

## LEADING BEYOND THE PANDEMIC: HOW FEMALE DEPARTMENTAL HEADS NAVIGATE LEADERSHIP ROLES IN THE POST-COVID-19 ERA

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### ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted education systems worldwide, compelling schools to adapt rapidly to unprecedented organisational, technological, and emotional challenges. During this period, effective school leadership became essential for maintaining educational continuity, supporting teachers, and sustaining learner engagement. Female departmental heads, who occupy critical middle-management positions within schools, played a vital role in stabilising teaching and learning processes during and after the pandemic. Despite their important contributions, limited research has examined how these leaders navigate their leadership roles in the post-COVID-19 educational context, particularly within South African schools. This study therefore aimed to explore how female departmental heads navigate their leadership roles in the post-COVID-19 era. The research was grounded in a constructivist paradigm and employed a qualitative research approach using a generic qualitative design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with ten purposively selected female departmental heads from public primary schools in Limpopo Province, South Africa. All participants had leadership experience before, during, and after the pandemic, enabling them to reflect on evolving leadership practices. Data were analysed using qualitative content analysis to identify key themes related to post-pandemic leadership experiences. The findings indicate that female departmental heads demonstrate adaptive and transformative leadership practices, including enhanced digital literacy, participatory and empathetic leadership approaches, strengthened staff development initiatives, innovative curriculum practices, improved collaboration, effective liaison with school management, and increased leadership flexibility. These practices enabled leaders to support teachers, maintain curriculum implementation, and foster collaborative school cultures. The study concludes that female departmental heads play a critical role in promoting resilient and inclusive leadership practices that contribute to educational recovery and transformation in the post-COVID-19 era. The study contributes to the field of educational leadership by extending understanding of how female middle-level leaders navigate post-crisis educational environments and by highlighting the value of adaptive, collaborative, and digitally informed leadership practices in strengthening school resilience and recovery.

**Keywords:** adaptive leadership; critical feminist theory; departmental heads; digital leadership; female educational leadership; post-COVID-19 education

### INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted education systems worldwide, forcing schools to rapidly adapt to unprecedented organisational, technological, and emotional

challenges. School closures, remote teaching, and disruptions to curriculum delivery required leaders to respond with flexibility, resilience, and innovation (Marshall et al., 2020). Within this context, school leadership became critical in ensuring educational continuity, maintaining teacher morale, and supporting learners through uncertain circumstances. Crises such as pandemics expose systemic vulnerabilities in education systems and highlight the need for leadership that can respond effectively to rapidly changing conditions (Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). In schools, departmental heads occupy a crucial middle-management role responsible for curriculum leadership, staff supervision, and the coordination of teaching and learning activities. Their leadership therefore plays a vital role in stabilising schools during periods of disruption and recovery. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed and intensified existing gender inequalities in educational leadership. Research shows that women in leadership positions experienced disproportionate pressures during the pandemic, including increased caregiving responsibilities, emotional labour, and heightened professional demands (Ahinkorah et al., 2021; Flor et al., 2022; Morgan et al., 2022). Despite these challenges, female educational leaders demonstrated notable strengths in crisis leadership, including empathy, collaboration, adaptability, and relational communication (Aldrich & Lotito, 2020; Garikipati & Kambhampati, 2021). Female departmental heads were particularly central to managing the educational disruptions caused by the pandemic, as they ensured curriculum continuity, supported teachers' emotional well-being, and maintained departmental functioning despite limited resources. As schools transition into the post-COVID-19 era, understanding how these leaders navigate their roles and sustain leadership effectiveness becomes increasingly important for strengthening school leadership and promoting gender equity in education.

South African evidence further highlights the importance of examining female educational leadership in the post-pandemic era. Although women constitute the majority of educators in South African schools, they remain underrepresented in senior leadership positions due to persistent structural, cultural, and gender-related barriers (Mestry & Schmidt, 2024; Moyo & Naidoo, 2024). Female educational leaders often encounter challenges associated with gender stereotypes, unequal access to leadership opportunities, and the expectation to balance professional responsibilities with family and caregiving roles. Despite these challenges, South African studies indicate that women leaders frequently demonstrate collaborative, relational, and transformational leadership practices that contribute positively to school improvement and staff development (Moyo & Naidoo, 2024; Zitha, 2022).

Within South African schools, departmental heads occupy a strategic middle-management position that links classroom practice with school-wide leadership and accountability structures. Departmental heads are responsible for curriculum oversight, teacher mentoring, instructional leadership, assessment moderation, and the implementation of departmental and national education policies (Oloba, 2026). Recent South African research suggests that departmental heads play a critical role in supporting teacher development, improving curriculum delivery, and fostering collaborative professional cultures within schools. However, many departmental heads continue to face challenges associated with increased administrative workloads, resource constraints, and

changing educational expectations, particularly in historically disadvantaged school contexts (Kubheka et al., 2025).

The post-pandemic recovery of South African schools has further intensified the importance of effective middle-level leadership. Following the disruption caused by COVID-19, schools have been required to address learning losses, teacher well-being concerns, learner absenteeism, and the integration of digital technologies into teaching and learning processes. School recovery efforts have highlighted the need for adaptive, resilient, and emotionally responsive leadership capable of supporting both educators and learners during educational reconstruction. South African evidence indicates that school leaders have increasingly adopted collaborative, flexible, and technology-enhanced approaches to rebuild teaching and learning systems and strengthen institutional resilience in the post-pandemic period (Mbuyane, 2024; Maome et al., 2024). These developments underscore the need to understand how female departmental heads navigate their leadership responsibilities within this evolving educational landscape.

