes in the transcript data. Throughout this process, the researchers progressed through the study by moving forward with codes that represented a consensus among

the research team. In the end, the findings the investigators report in the present article are ones which all the co-authors agreed to best reflect the principals' perspectives.

In order to further enhance the study's internal validity, the investigators created a data trail (Rodgers, 2008). This is a qualitative research practice where the researchers copied the participants' quotes from this study's transcripts data and pasted them under each theme that emerged from the data analysis. This strategy helped ensure that sufficient transcript data supported the results that the researchers reported in the present study. Following this process also ensured that the researchers were not sharing their viewpoints but instead shared the perspectives of the participants. Additionally, the investigators used low-inference descriptors (Chenail, 2012). In this qualitative protocol, the researchers used participants' quotes from various transcripts to ensure that their perspectives were reported accurately. The investigators believed that they employed a rigorous study design along with robust qualitative strategies to enhance the internal validity and trustworthiness of the study's findings. Lastly, the researchers kept a journal in order to remain objective and not contaminate the analysis of the data or the interview process. The researchers also wrote field notes to jot down their memories at the end of each day on the conversations they had with each school leader, the school context, and other significant quotes.

Findings

The findings unlocked the silent voices of rural and urban educational leaders and responded to the limited empirical work on the experiences of women educational leaders in Ghana. In this paper, the researchers focused on the first four Hofstede et al. (2010) model because their relevance in the lives of Ghanaian women principals was most noticeable. To

preserve the integrity of the findings, the researchers used the participants' comments verbatim. The first dimension of the Hofstede et al. (2010) 6D pertains to Power Distance.

Power distance index (PDI)

Ghana scored high in this dimension, indicating that people tend to accept hierarchy without questioning it. The study's participants were eager to talk about how the power dimension impacted them. One of the researchers wrote in her journal: "I was surprised by the willingness of the women leaders to speak freely about their feelings, frustrations, and experiences."

The women shared how difficult it was to be educational leaders in a patriarchal and traditional culture because the power inherently belonged to men. Doris expressed this sentiment when she said:

You see, in the eyes of traditional men, women should stay home and take care of the house and the children. This attitude does not help me because I run a community school, and I deal with a village chief who is traditional and believes in this sort of gender hierarchy. He and other men are convinced that men are naturally better leaders than women.

Ten out of twelve women had been victims of biases, recipients of microaggressions, and had been disrespected or humiliated by older women and men in various positions. Abigail blamed the men's attitudinal problems towards women leaders on culture. She shared:

First of all, there are more men in our positions. That makes it hard for women to come in because it is not in our culture to have many women in leadership positions in any field, let alone in education.

She continued by saying:

It is not easy to be a woman head teacher because the male teachers, the chief, and the community members are not respectful. They do not see women as being able to lead a school, make difficult decisions and being strict.

Madison, one of the younger principals, told a story of how the chief had unwelcomed her in front of her students, parents, and teachers on her first day of school. Remembering this day, she shared: “He told me, and I quote, ‘What is a small woman going to do in the school?’” Three years after this altercation, Madison shared how humiliated and intimidated she had felt, “I never wanted to go back to the school after this first encounter.”

Challenges were not just experienced with chiefs or other men in the community.

Explaining the difficulty male teachers had to work under a woman, Bethany recalled when one of her male teachers arrived late every day because he did not think the principal would say anything. She remembered: “I had to warn him and ended up writing to him and going to the district office with him. Since that day, he takes me seriously and does not arrive late anymore.” Ama had a similar experience with a male teacher who refused to greet her for weeks because he did not believe that he should obey a woman.

Asantewaa and Teresa were challenged by woman teachers who were older than they were. These leaders stated that while the younger woman teachers considered them as their allies and saw them as second “moms,” the teachers who were older than them were defiant and refused to do what they were asked to do. Teresa talked about a specific event: “With this older teacher, I had to have several conversations telling her that I respected her as my elder but that, as the principal, she had to listen to my guidelines.” Thus, the principals had opposition from three angles – the community leaders, male teachers and older woman teachers.

