

Leadership under pressure: Investigating the challenges faced by women departmental heads in South African schools

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Abstract

This paper explored the challenges women departmental heads face in South African schools, focusing on how gendered dynamics, institutional expectations, and systemic barriers shape their leadership experiences. Although departmental heads play a critical role in bridging instructional leadership and school management, women in these positions often navigate additional layers of complexity arising from socio-cultural norms, gender stereotypes, and unequal access to leadership development opportunities. Grounded in the Transformational Leadership Theory, this study adopted an interpretive qualitative approach and utilised narrative inquiry as the research design. It drew on semi-structured interviews with six women departmental heads across primary and secondary schools in a selected district in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The data, collected over a three-month period, were analysed using the thematic narrative analysis method. The findings revealed that women Departmental Heads (DHs) experienced leadership as a role fraught with constant gendered pressure, patriarchy, isolation, and institutional indifference. The findings further revealed that DHs, through resilient leadership, engaged in a quiet revolution, transforming mindsets and communities, breaking stereotypes, not with force, but with grace and strength. By giving voice to the lived experiences of these leaders, the study contributes to the discourse on gender equity in educational leadership and offers practical recommendations for creating more transformational, inclusive, and supportive environments for women in mid-level leadership roles.

Keywords: *educational leadership, gendered expectations, patriarchal barriers, resilient leadership, women departmental heads*

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1. Introduction

Leadership within educational institutions is a dynamic and multifaceted undertaking that requires professional expertise, resilience, adaptability, and emotional intelligence. In the context of South African schools, departmental heads (DHs) occupy a critical middle-management position that bridges classroom practice and school administration (Tapala et al., 2022). While all DHs navigate the pressures associated with curriculum delivery, staff management, and learner outcomes, Cele and Maphalala (2025) assert that women departmental heads often navigate complex challenges arising from the intersection of gendered expectations, entrenched structural inequalities, and broader sociocultural dynamics that shape the functioning of the education system. South Africa's commitment to gender equity in education leadership is evident in policies and frameworks such as the Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998 and the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996, which advocate for inclusive and democratic leadership. However, despite policy strides, women in leadership, particularly those in DH positions, continue to encounter systemic and institutional barriers that hinder their professional growth and effectiveness. These barriers range from entrenched patriarchal norms, resistance from colleagues, and a lack of mentorship to balancing leadership responsibilities with domestic roles, especially in historically disadvantaged and rural school contexts (Kaka & Hashmi, 2025).

The departmental headship role is inherently demanding, as Wald and Golding (2020) indicate, requiring individuals to lead subject teams, monitor teaching and learning, and support both learners and educators, often with limited resources and institutional support. For women, these demands are compounded by a "double burden" of proving their competence in a male-dominated space while managing societal expectations of femininity and care work (Chance, 2022). This creates an ongoing tension between leadership aspirations and structural constraints, positioning women in departmental leadership roles as leaders under constant pressure. According to Liem (2025), women in these roles must continually navigate the complex intersection of leadership responsibilities and sociocultural expectations. The author further indicates that these women leaders are expected to maintain academic standards, manage team dynamics, and exercise instructional leadership, often in environments where resources are limited and patriarchal norms persist. In many cases, these pressures are intensified by the dual burden of professional and domestic responsibilities, limited mentorship opportunities, and a lack of recognition for their contributions (Nhlumayo & Ngubane, 2025).

These realities underscore a pressing need to gain a deeper understanding of the pressures faced by women in middle management roles and how they respond to, resist, or adapt to such challenges. Despite these pressures, many women departmental heads demonstrate exceptional leadership marked by collaborative practices, empathy, and a deep commitment to educational improvement. They often adopt transformative and instructional leadership styles that focus on empowering staff and promoting learner achievement (Maponya, 2020). However, their success is frequently achieved in spite of, rather than because of, the system in which they work.

Despite progressive educational policies aimed at promoting gender equity in South African schools, women DHs continue to face significant leadership challenges that hinder their professional effectiveness and growth. Research indicates that while women increasingly occupy middle management positions, such as DH roles, they often operate within male-dominated school environments that perpetuate gender biases, unequal power dynamics, and limited support systems (Lawson, 2021; Bridges et al., 2023). These challenges are particularly pronounced in under-resourced schools, where women leaders must navigate multiple demands, including teaching, administration, staff supervision, and curriculum delivery, often without adequate institutional backing. Subramanian et al. (2025) argue that the pressure of leading under such circumstances not only affects their ability to perform optimally but also has implications for the broader goals of educational equity and school improvement.