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally altered the functioning of schools and created new challenges for educational leadership. Schools were largely unprepared for the sudden shift toward remote teaching, digital learning, and crisis management (Donnelly et al., 2021). These disruptions exposed inequalities within education systems and intensified pressures on school leaders who were required to manage organisational change while supporting the well-being of staff and learners (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Mubita, 2021). Within this context, female departmental heads were expected to demonstrate resilience, adaptability, and emotional intelligence while navigating resource constraints, increased workloads, and evolving instructional demands. Such expectations placed considerable strain on female leaders who were simultaneously balancing professional responsibilities with domestic and caregiving roles. Although women have demonstrated strong leadership capabilities during times of crisis, they remain under-represented in leadership positions within the education sector. Structural barriers such as gender stereotypes, limited professional advancement opportunities, and organisational cultures that privilege masculine leadership norms continue to hinder women's leadership progression (Khumalo, 2021; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). Furthermore, the pandemic intensified these gender disparities by increasing the professional and personal burdens placed on women leaders (Parry & Gordon, 2021). While research has acknowledged the resilience and contributions of female leaders during crises, there remains limited understanding of how female departmental heads specifically navigate their leadership roles in the aftermath of the pandemic. Without such understanding, education systems risk overlooking the leadership strategies and resilience mechanisms that enable female leaders to sustain departmental functioning and contribute to school recovery in post-crisis contexts.

Existing literature on educational leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic has largely focused on general leadership responses to crisis management at institutional or national levels. While studies have acknowledged the leadership strengths of women during crises, there remains limited empirical research examining the experiences of female departmental heads in the post-COVID-19 educational landscape, particularly within the South African school context (Salas & Price, 2021; Manning, 2023). Furthermore,

previous studies have primarily examined female leadership in broad organisational contexts without exploring how middle-level leaders such as departmental heads navigate the complex intersection of gender, resilience, and leadership development after the pandemic. Consequently, there is insufficient understanding of how female departmental heads sustain leadership effectiveness, support teacher well-being, and adapt their leadership strategies in the post-COVID-19 era. This study is important for both theoretical and practical reasons. From a theoretical perspective, the research contributes to the growing body of scholarship on gender and educational leadership by examining how resilience, leadership development, and gender dynamics intersect in the experiences of female departmental heads. From a practical perspective, the study provides insights that can inform leadership development programmes, gender-responsive policies, and institutional support mechanisms aimed at strengthening female leadership in schools. By exploring the lived experiences of female departmental heads in South African public schools, the study highlights the strategies, competencies, and organisational conditions that enable women leaders to navigate complex leadership roles in the post-pandemic educational landscape. Such insights are critical for developing inclusive leadership practices and promoting sustainable school leadership in the post-COVID-19 era.

### **Aim of the Study**

The aim of this study is to investigate how female departmental heads are navigating their leadership roles after the COVID-19 era.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study is underpinned by Critical Feminist Theory (CFT), which provides a conceptual lens for examining gendered power relations, inequalities, and leadership experiences within educational contexts. Critical feminist theory emerged from feminist scholarship that critiques patriarchal structures and seeks to challenge systemic inequalities affecting women in various social institutions (Hooks, 1994; Fraser, 2013). Within the field of educational leadership, CFT emphasises the need to interrogate the gendered dynamics that shape leadership opportunities, experiences, and expectations (Blackmore, 2013). By centring women's voices and lived experiences, the theory enables researchers to explore how female leaders negotiate institutional barriers and assert their agency within traditionally male-dominated leadership structures (Moyo & Perumal, 2018). A key concept within critical feminist theory is intersectionality, which highlights how different social identities such as gender, race, and socio-economic status intersect to shape individuals' experiences of power and marginalisation. The concept of intersectionality was introduced by Crenshaw (1989) to explain how multiple forms of oppression overlap and reinforce one another. Intersectionality provides a valuable framework for understanding the complex realities faced by female departmental heads, particularly in the South African educational context, where historical inequalities and socio-economic disparities continue to influence leadership opportunities (Moyo & Perumal, 2018). Through this lens, the experiences of female departmental heads are not viewed solely as gendered experiences but as multifaceted realities shaped by broader social, institutional, and cultural structures (Collins et al., 2021).

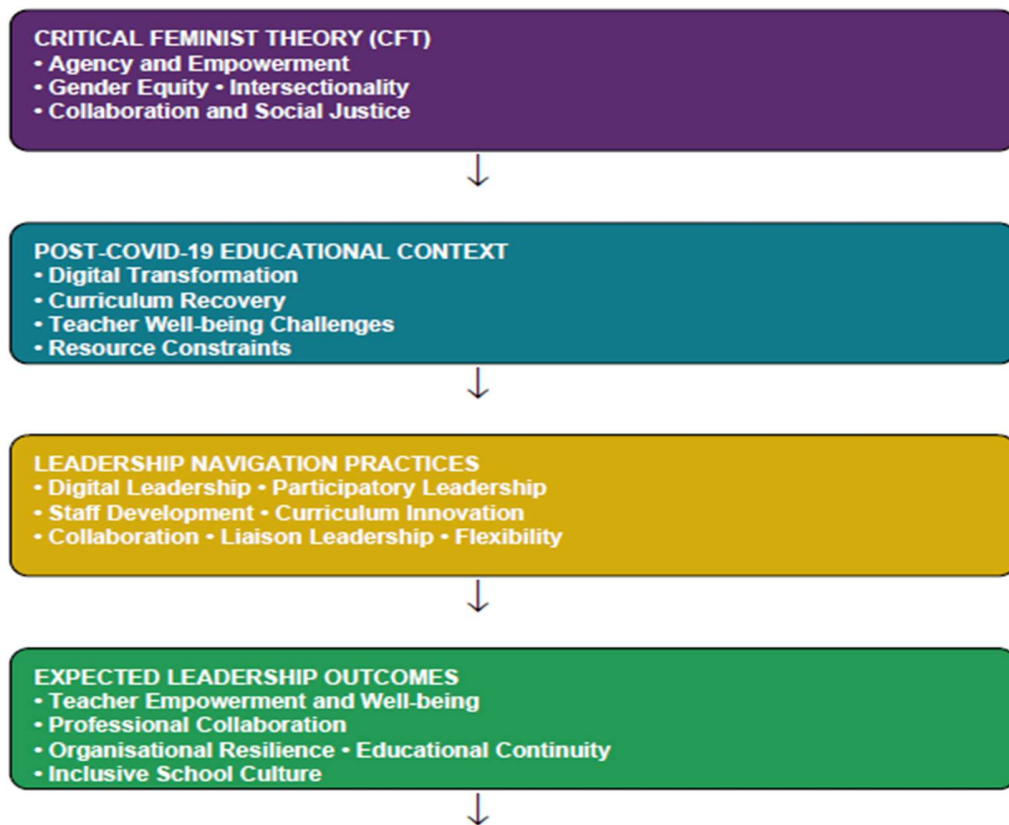
Critical feminist theory also critiques patriarchal leadership norms that associate leadership with traditionally masculine traits such as authority, control, and dominance (Eagly & Carli, 2007). These norms often marginalise leadership styles that emphasise collaboration, empathy, and relational communication, qualities commonly associated with female leadership (Blackmore, 2013; Eagly & Carli, 2007). Within educational institutions, such patriarchal norms may influence perceptions of leadership competence and limit women's access to leadership positions (Acker, 2012). By applying CFT, this study critically examines how female departmental heads challenge these gendered expectations and demonstrate alternative leadership practices that prioritise empathy, collaboration, and resilience. Finally, critical feminist theory emphasises agency and resistance, highlighting how women actively challenge structural inequalities and create pathways for empowerment within institutional contexts (Fraser, 2009; Collins, 2000). Feminist scholars argue that women's leadership practices often involve forms of resistance that reshape organisational cultures and challenge dominant power structures (Blackmore, 2013). In the post-COVID-19 era, female departmental heads demonstrated agency by adapting their leadership practices, supporting teacher well-being, and sustaining departmental functioning despite significant challenges. Through the application of CFT, the study explores how female leaders exercise resilience and transformative leadership while navigating gendered barriers in educational leadership. This theoretical perspective therefore provides a valuable framework for understanding how female departmental heads contribute to school recovery, leadership transformation, and the advancement of gender equity within educational institutions.