Despite the challenges they encountered, these women leaders never gave up. Mary complained that after being the principal for over 14 years, she was still not invited to the community meetings led by the chief “because these meetings are for men only.” She expressed her initial frustration when she shared: “The decisions the men make in these meetings affect my school and the students, but I have to choose my battles.” She had attempted to be part of the meeting to no avail. She therefore had to abandon that and rather focus on earning the respect of the community through targeted school improvement activities like looking for funds to improve school facilities. This has endeared her to the leaders who, at first, would not listen to her. Thus, though she still does not attend those meetings, she strategically selects which issues to challenge and which not to for maximum impact. These principals were determined to do their jobs well and be recognized as contributing professional members of society. Helen illustrated this intrinsic motivation when she asserted: “I want to let the men know that I can lead. No matter what, I have a position, so I can decide to do something or not, always with the students’ well-being in mind.” For 10 out of 12 leaders, the principalship came with a multitude of challenges related to the power dimension and inherent hierarchy that exists in patriarchal societies. These leaders experienced difficulties among men and women alike but over time, they managed to navigate the cultural norms for the benefit of their students. One way they navigated Ghana’s cultural norms and the power dimension was by taking advantage of the society’s penchant for collectivism.

Individualism versus collectivism (IDV)

Ghana is considered a collectivistic society. As such, relationships with other members of the group and the interconnectedness between people play a central role. Reflecting about collectivism, one of the researchers journaled: “When we think of the phrase, it takes a village to

educate a child, I think of Ghana. People take care of each other's children and take care of each other in general." In this study, the idea of collectivism was expressed when the women leaders sought help by organically forming or attending support groups and networks. These support systems helped the women deal with cultural norms and issues related to educational leadership. The women leaders explained having several kinds of support systems.

All married women declared that they were able to balance their personal and professional lives because of the help they received from their husbands, family members, or helpers. The principals shared that their husbands perceived them as professionals and equal partners in their homes and that Ghana's patriarchal culture did not transpire into their homes. Doris explained: "My husband and children help me because they understand my role and support what I do. My husband always tells me that leadership has no sex. I am grateful he feels that way." Helen added: "I think my family is proud of me. They see the good work I do and see that my work is my passion, so they are always willing to help so that I continue my work." The leaders who were not married or were widows also had a support system in place. The single leaders spoke about having "their own strategies that involved setting a time-table for themselves, hiring help, and getting up very early to do their tasks at home."

Another way the leaders took advantage of the collectivistic culture was by creating networks. The women leaders connected with other women leaders using group text as a means to learn from peers and share experiences. It was common for these leaders to belong to several *WhatsApp* groups. Leaders reported having *WhatsApp* groups for their teachers and attending several groups for school leaders only. Respondents indicated that their professional organizations like the Ghana National Association of Teachers (GNAT) and the National Association of Graduate Teachers (NAGRAT) had both general and women specific networks

that they benefitted from. GNAT for example has the GNAT Ladies Association (GNAT-LAS). These associations also have local chapters that they relied on for professional support. Moreover, the basic school headteachers belonged to the Conference of Heads of Basic Schools (CoHBS) which is a network of school leaders at the basic school level. Respondents indicated that unlike their male counterparts, they had a woman chapter of CoHBS where they supported each other and also provided mentoring and coaching support to members. In addition, individual school heads sought help from colleagues and visited each other's schools to talk about their challenges and collaboratively find solutions. By so doing, various small localized groups of women school leaders have emerged spontaneously to complement the larger professional groups. Doris for example spoke about going to see Teresa regularly to speak about her issues. She declared: "I know Teresa gets me because she also had to convince her community that she could do the job and prove to them. So, we find each other, talk, and help each other in difficult times." Relying on each other for help and support seemed to have helped the women leaders go through the initial hurdles imposed by the cultural norms of the Ghanaian patriarchal and traditional society.