While research on gender and school leadership has primarily focused on principals and other senior leadership roles, a significant gap remains in the literature concerning women departmental heads, particularly in the South African context. This study aims to address this gap by examining the lived experiences of women departmental heads across various school settings. The study centres women's voices, capturing the nuances of their leadership journeys, the tensions they encounter, and the strategies they employ to lead effectively under pressure. It explores how gender intersects with leadership responsibilities and what implications this has for equity, school performance, and the broader transformation of educational leadership. By shedding light on these experiences, the study contributes to the ongoing discourse on gender and leadership in education, aiming to inform policies and practices that support inclusive and effective school leadership. Against this background, this paper addresses the following questions:

1. How do women DHs navigate leadership under pressure?
2. What factors contribute to the challenges faced by women DHs?
3. What strategies do DHs use to navigate leadership under pressure?

2. Literature Review

The role of women DHs in schools is fraught with multifaceted challenges deeply rooted in socio-cultural, institutional, and personal dynamics. While these women navigate complex professional landscapes, their leadership is often scrutinised and constrained by pervasive gendered expectations and systemic barriers.

2.1. Gender Stereotypes and Leadership Perception

Despite progressive strides in educational leadership, gender stereotypes continue to overshadow women DHs' authority and legitimacy. Leadership traits such as assertiveness, decisiveness, and authority are culturally coded as masculine, placing women in a precarious double bind. Women who embody these traits risk being labeled as aggressive or unfeminine, while those who display empathy or collaboration are sometimes dismissed as weak or indecisive (McCann, 2022). This paradox undermines the effectiveness of women's leadership and reinforces persistent biases.

In South Africa, women DHs frequently encounter skepticism from colleagues and subordinates who unconsciously equate leadership competence with maleness, which diminishes women's influence within departments (Bell III, 2023; Khashane, 2021; Nhlumayo & Ngubane, 2025). Similarly, Kenyan women departmental heads face challenges in overcoming entrenched perceptions that question their professional capabilities, regardless of their qualifications or experience (Muthoka, 2021). These findings align with studies from Ethiopia, where, despite a significant number of qualified female teachers, few advance to leadership positions due to deeply ingrained gender norms (Alemu, 2024). The persistence of such stereotypes globally highlights the enduring challenge women face in reconciling societal expectations with leadership roles (Smith & Sinkford, 2022).

2.2. Institutional Barriers and Male-Dominated School Cultures

Institutional structures within schools frequently perpetuate male dominance, constraining the opportunities available to women DHs. Informal networks and male-centric

cultures marginalize women, restricting their access to decision-making platforms and leadership development (Moorosi, 2021). In South Africa, these dynamics manifest in the exclusion of female DHs from key meetings and strategic discussions, effectively silencing their voices and limiting departmental influence (Nkosi & Nhlumayo, 2025). This marginalisation is not unique to South Africa. Tanzanian female leaders report being sidelined despite policy frameworks aimed at fostering gender equity (Ndyali, 2022). In Nigeria, patriarchal institutional cultures restrict women to less prestigious departments and obscure pathways for leadership advancement (Imhanrenialena et al., 2025). Akinwale (2023) contends that such subtle yet entrenched barriers maintain the status quo and hinder the professional growth of women DHs across Africa.

2.3. Work-Life Balance Challenges

The intersection of professional demands and traditional gendered expectations imposes a disproportionate burden on women departmental heads. Globally, women continue to shoulder the majority of domestic responsibilities, which hinders their capacity to meet the rigorous demands of educational leadership (Bush & Glover, 2021). In South Africa, the dual expectation of managing household duties alongside leadership responsibilities intensifies stress and constrains career advancement opportunities (Barkhuizen et al., 2022). This pattern is echoed in Kenya, where family obligations frequently compel women in departmental leadership roles to forgo critical leadership training and networking engagements, thereby limiting their professional growth (Muthoka, 2021). Similarly, Ethiopian studies have highlighted that the competing demands of work and home life contribute to exhaustion and professional isolation among female leaders (Alemu, 2024). Even in the United Kingdom (UK), inflexible institutional structures exacerbate work-life balance challenges, underscoring the pervasive and cross-cultural nature of this barrier (Smith & Sinkford, 2022). Collectively, these findings suggest that the dual pressures of professional leadership and domestic responsibilities are not merely individual challenges but structural and systemic issues that impede women's leadership development across diverse educational contexts.