To strengthen the theoretical framing of this study, a conceptual framework was developed to illustrate the relationship between Critical Feminist Theory, leadership navigation practices, the post-COVID-19 educational context, and the expected leadership outcomes. The framework positions Critical Feminist Theory as the foundational lens through which female departmental heads interpret and navigate leadership responsibilities in schools. The theory emphasises agency, resistance, collaboration, empowerment, and the challenging of patriarchal leadership norms. Within the post-COVID-19 educational context, female departmental heads operate in environments characterised by educational disruption, increased digitalisation, teacher well-being concerns, curriculum adaptation demands, and resource constraints. These contextual realities shape the leadership challenges and opportunities experienced by female leaders.

Guided by Critical Feminist Theory, female departmental heads navigate leadership through adaptive leadership practices, including enhanced digital literacy, participatory decision-making, staff development, curriculum innovation, collaborative leadership, liaison functions, and leadership flexibility. These practices represent leadership navigation strategies that enable female leaders to respond effectively to post-pandemic educational demands while simultaneously challenging traditional hierarchical leadership approaches. The expected outcomes of these leadership practices include improved teacher support, strengthened professional collaboration, enhanced curriculum implementation, increased organisational resilience, greater educational continuity, and the promotion of inclusive and gender-responsive leadership cultures. Consequently, the framework demonstrates how feminist-informed leadership practices contribute to school

recovery, transformation, and sustainable educational improvement in the post-COVID-19 era.

### Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Understanding How Female Departmental Heads Navigate Leadership Roles in the Post-COVID-19 Era



**Caption:** Critical Feminist Theory informs leadership navigation practices within the post-COVID-19 educational context, leading to transformative leadership outcomes.

## METHODOLOGY

This study was grounded in the constructivist research paradigm, which emphasises understanding social reality through participants' lived experiences and interpretations of their social world. Constructivism assumes that knowledge is socially constructed through interaction, experience, and reflection rather than existing as a fixed objective reality. This paradigm was appropriate for the present study because it enabled the researcher to explore how female departmental heads interpret and make meaning of their leadership experiences in the post-COVID-19 educational context. By adopting this paradigm, the study recognised that leadership practices and resilience are shaped by contextual realities such as gender dynamics, institutional culture, and the lingering effects of the pandemic. The constructivist paradigm further encourages reflexivity, acknowledging that the researcher's interpretation plays a role in meaning-making during the research process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Within this framework, the study sought to capture authentic insights into how female departmental heads navigate leadership roles after the COVID-19 era. A qualitative research approach was adopted to obtain an in-depth understanding of the experiences and perspectives of female departmental heads regarding their leadership roles in the post-pandemic period. Qualitative research is particularly suited to studies that seek to explore complex social phenomena within their natural contexts and to understand the meanings individuals attach to their experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This approach enabled the researcher to engage directly with participants and to capture rich, descriptive accounts of how female departmental heads navigated leadership challenges after the COVID-19 crisis. Furthermore, qualitative inquiry facilitated open dialogue and reflective responses from participants, allowing them to express their personal experiences, perceptions, and strategies for coping with the evolving demands of educational leadership. The qualitative approach therefore provided a suitable methodological framework for exploring the lived realities of female leaders within South African public primary schools.