In all cases, after the early struggles with parents and community members, these principals eventually received the support they deserved from their teachers, opinion leaders such as the chiefs and the Parent Teacher Association (PTA). They claim to have earned this support through the hard work they put in and the corresponding results that they achieved. Participants indicated that though the communities initially doubted their abilities, they had to change this mindset by transforming the schools for all to see – as in Florentine's words, "eventually, our work output speaks for us and they are convinced that we are indeed the right people to do the job". Finally, these leaders found support in God. They often had the attitude in

conflict situations that “this too shall pass, and God is always there for us.” Using Ghana’s collectivistic attributes, the principals naturally fostered strong relationships with peers, convened or attended existing networking groups, and sought help in both their professional and personal lives. Additionally, these women overcame the cultural attitudes towards issues of gender by using the traits that a feminine country embodies to their advantage.

Masculinity versus femininity (MAS)

Ghana is considered a feminine country. In feminine societies, there is an inclination for cooperation, modesty, caring, and quality of life. When asked about their views of leadership and leadership styles, the participants listed a number of traits they embodied. These attributes represented those displayed by feminine countries. The women’s attributes included what Asantewaa called “Motherly love.” Asantewaa explained that motherly love was extending motherhood to colleagues and children. She said: “We are caring to all; we are mothers to all, and men could never be that.” The women also talked about being resilient, “not giving up”, “being passionate, compassionate, good communicators, strict when needed, goal oriented, and good listeners.” Other attributes included being welcoming, having a strong will power, and inner motivation. Additionally, the women declared being “sensitive to cultural and contextual differences.”

Helen stated that men are strict but they “rarely listen to others, they are autocratic and have an ego. We do not and that is why it makes us better educational leaders.” Asantewaa added that:

Parents need to know their child have another mom at school who will be able to take care of him or her in any way. A man cannot cook, sew, nurture, cannot understand what the girls go through, but we can.

Thus, though this may imply some cultural stereotypical undertones, these women school leaders used their maternal qualities to their advantage. They combined home experiences as mothers with experiences on the job to carve a unique style of leadership that they employed in their schools.

Two women, however, did not have a negative experience with men. For example, Elizabeth believed her listening skills fostered her positive working relationship with men. She said: “I do not have any problems with men because I am always ready to listen even if I do not do what the men want, at least I listen.” The women in this study overcame cultural norms and beliefs by displaying these traits in their actions and leadership styles. All 12 women spoke about the fact that these traits affected their leadership styles. They described their leadership as being inclusive, democratic, and collaborative. Doris summarized the sentiment of the group when she said: “I use all styles, I blend them all, authoritative, laissez-faire, and democratic. It depends on the situation. I can also be authoritative when it comes to teachers being punctual, for example.” In all cases, women reported that being a woman leader helped them talk to teenage girls about topics related to avoiding teenage pregnancy and other subjects specifically relevant to girls. Leaders mentioned that being a woman helped with coaching and being role models for the girls so they see that school is important and motherhood can wait despite the cultural pressures and beliefs. After having women leaders, teen pregnancy declined considerably in three of the nine schools that served teenage students. The 12 educational leaders in the KEEA district used collectivism, the traits of the Ghanaian feminine society, and additional attributes specific to women to overpower traditional cultural beliefs and practices. Uncertainty avoidance is the last dimension on the Hofstede et al. (2010) framework discussed in this paper.

Uncertainty avoidance index (UAI)

Ghana showed a preference for avoiding uncertainty. In this dimension, uncertainty was displayed in two different ways. First, the women themselves were uncertain about being able to be principals. In all cases, these women leaders did not choose to pursue a leadership role because they were uncertain of their abilities or because of the cultural stigma around women and leadership. Instead, colleagues and members of the GES staff recommended them for their positions. In that sense, their career in leadership was at first externally defined. Teresa said: “I never knew I could do it, but my principal insisted that I try and told me I had the qualities, so she recommended me for it.” Once they were in their positions and gained some confidence after seeing their school’s results, the women took their careers into their own hands and started to self-define it. This is exemplified in their professional goals and aspirations to pursue their leadership career and obtain Master’s and PhD’s, as noted in the first dimension.