2.4. Mentorship and Career Development

Mentorship emerges as a pivotal yet consistently underprovided resource for women departmental heads navigating the complexities of educational leadership. Across contexts, the

absence of robust mentorship structures contributes to professional isolation, leaving women leaders uncertain about how to overcome entrenched gendered barriers (Coleman, 2020). In South Africa, this gap is particularly pronounced, with women departmental heads often lacking access to strategic mentorship that extends beyond emotional support to practical guidance for leadership development (Nhlumayo, 2025). Comparable patterns are evident in Kenya, where existing mentorship programs tend to be largely symbolic, failing to respond to the nuanced and context-specific challenges faced by women leaders (Muthoka, 2021). Zimbabwean research further highlights how professional isolation erodes confidence and hinders leadership aspirations among female educational leaders (Moyo et al., 2020). Similarly, studies in the United Kingdom reveal that limited access to influential networks impedes both career progression and the sustainability of leadership roles for women (Faugoo, 2024). Collectively, these findings highlight a recurring global pattern: while mentorship is widely recognized as essential for leadership development, the systemic shortcomings in its provision perpetuate intra-gender inequities and constrain women's capacity to fully exercise agency within educational leadership spaces.

2.5. Internalised Pressure and Identity Conflict

Beyond external barriers, women departmental heads contend with profound internal conflicts shaped by identity and societal expectations. Experiences of imposter syndrome, self-doubt, and anxiety are exacerbated by continuous scrutiny and the pressure to conform to traditional gender norms (Szilak, 2023). In Eswatini, Phebeni and Mpofo (2025) argue that the tension between cultural expectations and professional identity generates psychological burdens that erode confidence and undermine leadership efficacy. Similar dynamics are observed in Kenya, where constant evaluation and marginalization foster uncertainty, compromising authority and decision-making among women departmental heads (Beatrice et al., 2024). In Ethiopia, inadequate leadership preparation further intensifies these internal struggles, limiting women's capacity to navigate complex professional environments effectively (Alemu, 2024). Taken together, these studies suggest that internalized pressures, compounded by societal and cultural expectations, are as consequential as structural barriers, shaping women's leadership experiences and constraining their professional agency across diverse educational contexts.

2.6. Theoretical Framework

Transformational Leadership Theory, originally conceptualised by Burns (1978) and further developed by Bass (1985), provides a valuable lens for understanding how leaders inspire, influence, and navigate challenges, particularly under pressure. This theory identifies four key components: idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration, which collectively describe leaders who motivate others through vision, ethical behaviour, and a commitment to individual and organisational growth. In the context of this study, the theory is especially relevant for examining the experiences of women departmental heads in South African schools, who often lead in environments characterised by systemic inequality, limited resources, and persistent gender bias. These leaders must continuously manage expectations from staff, learners, and senior management while also navigating sociocultural pressures related to their gender roles.

Transformational Leadership Theory provides a framework for exploring how women departmental heads enact leadership under pressure and whether they can embody transformational practices, such as empowering staff, fostering collaboration, and promoting learner achievement, even amid organisational and societal constraints. By focusing on transformational dimensions, the study aims to uncover not only the barriers these leaders face but also the strategies they employ to lead effectively. While Transformational Leadership Theory offers a useful lens for examining how women departmental heads navigate leadership under pressure, it may overemphasize individual agency and inspirational practices, potentially underplaying the structural and systemic constraints that limit the enactment of transformational behaviors. Consequently, the theory provides valuable insights into leadership strategies and barriers but may need to be complemented with frameworks that critically address power dynamics, institutional inequities, and sociocultural factors influencing women's leadership in middle management. Furthermore, this framework also supports the exploration of whether systemic issues in school leadership structures enable or hinder the development of transformational leadership among women in middle management roles. The theory thus guides both the analysis of leadership challenges and the identification of pathways for professional support and policy improvement.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a narrative inquiry approach to explore the lived experiences of women departmental heads in South African schools, as guided by Clandinin and Connelly (2004). It is particularly suited for this study because it provides a rich, in-depth understanding of how women leaders experience, interpret, and give meaning to the challenges they encounter in school leadership roles. The study involved six purposively selected women departmental heads from public secondary schools across different socio-economic and geographic settings in one selected education district in South Africa. The small sample size was deliberate, allowing for an in-depth qualitative exploration of their lived experiences, with a focus on depth and contextual understanding rather than generalizability, as guided by Subedi (2021). Furthermore, this sample is consistent with the principles of narrative inquiry, which values depth over breadth and aims for rich, contextualised understanding rather than generalisability.