The study employed a generic qualitative research design, which focuses on understanding how individuals interpret and make sense of a particular phenomenon based on their experiences. Generic qualitative designs provide methodological flexibility and allow researchers to explore participants' perceptions without being restricted to a specific qualitative tradition such as phenomenology or grounded theory (Kahlke, 2014). In this study, the design enabled the researcher to examine how female departmental heads navigated leadership roles after the COVID-19 pandemic and to identify patterns in their leadership practices, resilience strategies, and professional experiences. The design was therefore suitable for addressing the research aim, which sought to investigate the lived leadership experiences of female departmental heads in a changing educational environment. By using a generic qualitative design, the study was able to capture nuanced perspectives while maintaining flexibility in data interpretation and thematic development. The population for this study consisted of female departmental heads working in public primary schools in Limpopo Province, South Africa. From this population, ten female departmental heads were purposively selected to participate in the study. Purposeful sampling was used because it enables the selection of participants who possess relevant experience and knowledge related to the research topic (Cohen et al., 2011). The selection criteria required participants to be female departmental heads who had served in leadership positions before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic,

ensuring that they had sufficient experience to reflect on leadership practices across different phases of the crisis. To provide diverse perspectives, the sample included five participants from rural schools and five from urban schools. This approach ensured that the study captured varied contextual experiences of leadership within different educational settings. The sample size of ten participants was considered appropriate for the qualitative nature of the study, which prioritised depth of understanding over statistical representation. The selected participants possessed rich experiential knowledge relevant to the research aim, enabling the generation of detailed and information-rich data. Furthermore, data collection continued until sufficient depth and repetition of emerging ideas were observed across interviews, suggesting that adequate insight had been obtained to address the research questions. The inclusion of participants from both rural and urban school contexts further enhanced the diversity and credibility of the findings by ensuring representation of varied leadership experiences within the post-COVID-19 educational environment.

<b>Participant Code</b>	<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Years Leadership Experience</b>	<b>of</b>	<b>School Location</b>	<b>Highest Qualification</b>
P1	35–40	6–10 years		Rural	Bachelor’s Degree
P2	41–45	11–15 years		Urban	Honours Degree
P3	46–50	11–15 years		Rural	Master’s Degree
P4	35–40	6–10 years		Urban	Honours Degree
P5	51–55	16–20 years		Rural	Bachelor’s Degree
P6	41–45	11–15 years		Urban	Master’s Degree
P7	46–50	16–20 years		Rural	Honours Degree
P8	36–40	6–10 years		Urban	Bachelor’s Degree
P9	51–55	21+ years		Rural	Honours Degree
P10	46–50	16–20 years		Urban	Master’s Degree

Table 1 illustrates the demographic diversity of the participants included in the study. The participants represented a range of age groups, leadership experience levels, school contexts, and qualification levels. This diversity was important in ensuring that the study captured varied perspectives regarding how female departmental heads navigated leadership responsibilities in the post-COVID-19 era. The inclusion of participants from both rural and urban schools further strengthened the contextual richness of the data and enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings.

Data were collected through semi-structured one-on-one interviews, which allowed participants to share their experiences while enabling the researcher to probe deeper into emerging issues related to leadership in the post-COVID-19 era. Semi-structured interviews are widely used in qualitative research because they provide flexibility in questioning while ensuring that key research themes are addressed (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). The interviews focused on participants' leadership experiences, resilience strategies, challenges encountered, and adaptive practices developed after the pandemic. This method allowed participants to provide detailed accounts of how they navigated leadership responsibilities in their schools during a period of significant educational change. The use of interviews therefore generated rich narrative data that captured the complexity of female leadership experiences within the post-pandemic educational environment. The data generated from the interviews were analysed using qualitative content analysis, which involves systematically examining textual data to identify patterns, themes, and meanings related to the research questions. The analysis process began with the transcription of interview recordings, followed by repeated reading of the transcripts to gain familiarity with the data. The researcher then coded relevant segments of the data and grouped similar codes into broader categories and themes that reflected participants' leadership experiences and strategies in the post-COVID-19 era. Qualitative content analysis is appropriate for studies that seek to interpret participants' narratives and identify recurring themes within qualitative data. Through this process, the study identified key thematic insights regarding how female departmental heads navigated leadership roles and built resilience after the pandemic.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the research process to ensure the protection of participants and the integrity of the study. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Faculty of Education Higher Degrees Committee at the University of Johannesburg, and permission to conduct the research was granted by the Limpopo Department of Education. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided written informed consent prior to their participation. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without any negative consequences. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms were used instead of participants' real names, and interview data were stored securely. Ethical research practices such as respect, privacy, and the protection of participants' dignity were maintained throughout the study.

## **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

Despite its contributions, the study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the study was conducted with a relatively small sample of ten female departmental heads, which limits the generalisability of the findings to broader populations. Secondly, the research was conducted within public primary schools in Limpopo Province, meaning that the findings may not fully reflect the experiences of female leaders in other provinces or educational contexts within South Africa. Additionally, the study relied on participants' self-reported experiences, which may be influenced by personal perceptions and recall bias. However, despite these limitations, the qualitative approach provided rich and contextual insights into the leadership experiences of female departmental heads,

offering valuable contributions to the understanding of gendered leadership and resilience in the post-COVID-19 educational landscape.

## FINDINGS

The findings revealed that female departmental heads demonstrated adaptive and transformative leadership practices in the post-COVID-19 era, reflected through several key themes, including upskilled digital literacy, shifts in leadership style, staff development, curriculum development, improved collaboration, effective liaison between departments and school administration, and increased flexibility in leadership practices.

### 1. Upskilled digital literacy

Participants posited that following the COVID-19 pandemic, female departmental heads are navigating their leadership roles through a growth in their digital literacy. They described how the shift to remote teaching required them to acquire new technological skills, which they now apply in leading teachers, facilitating meetings, communicating with stakeholders, and integrating digital tools into teaching and learning. Participant 1 highlighted how the pandemic accelerated her digital competencies. She shared that before COVID-19 she had limited digital knowledge, but remote teaching pushed her to adopt and integrate technology more confidently. She now leads digital initiatives, holds virtual departmental meetings, and encourages online homework and innovative learning activities such as robotics. *“Before COVID-19, I had little knowledge about digital tools, but remote learning forced me to learn. Now I confidently integrate technology, host virtual meetings, and support online homework and robotics in the foundation phase.”* Participant 2 reflected on a transition from exclusively face-to-face meetings to reliance on virtual communication platforms. *“Before COVID-19, we only held physical meetings. Now we conduct most meetings virtually using WhatsApp or Zoom.”* Participant 3 emphasised that developing digital skills enabled her to lead teachers in integrating technology into lesson planning and classroom practices: *“I had little knowledge about digital tools, but I was forced to learn. Now I support teachers to use technology, including downloading videos and resources to make learning fun.”* Participant 4 explained that although virtual platforms improved communication, support staff struggled with technology. She described creative strategies to ensure all staff could participate and also noted community challenges such as parents lacking smartphones. *“Virtual meetings were challenging for support staff, so we adapted by assisting them and using community radio when parents could not access digital platforms. Despite challenges, technology transformed communication and teamwork.”*