Second, for 10 out of the 12 women, the community initially showed uncertainty towards the women leaders by doubting their aptitude to lead the schools. As previously mentioned in the first dimension of the Hofstede et al. (2010) framework, chiefs, male community members, and teachers, as well as older woman teachers, challenged and disrespected their women principals. Uncertainty was felt because the various stakeholders did not think their new woman school-head could and should lead. The study findings suggested that the uncertainty dimension, along with the power dimension, initially created discomfort for women school leaders. However, the women used the attributes of a collectivist and feminine society to their advantage in order to navigate the patriarchal and traditional cultural norms and beliefs as well as execute their responsibilities.

Discussion of the results

The data indicated that the women educational leaders in this study faced numerous challenges related to cultural norms and beliefs. The women were particularly challenged by the power and uncertainty avoidance dimensions of Hofstede et al. (2010) framework.

Questioning culture and the power dimension

Though Ghana generally scored high on the power dimension, our participants questioned hierarchy when they felt that it did not benefit their leadership, presenting a nuance to the Hofstede et al. (2010) framework. Despite the difficulties the women leaders encountered, they did not accept the inherent hierarchy that exists in patriarchal countries. In traditional patriarchal societies, men hold the power, authority, and clout while women manage the home and children. However, these principals shared that their husbands perceived them as professionals and equal partners in their homes and that Ghana's patriarchal culture did not transpire into their homes. The fact that the women leaders had the overt support of their husbands is another nuance to the Hofstede et al. (2010) framework.

Although the women leaders did not have any orientation prior to starting their new roles, the women in this study confronted and accepted cultural challenges by using Ghana's country attributes to covertly challenge and question the power dynamics at play in their communities. Specifically, they questioned and navigated cultural norms and beliefs using the society's collectivistic penchant and feminine attributes (Hofstede et al., 2010) and used their hard work as well in order to be heard. Using their collectivistic inclination, the women leaders sought help from their families, peers, and various existing networks. Relying on each other for help and support seemed to have helped the women leaders go through the initial hurdles imposed by the cultural norms of the Ghanaian patriarchal and traditional society. Such practices included

networking with women peers in person, through organization, and using *WhatsApp*. This finding aligns with Potokri's (2015) who affirmed that culture plays a significant role in African women and thus shapes their lives. The author also asserted that questioning culture is a "means of allowing women's voices to be heard" (p. 6696). The findings from the current study add to Potokri's (2015) conceptual study in that they provide how to covertly question culture while respecting traditions using country specific cultural traits to interrogate cultural norms. In this way, as seen in the findings, mindsets are gradually changed without the usual resistance and opposition.

Utilizing Hofstede et al. (2010) framework to map women educational leaders' experiences and challenges provided nuances in the Hofstede et al. (2010) dimensions within the KEEA district. The women's successful use of country's attributes to navigate cultural norms may indicate that collectivism, for example, was dominant in the KEEA district. Practices stemming from collectivism included the use of existing and new networks, or the creation of new *WhatsApp* groups that arise spontaneously through colleagues who engaged each other to seek support and help in addressing issues of practice. Help was also sought through various existing associations, organizations, and meeting with colleagues who faced similar challenges. Other examples pertained to the country's feminine attributes.

Feminine traits and leadership styles

The Hofstede et al. (2010) framework considers Ghana as a feminine country. As such, the society values cooperation, modesty, and caring. Findings suggested that the women's leadership styles embodied various qualities related to cooperation, modesty, and caring and that they did not adhere to one leadership style but rather would use different styles and blended the styles depending on the situation at hand. The findings indicated that one size did not fit all in

matter of leadership. Despite adversities, the women leaders succeeded in changing mindsets using their unique leadership style. Although their style does not have a name, we may call it the 'blended pragmatic' leadership style based on what worked at the moment and was effective in their context and within their culture and subcultures. As a result, developing theories of leadership and adopting a leadership lens based on the role of women, the national culture, and the local cultures seem to be needed. This finding is in agreement with Mestry and Schmidt's (2012) assertion that leadership theory is often based on one view, the masculine perceptions, and often comes from the West. This reiterates the need for culturally responsive women leadership theories.