Purposeful sampling was employed to select participants who have relevant experience and insight into the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2013). All participants had served in their roles for at least two years, ensuring they had sufficient leadership experience to reflect meaningfully on their challenges. Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured narrative interviews, allowing participants to share their leadership journeys in their own words. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes, and with participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The semi-structured interview guide was developed in alignment with the research questions and Transformational Leadership Theory. The guide included open-ended questions exploring leadership practices, gendered experiences, and coping strategies under pressure. It was reviewed by experts in educational leadership for clarity and contextual relevance and piloted with one departmental head to refine wording and flow. Ethical sensitivity was maintained throughout to ensure questions were respectful, non-intrusive, and supportive of participants' comfort and confidentiality.

Data saturation was reached when additional interviews with the six women departmental heads yielded no new themes or insights (Ahmed, 2025). This indicated that sufficient depth and richness had been captured to address the study's research objectives. As guided by Riessman (2008), we employed thematic narrative analysis to interpret the data. The analysis will involve identifying core themes, storylines, and meaning structures across participants' narratives. The analysis remained true to the temporal and emotional flow of each

narrative, ensuring participants' voices remained central throughout the study (Riessman, 2008). Furthermore, this analytical process involved constant comparison across narratives to highlight convergences and divergences, as well as to uncover subtle patterns of intra-gender dynamics, professional identity formation, and leadership strategies.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant university ethics committee and from provincial education departments. Triangulation was achieved through interviews with different participants from various research sites, as guided by Denzin (2012). Temporal triangulation was also employed, as data were collected over a three-month period, allowing participants to reflect on their leadership experiences across different phases of the academic term, as guided by Zheng et al. (2025). The researchers' positionality was critically acknowledged throughout the study. Drawing on professional experience within the education sector, they maintained reflexive awareness of how insider perspectives and gendered assumptions could influence data interpretation. Reflexive journaling and peer debriefing were used to mitigate potential bias and ensure that participants' narratives remained central to the analysis of leadership under pressure.

Table 1 presents the demographic details of the research participants and the research sites.

Table 1

Profile of the research sites participants

Participants and schools	Number of learners in the school	Highest Qualification	Age	Number of years as a teacher	Number of years as a departmental head
DH1	564	B.Ed. Hons	29	9	3
DH2	356	B.Ed. Hons	32	12	6
DH3	672	B.Ed. Hons	34	12	5
DH4	700	M.Ed.	45	19	12
DH5	689	B.Ed. Hons	37	16	6
DH6	1102	M.Ed.	43	22	14

Keys: DH = Departmental Head, B.Ed. Hons = Bachelor of Education Honours, M.Ed. = Master of Education

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the participants and research sites. The six selected schools were all secondary schools situated within a single education district and were purposively chosen because they each have women serving as departmental heads. To maintain

anonymity, participants' identities are concealed using pseudonyms. Departmental Head 1 to Departmental Head 6 – DH1 to DH6.

4. Findings

Table 2 below presents the key findings that emerged from the data, which are analyzed in detail in the following section.