Participant 5 stated that many digital practices adopted during the pandemic have continued, improving efficiency and flexibility in leadership and instruction. *“We have adopted many digital strategies from COVID-19. We conduct online lessons when needed and hold virtual meetings. I have upskilled my digital literacy, as these practices are flexible and support everyone’s well-being.”* Participant 6 described expanded use of digital platforms for academic planning and communication: *“We now hold online curriculum and assessment meetings and send homework using Google Classroom and WhatsApp, though network issues remain a challenge.”* Participant 7 emphasised the use

of digital platforms for academic tasks: *“Assignments and homework are now given online through platforms like Zoom and WhatsApp. I created groups for educators and parents to share information.”* Participant 8 highlighted ongoing virtual communication and collaboration with both school and district stakeholders: *“We conduct virtual meetings and communicate through WhatsApp. We also submit work through Google Classroom and similar platforms.”* Participant 9 noted continued use of technology and increased dependence post-pandemic. *“We used technology before COVID-19, but now we rely on it full-time for meetings, online homework, oral assessments, and other activities.”* Participant 10 pointed out a full shift to digital communication within her department, which also required her to balance technological leadership with emotional support. *“Before COVID-19, all meetings were face-to-face. Now we use WhatsApp and virtual platforms, and staff carry laptops to work daily. As a female DH, I am expected to show support and empathy while adapting to digital leadership.”* Participant 11 noted ongoing encouragement of digital learning tools to enhance classroom engagement. *“I encourage my department to use online educational apps to make learning interactive and fun.”*

## 2. Shift in leadership style

Another opinion that emerged from participants' accounts was a shift in leadership style among female departmental heads in the post-COVID-19 era. Many participants revealed that the pandemic experience prompted them to adopt more transformational, participative, and flexible leadership approaches that emphasise empathy, collaboration, communication, and inclusivity. The crisis reshaped their leadership perspectives, leading them to value people-orientated practices and digital adaptability. Participant 6 explained that her leadership approach has evolved from a directive style to a more transformational and participative one. She described creating a supportive and positive work environment where teachers feel valued and empowered. As she noted: *“I create a supportive environment where teachers feel valued and empowered... building trust, listening to concerns, and finding solutions together.”* Similarly, Participant 1 reflected on how the pandemic taught her the importance of flexibility and adaptability in leadership. She shared that:

*COVID-19 showed how quickly things can change. I have learnt to be more flexible in planning and decision-making, leaving more room for change and encouraging my team to be adaptable as well. The best leaders are not those with all the answers but those willing to take risks, make decisions with limited information, and stay open to learning from mistakes.*

Participant 2 also observed a shift towards communication and teamwork, noting that she has made deliberate efforts to ensure constant interaction and morale among her staff. As she stated, *“I now prioritise more communication, teamwork, and support than before the pandemic. I started regular virtual meetings with staff to share resources, maintain positive morale, and ensure that no one is left behind.”* For Participant 3, the pandemic transformed her from being task-focused to people-centred, deepening her empathy and enhancing her belief in shared leadership. She remarked that: *“The pandemic transformed my leadership to be more people-orientated, empathetic, and responsive.”*

Participant 5 highlighted a significant shift towards collaboration and psychological freedom in her school context. She explained that:

*In this post-COVID-19 era, digital tools are now the norm in our school. Leadership has become more collaborative, with less command and control. I see leadership now as relationships where followers feel free to speak and share their authentic selves. There is greater cooperation, willingness to support, and flexibility.*

Participant 8 reflected on the technological transformation in administrative and instructional practices, noting that she has embraced digital methods to improve efficiency. She shared that *“Before COVID-19, many things had to be done face-to-face, such as meetings, homework submissions, and communication with parents. As a female departmental head, I have now introduced digital tools that make things simpler and more efficient than before.”* Participant 11 indicated a shift towards compassionate and wellbeing-orientated leadership, focusing on creating a supportive environment for teachers. She explained that:

*As a female departmental head, I now advocate more for teachers’ well-being and flexible work policies. Teachers need to be appreciated for their extra effort and not taken for granted. I am instilling the spirit of compassion and understanding in the school environment to achieve a positive atmosphere for teaching and learning.*

### **3. Staff development**

Staff development emerged as a crucial aspect through which female departmental heads navigate their leadership roles in the post-COVID-19 era. The participants highlighted the importance of collaboration, mentorship, emotional support, and technological competence in fostering teacher growth and improving curriculum delivery. Their responses reflect a shift towards more supportive and inclusive leadership practices that prioritise teamwork, capacity building, and continuous professional development. Participant 1 emphasised the importance of teamwork and peer support among educators. She explained that she encourages younger teachers to assist older colleagues who still struggle with adapting to new methods and technologies. She further highlighted her role in enhancing teachers’ subject knowledge and moderating school-based assessments. As she noted: *“Younger educators assist older colleagues who still struggle with new technologies, while I support teachers’ content knowledge and curriculum implementation.”* Participant 2 underscored the importance of collaboration and emotional intelligence in staff development. She viewed her role as fostering a positive and supportive working environment through open communication and responsiveness to teachers’ needs. She stated: *“I encourage educators to share best practices and create a positive environment through listening and regular feedback.”*

Participant 3 focused on the integration of technology in staff development as a way of improving teaching and learning. She described how her strong technological skills enable her to guide teachers in using ICT to enhance curriculum delivery and accommodate diverse learners. She explained, *“I have strong foundational technological skills to support teachers, learner support, and curriculum delivery. I also encourage*