Uncertainty avoidance

Under this dimension, the data indicated that women did not decide or nominate themselves to become educational leaders because they were uncertain of their abilities or because of the cultural stigma around women and leadership. Instead, they were nominated by their superiors who had noticed their skills and leadership capacities. Based on these 12 leaders, it appears that the patriarchal cultural norms affected the women's self-esteem and confidence to pursue leadership positions. However, once in their position of leadership, these women did not avoid uncertainties. Instead, the women managed uncertainties by seeking help from their peers and women colleague leaders. Being able to confront uncertainties is another example of a nuance to the Hofstede et al. (2010) framework.

These findings are important in all cultures but is particularly salient in patriarchal societies where women are often relegated into subservient positions in society due to deeply embedded cultural norms and beliefs. The researchers in this study affirm that women need to be appraised for what they do and not by their gender. The authors also support Naidoo and

Perumal's (2014) assertion that there is a need for further empirical research on women leaders in Africa that are led by women because, too often, the experiences of African women are reported through a male dominated lens.

Limitations of the present study and suggestions for future research

This study took place with 12 women in one district within one district in one region of Ghana. While this is a limited sample, this study is significant because it increased one's understanding of how women leaders in patriarchal societies navigated cultural beliefs and norms in order to execute their responsibilities.

Given the global call to promote equity in all aspects of social, economic, and public life, the question is not whether we should support women educational leaders but rather how we can better support these professionals navigate cultural norms embedded in patriarchal and traditional societies. The following five recommendations are made for practitioners, policy makers, and scholars.

1. The study found that women principals usually face resistance largely due to their gender. Principals were posted to schools and they would have to spend a considerable period of time to navigate their way through and eventually be accepted. There was no formal orientation for any of the respondents when they assumed their new roles. The researchers therefore recommend that the district education offices organize joint orientation sessions for newly appointed school heads, particularly women school heads and community leaders in order to establish at the outset, a working relationship that can be nurtured to the benefit of the school.
2. To ease the transition to leadership roles, there is a need for regular gendered in-service training for women principals to sustain and improve their leadership skills. The

gendered training could address topics such as how to manage people from other genders, navigate cultural values, and work-life balance (Debebe, 2011; Moorosi et al., 2018).

Moreover, since networking was seen to be a great resource to the women principals, it is recommended that successful leaders, such as the ones in this study, be provided the opportunity to share their experiences, become mentors, and share how they overcame cultural barriers with other colleagues.

3. All the principals had smartphones and used *WhatsApp* to facilitate their professional engagement with their colleague principals near and far. As such the *WhatsApp* application could be leveraged to provide professional development events since it is already readily used by leaders in urban and rural areas alike.
4. Though GNAT has a women's wing (GNAT-Las), CoHBS does not have one. What exists is informal. Since these associations were found to be useful in supporting school principals, it is recommended that an association could be formally created for women principals so that they have another avenue to share targeted resources, challenges, and solutions.
5. Additional qualitative studies could be conducted in this region with a larger sample, as well as in other regions of Ghana to understand the extent to which women are able to navigate their contextual cultural values.

Conclusion

The purpose of this phenomenology study was to understand the experiences and perspectives of 12 women principals located in the KEEA municipality in the Central Region of Ghana. Specifically, this study examined how women educational leaders navigated cultural norms and beliefs in a patriarchal and traditional society. The researchers used Hofstede et al.

(2010) six dimensions of national culture as a conceptual framework. Findings indicated that these women overcame the power dimension and hierarchy using other cultural attributes such as collectivism and traits related to living and working in a feminine country. These educational leaders and others like them played a substantial role in eradicating gender inequities in education and beyond. This study is significant in that it provided nuances in the Hofstede et al. (2010) dimensions within the KEEA district in the Central region of Ghana and sets the stage for more qualitative studies on Ghanaian women educational leaders and comparative studies on men and women school leaders.

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