Table 2

Themes the emerged from the study

Questions addressed	Theme
Challenges faced by women Departmental heads as they navigate leadership under pressure	Navigating Leadership Under Pressure: The Lived Experiences of Women Departmental Heads
Factors contributing to the challenges faced by women departmental Heads	Silent Structures: Patriarchy, Isolation, and Institutional Indifference
Strategies Departmental Heads use to navigate leadership under pressure	Transforming in the Margins: Resilient Leadership as Quiet Revolution

The analysis of the transcribed and translated data from six women DHs revealed three main themes that reflect their gendered experiences of leadership: Leading on Trial: Gendered Scrutiny and the Burden of Legitimacy; Silent Structures: Patriarchy, Isolation and Institutional Indifference; and Transforming in the Margins: Resilient Leadership as Quiet Revolution. These themes highlight how their authority is consistently challenged, how institutional support remains limited, and how they respond with determined and creative leadership practices. Verbatim quotes from DH1 to DH6 are used to illustrate each theme, followed by analysis to deepen understanding of the gendered realities of educational leadership.

Theme 1: Navigating Leadership Under Pressure: The Lived Experiences of Women Departmental Heads

The women DHs experience leadership as a role fraught with constant gendered pressure and scrutiny. For these women, holding a leadership position is not simply about exercising authority but involves enduring ongoing challenges to their legitimacy and

competence. The data show that women DHs often have to prove their worth repeatedly, as their leadership is frequently undermined through both subtle and overt acts of resistance.

As **DH1** narrated, *“One male teacher openly mocks me in staff meetings, saying, ‘A woman telling me what to do? I’m not taking orders from a umfazi (a woman).’ It’s humiliating, and it wears me down.”* **DH3** shared, *“One of the male colleagues once said, ‘You’re a woman; how can you lead us?’ That sentence plays in my head when I’m preparing reports or leading meetings.”* These testimonies highlight the internal and external pressures that come with female leadership in male-dominated spaces. Even within their own gender group, support can be absent. **DH2** noted, *“Even my female colleagues question my leadership. They whisper, ‘Why is she trying so hard? She’s not the principal.’”* Others described the erasure of their role by parents and colleagues alike. **DH5** stated, *“The parents come to the office and ask to speak to the man in charge, even though they know I’m the department head.”* The data also revealed the frustration of being ignored in professional settings. **DH4** described how, *“In meetings, my suggestions are ignored. But if a male DH repeats the same thing, suddenly it’s a good idea.”* Similarly, **DH6** shared, *“I’m always second-guessed. It’s like being a leader on probation, no matter how long I’ve been in this position.”*

These insights reveal that gendered assumptions about competence and authority shape women’s leadership experiences, placing them in a ‘double bind’ between being perceived as ‘too assertive’ or ‘too accommodating.’ Despite these constraints, participants demonstrate transformational leadership by inspiring, motivating, and empowering staff, showing how they exercise influence and foster collective growth within restrictive institutional contexts. These findings indicate that leadership is not equally received or enacted for women. It is often performed under surveillance and suspicion. Further, drawing attention to gender equity in leadership must go beyond mere representation. It must include addressing the deeper, culturally embedded practices that delegitimise female authority. Without such a shift, women in leadership remain in a constant state of professional defense, leading not just their departments, but also a silent struggle for recognition.

Theme 2: Silent Structures: Patriarchy, Isolation, and Institutional Indifference

The systemic silence and institutional indifference contribute to the marginalisation of women DHs. These leaders are not only challenged by individuals, but by entire systems that seem not to acknowledge the peculiar challenges they face as women in leadership. The school

culture, leadership hierarchy, unions, and district officials are all implicated in maintaining a status quo that leaves women unsupported and isolated. This is evident in the words of **DH2** as she openly shared her frustration: *“The principal’s attitude when I raise gendered concerns is always dismissive. He just says, ‘That’s how things have always been’.”* Echoing this, **DH6** stated, *“I’ve raised issues around disrespect and workload, and my principal tells me, Leadership is tough for everyone. But not everyone has to defend their competence every day just for being a woman.”* **DH3** added, *“Unions only show up when there’s a strike. But when we ask for support as women in leadership, there is silence.”* The feeling of invisibility was reinforced by **DH1**, who said, *“At union meetings, my voice gets drowned out. They look to the male DHs to speak on our behalf.”* Beyond union neglect, formal mentorship programs and district interventions were described as superficial. **DH4** explained, *“District officials arrive with demands and targets, but they never ask what support I need.”* **DH5** remarked, *“Mentorship was supposed to help me grow. Instead, it was just a signature and a tick on someone’s form. No follow-up. No real guidance.”*