*teachers to plan differentiated activities to accommodate all types of learners. I design programmes, integrate them with the use of ICT, and engage in daily routines.*” Participant 9 reflected a leadership approach centred on modelling and emotional support. She believes in leading by example while empowering her team members to take initiative. Her response shows an awareness of the emotional and practical challenges educators face after the pandemic. She expressed, *“I believe in walking in front, so whatever we do, I take the lead in it. I also welcome my team’s ideas if they come with their own initiatives. I support my team emotionally and practically in this post-COVID-19 era.”*

#### **4. Curriculum development**

Participants expressed that in the post-COVID-19 era, female departmental heads have played a crucial role in rethinking and restructuring curriculum implementation to meet the evolving educational demands brought about by the pandemic. Their narratives reveal a shift towards flexibility, inclusivity, and consistency in curriculum planning and delivery. Participant 1 explained that, as part of the curriculum adjustment strategy, she *“reduced curriculum content across all subjects”* to ensure that educators could manage the workload more effectively within the limited time available after schools reopened. Participant 2 highlighted how her leadership approach had become more structured and compassionate since the pandemic. She noted that she now provides greater clarity, regular monitoring, and enhanced guidance to ensure curriculum stability. She emphasised the importance of adhering to the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), which she referred to as *“our Bible”*, ensuring that both teaching and assessment align with its frameworks. She explained:

*I now give more clarity than before COVID-19. I monitor regularly because the pandemic has taught me that time management is important, and as a female leader, I have to use my caring nature to ensure curriculum development is certain in my department. I also make sure that educators implement the CAPS with more understanding, following the reduction of themes in the ATPs and ensuring their teaching and assessments comply with policy directives.*

Participant 3 described how she had introduced flexible and innovative teaching practices that cater to diverse learners’ needs. Her approach integrates differentiated instruction, play-based learning, and the use of technology, particularly robotics, to make learning more engaging and accessible. She stated: *“I introduced differentiated instruction, play-based learning, and technology such as robotics to enhance learner engagement and accessibility.”* Participant 8 pointed out that continuous professional development has become central to curriculum improvement in her department. She explained that she makes time to collaborate with her team. *“I make sure that I sit down with them and develop them so that they have the knowledge of the curriculum.”* Similarly, Participant 11 underscored the significance of leading fair and policy-aligned assessment development. She remarked, *“I also lead the development of clear and fair assessments using the CAPS document and frameworks. I monitor and support the use of ATPs.”*

## 5. Improved collaboration

Improved collaboration was another significant way in which female departmental heads navigated their leadership roles in the post-COVID-19 era. Participants described how fostering teamwork, open communication, and trust among staff strengthened relationships and enhanced collective performance within their schools. Their experiences reflected an intentional effort to create inclusive and supportive environments that prioritise collaboration and mutual respect. Participant 1 highlighted that collaboration was central to her leadership approach and that her openness encouraged teamwork among staff. She described how both male and female teachers supported one another beyond their formal duties, particularly in assisting learners from neighbouring countries who lacked essential documents. According to her,

*The whole school perceives me as collaborative and easy to approach... The male teachers are so helpful... They even come to the foundation phase to look for the learners that don't have birth certificates because their parents are coming from our neighbouring countries... They make sure that they follow up until they get the documents for these kids... teamwork is the best key.*

Participant 6 further emphasised the role of social connection in strengthening collaboration and trust. She viewed communication and empathy as key elements of her leadership style, noting that building relationships beyond the work environment enhances staff cohesion. As she explained: *"I organise social gatherings that strengthen trust and help staff see me as a supportive and empathetic leader."* Similarly, Participant 8 underscored the importance of clear communication, shared vision, and empowerment in promoting collaboration. She made deliberate efforts to ensure that her team understood collective goals and had opportunities to contribute their ideas. In her words, *"I interact with them and make sure that whatever needs to be done is clearly understood... I ensure they know the vision we are pursuing so that we all work towards a common goal... I empower them by giving them time, space, and a chance to bring out their ideas."*

## 6. Liaison between department and school administration

Participants highlight how female departmental heads serve as vital intermediaries between their departments and the broader school administration, ensuring that teaching and learning activities run smoothly in the post-COVID-19 era. Their leadership involves effective coordination, communication, and problem-solving to secure necessary resources and maintain curriculum standards despite persisting challenges from the pandemic period. Participant 3 described her role as a crucial link between her departmental team and the school management, particularly regarding the provision of essential teaching and learning materials. She explained that *"I also stand as a nodal point between my team and the administration at school, for example, for the provisioning of teaching and learning material."* Similarly, Participant 10 emphasised her proactive involvement in resource management and collaboration with both internal and external

stakeholders. She elaborated that: *“I work with principals and neighbouring schools to secure textbooks and teaching resources so that curriculum delivery is not compromised.”*

## 7. Increased flexibility

Participants opined that the post-COVID-19 era has required female departmental heads to become more adaptable and responsive to dynamic educational contexts. The experiences shared by participants reveal that the pandemic reshaped their leadership practices, particularly in relation to flexibility, planning, and decision-making. They have had to balance evolving institutional expectations with the need to maintain effective teaching and learning environments, incorporating lessons learnt from the crisis period into their current leadership approaches. Participant 2 explained that the pandemic taught her the importance of adaptability in leadership and planning. She noted that she now embraces flexibility in decision-making and encourages her team members to do the same. According to her:

*As a female departmental head in this post-COVID-19 era, I have increased flexibility and adaptability. COVID-19 has shown how quickly things can change. I have learnt to be more flexible in planning and decision-making. I now leave more room for change and encourage my team to be adaptable as well, for example, through online or digital submission of homework and the introduction of robotics as part of the curriculum.*

Similarly, Participant 6 emphasised that the pandemic highlighted the necessity for rapid adaptability in school leadership. She reflected on how flexibility has become a key leadership strategy in responding to ongoing changes within the education system. She stated that: *“COVID-19 taught me to be more flexible in planning and decision-making and to encourage adaptability among staff.”* Participant 10 also underscored the significance of situational flexibility in her daily leadership practice. She described how she adapts her decision-making process based on the immediacy and complexity of different challenges. In her words:

*I now often practise flexibility, and it works. For example, flexibility in terms of situations we come across every day helps me take informed decisions according to the situation at hand. If it needs a quick response, I act fast; if it requires reflection, I take time to think it through. This approach has helped the department become more future-ready and adaptive to ongoing changes, such as continuing with hybrid meetings, digital tools, and well-being practices.*

## DISCUSSION

The data revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for digital transformation in education, compelling school leaders, including female departmental heads, to rapidly acquire and apply digital competencies in their professional roles. The

data shows that female departmental heads developed significant confidence and proficiency in using digital technologies, which now shape how they lead, communicate, and manage academic activities. This shift aligns with global studies showing that the pandemic accelerated digital learning adoption and reshaped leadership practices to integrate technology in both administrative and pedagogical functions (Omar et al., 2023; Trust & Whalen, 2020). Many of these leaders, who initially had limited exposure to digital tools, adapted by learning to conduct virtual meetings, facilitate online teaching, and use platforms like Zoom, Google Classroom, and WhatsApp for communication. Such adaptability reflects the resilience and innovation characterising female leadership during crises, a phenomenon emphasised by Gómez et al. (2024), who note that female leaders often leverage crises as opportunities for professional and institutional growth. Drawing from CFT, the upskilling in digital literacy can be interpreted as a form of empowerment and resistance against patriarchal structures that historically excluded women from technological domains. As Hooks (2015) and Katsiampoura (2024) argue, feminist leadership involves challenging systems of power that restrict women's access to knowledge and authority. In this study, female departmental heads used digital platforms not only to sustain academic continuity but also to assert agency and visibility within male-dominated educational hierarchies. By mastering digital tools, these leaders redefined leadership boundaries, exemplifying what Arinder (2020) describes as intersectional empowerment, where technology became a tool for dismantling gendered limitations in leadership participation. Their digital engagement fostered collaborative, inclusive communication channels that reflect feminist principles of shared power and relational leadership (Lumby & Azaola, 2014).

From an educational leadership perspective, digital upskilling enhanced female leaders' ability to promote teacher development, streamline departmental operations, and maintain academic standards amidst disruption. Studies indicate that leaders who integrate technology effectively improve institutional efficiency, professional communication, and collaborative learning cultures (Dube, 2022; MacLure et al., 2023). Female departmental heads' digital adaptability mirrors Eagly and Carli's (2007) concept of transformational female leadership, characterised by empathy, flexibility, and innovation. The shift from physical to virtual interaction expanded their leadership capacity beyond geographical constraints, fostering new modes of engagement and mentorship. Moreover, digital tools enhanced transparency and accountability in leadership practices, reflecting Collins' (1990) notion that feminist knowledge and power emerge from accessibility, dialogue, and collective participation. Interpreting the data further, the continued reliance on digital tools post-pandemic signifies not merely a technical adaptation but a transformation in leadership identity and culture. Female departmental heads have integrated digital literacy into the core of their leadership praxis, reinforcing inclusive and equitable education. This aligns with CFT's call for transformative praxis, where leaders employ technology as a democratic space for empowerment, knowledge exchange, and social justice (Katsiampoura, 2024; Hooks, 2015). However, the persistence of structural inequalities, such as limited access to devices or stable connectivity, especially among support staff and rural communities, highlights the intersectional nature of digital inequities. Hence, while these female leaders demonstrate agency through digital competence, their experiences also reveal the need

for systemic support and equitable digital infrastructure to sustain inclusive leadership practices.

The data indicate that female departmental heads have undergone a significant transformation in their leadership styles in the post-COVID-19 era. This shift reflects a move from hierarchical and directive leadership models to more participative, transformational, and empathetic approaches that prioritise collaboration, communication, and the well-being of staff. The pandemic catalysed a re-evaluation of leadership priorities, pushing leaders to become more adaptable and people-centred. This aligns with CFT, which critiques patriarchal leadership norms that privilege assertiveness and control, instead advocating for collaborative and inclusive practices that recognise the unique contributions of women in leadership (Hooks, 2015; Katsiampoura, 2024; Eagly, 2020). Within this framework, the post-pandemic leadership transformations among female departmental heads can be viewed as acts of resistance and redefinition, challenging male-dominated models and validating leadership traits rooted in empathy, emotional intelligence, and shared decision-making. The literature supports this shift towards transformational leadership as a necessary response to crisis conditions. Transformational leaders are known for inspiring commitment, fostering innovation, and creating psychologically safe environments where followers feel valued and motivated (Tian et al., 2022; Vermeulen et al., 2022). Female departmental heads' adoption of participative and collaborative approaches resonates with studies showing that women leaders tend to prioritise inclusivity and relational management, enhancing teacher morale and organisational resilience (Toccalino et al., 2022). These shifts demonstrate that leadership in post-pandemic schools is no longer about top-down authority but about creating interdependent systems of support. In this sense, CFT provides a critical lens to interpret such transformation as an emancipatory process where female leaders assert their agency by redefining what effective leadership means in education.