These narratives reveal a broader pattern in which institutional structures surrounding school leadership remain deeply patriarchal and often performative in their support. Women departmental heads are therefore expected to carry out leadership duties in environments that overlook or minimise the additional burdens they face. Drawing on Transformational Leadership Theory, the study highlights that true leadership involves inspiring, empowering, and motivating others, which cannot occur effectively when systemic inequities persist. Equity in leadership cannot be achieved simply by placing women in positions of authority; schools and educational systems must actively respond to the gendered dimensions of leadership. This entails rethinking mentorship, leadership development, and union representation to ensure that these mechanisms foster genuine inclusion rather than reproducing the exclusions they are meant to address. Transformational leadership principles underscore the importance of vision, empowerment, and collective growth, providing a theoretical lens for guiding institutional reforms that support women leaders in navigating and transforming patriarchal structures.

Theme 3: Transforming in the Margins: Resilient Leadership as Quiet Revolution

Despite the challenges, the findings reflect a powerful counter-narrative of agency, resilience, and transformational leadership. Women DHs in this study demonstrate that leadership is not only defined by formal structures or recognition, but also by intentional,

personal acts of growth, reflection, and resistance. These leaders described how they have developed coping strategies that are not merely about survival, but about leading with purpose, authenticity, and emotional intelligence. **DH5** explained, *“I’ve learnt to schedule everything, including my rest. If I don’t carve out time for myself, I’ll collapse.”* This intentional self-care reflects a broader awareness that leadership is unsustainable without emotional regulation. **DH1** highlighted the importance of networking: *“Sometimes I just need to talk to another woman who understands this life. We vent, we cry, and then we laugh. That’s how we survive through each other.”* In the absence of institutional mentorship, some have become self-directed leaders. **DH2** said, *“Since I’m not getting proper mentorship, I’ve taken charge. I read leadership books, listen to podcasts, and join female principals’ projects, like this one.”* Similarly, **DH6** reflected, *“I may not have much support, but I’ve made peace with doing things my way. Every small win, even a staff member finally listening, is my way of resisting being overlooked.”* The emotional dimension of their leadership was also evident in spiritual grounding. **DH3** shared, *“Every morning before I enter the school, I sit in my car and pray. It helps me centre myself and prepare for battle.”* Even amidst emotional strain, they remain committed to their roles. As **DH4** remarked, *“There are days when I cry, but I still show up and lead. I refuse to be broken by this.”*

These narratives reveal that these DHs are engaging in what can be described as a quiet revolution. They are crafting a form of transformational leadership that draws on adaptability, relational trust, reflection, and inner strength even in the absence of formal support. This is leadership forged in the margins, shaped not by positional power, but by moral commitment and emotional resilience. For the study, this signifies that female leaders are not passive victims of patriarchy, but active agents of transformation. Through the lens of transformational leadership theory, their practices reflect the core dimensions of inspiring a shared vision, motivating others, and fostering collective empowerment. Their leadership challenges dominant notions of power and authority, illustrating that authentic transformation does not simply flow from the top down, but emerges from within, even in the most unsupported spaces.

5. Discussion

This study explored the challenges women DHs face as they navigate leadership under pressure within South African schools. Viewing their experiences through the prism of Burns’s (1978) transformational leadership theory reveals critical tensions between the idealised

qualities of transformational leadership and the socio-cultural realities shaping women's leadership journeys. Burns conceptualises transformational leadership as a process in which leaders inspire and motivate followers. For instance, by appealing to higher moral values, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration. The women DHs in this study embody many of these qualities, demonstrating resilience, emotional intelligence, and a commitment to fostering collective growth. However, their leadership is persistently undermined by gendered stereotypes that recast assertiveness and decisiveness, core traits of transformational leaders, as unfeminine and aggressive. This double bind highlights a paradox where women must negotiate between demonstrating authority and managing backlash, a tension extensively documented in global scholarship (McCann, 2022; Bell III, 2023). Their experiences challenge Burns's assumption of leadership efficacy as intrinsic to leader-follower dynamics, revealing instead how deeply external sociocultural biases influence the reception and enactment of transformational leadership. Further complicating their leadership is the pervasive institutional patriarchy and indifference that constrains women DHs. Despite Burns's assertion that transformational leadership thrives in environments fostering trust, support, and empowerment, these women encounter systemic exclusion from decision-making forums and tokenistic mentorship. The performative nature of institutional support not only marginalises their voices but also erodes the trust and relational capital essential for transformational influence (Moorosi, 2021; Imhanrenialena et al., 2025). This institutional inertia echoes findings from similar African contexts, emphasising that sustainable transformation requires addressing entrenched structural barriers, not merely increasing the number of women in leadership roles.

The intersection of professional responsibilities with traditional gendered expectations introduces profound emotional labor, intensifying the leadership burden. Women DHs contend with internalised pressures such as impostor syndrome and identity conflicts, which impede their confidence and decision-making capacity. The psychological struggles highlight the hidden costs of transformational leadership for women operating within patriarchal contexts and expand Burns's framework by emphasising the emotional and identity dimensions that influence leadership performance (Szilak, 2023). The internal tension highlights the need for leadership development approaches that encompass both professional skills and emotional resilience. Despite these multifaceted barriers, the women in this study demonstrate a powerful form of leadership that might be characterised as a quiet, resilient revolution. Through self-

directed learning, peer support, spiritual grounding, and emotional regulation, they cultivate transformational leadership that transcends formal authority and institutional recognition. This aligns with Maphalala et al.'s (2022) findings, which suggest that self-directed learning enables educational leaders to take ownership of their professional development in the absence of structured programs.

For these women, self-directed learning becomes a tool of empowerment, a quiet resistance to systems that deny them adequate support. In this way, their leadership reflects Burns's ideal of self-actualizing leaders who grow not only for their own benefit but to uplift others. The findings affirm the relevance of Burns's transformational leadership model while simultaneously challenging it. This study finds it crucial for Burns to account more for the gendered and contextual realities shaping women's leadership experiences. The findings further underscore the need for policies that actively address gendered and institutional barriers in school leadership. For example, policies such as The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa of 1996, which mandates equity and prohibits discrimination, and the Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill of 2013, which aims to achieve substantive gender equality in both law and fact (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1996; 2013). These policies could mandate gender-sensitive leadership training, equitable mentorship programs, and supportive structures that empower departmental heads to navigate leadership challenges under pressure, ensuring that women leaders can exercise agency effectively within the school system.

Women DHs' leadership is not simply about inspiring and motivating others but also about enduring and resisting pervasive gender biases and institutional constraints. This study calls for a reconceptualisation of leadership development and institutional reform. To the one who recognises the emotional labor and moral resilience required of women leaders and actively dismantles structural barriers to gender equity. Ultimately, this study contributes critical insights into how transformational leadership unfolds under pressure, revealing the complex interplay between individual agency and systemic oppression. It highlights the importance of creating enabling environments where female leaders can thrive, not by conforming to dominant leadership norms but by leading authentically, morally, and resiliently in the face of adversity.

6. Conclusion and Implications for Practice

The central argument advanced in this paper is that leadership under pressure is not only about managing immediate challenges but also about negotiating deeply rooted institutional and cultural barriers that disproportionately affect women. The findings suggest that leadership in such contexts is both constrained and transformative, constrained by structural inequities, yet transformative through the resilient practices and relational strategies adopted by departmental heads.

In practical terms, the study recommends that educational policymakers and school governing structures strengthen institutional support systems, implement gender-sensitive leadership training, and establish collaborative networks to reduce isolation and empower departmental heads to lead more effectively under pressure. These interventions would not only enhance school leadership capacity but also contribute to equity and inclusivity in education leadership spaces.

While the research question has been substantially addressed, it also opens pathways for further inquiry. Future research should actively incorporate the perspectives of other stakeholders, such as principals, teachers, and district officials, to build a more comprehensive and contextually grounded understanding of leadership under pressure. Conducting comparative studies across different districts or school types will generate practical insights into contextual variations and guide more targeted interventions.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The focus on six departmental heads within one district limits the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the reliance on qualitative interviews may have constrained the exploration of broader systemic patterns. These limitations affect the transferability of the findings, as the results may not fully represent women leaders in other contexts or capture broader systemic patterns. Nonetheless, the study provides rich, contextual insights that can inform further research and policy, with caution applied when extending the findings to other settings.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines set by the University of South Africa. The conduct of this study has been approved and given relevant clearance(s) by the University of South Africa.

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