Furthermore, the increased reliance on digital technologies and flexible work practices during and after the pandemic has compelled female leaders to adapt to hybrid management styles that combine technological competence with relational sensitivity. This is consistent with the emerging body of research on digital and adaptive leadership in education, which highlights the necessity for leaders to blend technical skills with human-centred management to sustain productivity and well-being (Halim et al., 2022; Oloba et al., 2025). By embracing innovation and collaborative problem-solving, female departmental heads not only ensured continuity of teaching and learning but also reinforced their credibility as adaptive and resilient leaders. CFT interprets this adaptability as a manifestation of women's agency, challenging systemic inequities by creating alternative spaces of empowerment where inclusion and flexibility replace rigidity and control (Arinder, 2020). Thus, the post-pandemic shift in leadership style among female departmental heads signifies both a pragmatic and ideological transformation. Pragmatically, it was a response to the need for resilience, flexibility, and empathy amid uncertainty. Ideologically, it reflects a feminist reimagining of leadership that centres on relational power rather than hierarchical dominance. The evidence shows that female departmental heads have become more compassionate, communicative, and

technologically adept, thus aligning leadership with humanistic and equitable principles. This evolution exemplifies the CFT principle of transformative praxis, where leaders not only adapt to change but use their positions to challenge oppressive systems and promote justice within their institutions (Hooks, 2015; Chin, 2022). Consequently, the shift in leadership style is not merely a response to crisis but a step towards establishing feminist-informed leadership cultures in education, cultures that value empathy, inclusivity, and collaboration as essential foundations for sustainable school improvement.

The data on staff development reveal that female departmental heads have adopted collaborative, inclusive, and transformative leadership strategies to support teachers' professional growth in the post-COVID-19 era. This shift reflects a move away from traditional hierarchical leadership models toward participatory practices that emphasise teamwork, emotional intelligence, and technological competence. Informed by CFT, such leadership practices challenge patriarchal and exclusionary norms by promoting empowerment, relationality, and shared agency among teachers (Hooks, 2015; Katsiampoura, 2024; Lumby & Azaola, 2014). The departmental heads' focus on mentorship and collective capacity-building aligns with CFT's principle of dismantling power hierarchies and validating the lived experiences of women as sites of knowledge and transformation (Arinder, 2020). Through collaboration, these leaders enact feminist praxis that fosters solidarity and resilience within school environments, positioning teacher development as a collective, socially responsive endeavour rather than an individualised task. Moreover, the participants' emphasis on teamwork and peer mentoring illustrates the emergence of distributed and relational leadership models within schools. As noted by Barkhuizen et al. (2022) and Gómez et al. (2024), post-pandemic school leadership increasingly demands adaptability, empathy, and collaboration, qualities often associated with female leaders. By encouraging younger teachers to support senior colleagues in mastering digital and pedagogical tools, the departmental heads demonstrate adaptive leadership that bridges generational divides and enhances professional inclusivity. This practice not only reflects the Ubuntu ethos embedded in South African educational contexts but also aligns with Hooks' (2015) call for leadership rooted in care, connection, and community well-being. The cultivation of peer learning communities echoes feminist educational principles of participatory engagement and challenges hierarchical assumptions about expertise. In this sense, female leaders are not only rebuilding teaching capacity but are reimagining post-pandemic education as a collaborative ecosystem that values mutual growth.

In addition, staff development after COVID-19 has evolved to incorporate emotional intelligence and psychological support as essential components of professional growth. Female departmental heads' emphasis on listening, empathy, and emotional support for teachers who face personal and professional challenges indicates a holistic understanding of staff development that extends beyond academic performance. This approach resonates with Lumby and Azaola's (2014) argument that women's leadership in education often embodies relational and empathetic dimensions that foster inclusive cultures. It also aligns with Hooks' (1994) and Collins' (2000) advocacy for leadership that integrates care and social justice into institutional practices. The intentional focus on

emotional well-being as part of staff development represents a form of feminist resistance against technocratic models of leadership that ignore the human dimensions of schooling. By creating spaces where teachers feel heard and supported, female departmental heads enact transformative justice, a key principle of CFT that prioritises healing, solidarity, and empowerment within educational institutions.

The integration of technology into staff development, as reported by participants, signifies an important post-pandemic transformation in pedagogical leadership. The female departmental heads' ability to support teachers in using ICT for differentiated instruction and learner engagement demonstrates both technological competence and visionary leadership. This finding echoes Motlhanke and Naong (2021) and Zhoc et al. (2021), who highlight the centrality of technological adaptability in building resilient and future-oriented schools. Through these practices, female leaders are not merely facilitating skill acquisition but are modelling empowerment by ensuring that all staff, regardless of age or experience, participate fully in digital learning innovations. Interpreted through a CFT lens, this represents a disruption of exclusionary power relations by promoting equitable access to technological knowledge and agency among all teachers. Therefore, the post-COVID-19 emphasis on staff development illustrates how female departmental heads navigate their leadership roles through collaborative mentorship, emotional intelligence, and inclusive digital transformation, anchoring their leadership in feminist principles of care, empowerment, and social justice. The participants' approaches to staff development reflect an enactment of feminist and transformational leadership ideals, where empowerment and relational ethics replace hierarchical control. In line with CFT, these practices challenge patriarchal norms that marginalise women's leadership by demonstrating that empathy, collaboration, and inclusivity are not signs of weakness but of transformative strength. Female departmental heads thus reconstruct the meaning of leadership in the post-COVID-19 era, situating professional growth within a framework of solidarity, intersectionality, and mutual empowerment.

The data revealed that in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, female departmental heads have become central to reimagining curriculum development and implementation in schools. Their leadership reflects adaptability, inclusivity, and strategic responsiveness to the new realities of teaching and learning. As the data reveal, these leaders not only restructure curricula to accommodate lost instructional time but also integrate flexible pedagogical practices and technological innovations to enhance learner engagement. This resonates with the argument of Gouédard et al. (2020) that effective curriculum leadership in crisis contexts requires balancing national educational standards with local realities to ensure accessibility and relevance. The pandemic amplified the necessity for curriculum leaders to act both as instructional guides and emotional anchors, supporting teachers in transitioning between modalities while maintaining instructional quality. Female departmental heads demonstrate resilience through strategic curriculum streamlining, ensuring that essential content is delivered within compressed timelines while maintaining policy alignment with the CAPS. This approach highlights their dual focus on efficiency and compassion, qualities that align with CFT, which advocates for leadership that is both transformative and empathetic (Hooks, 2015). As Katsiampoura (2024) explains, feminist-informed leadership values collaboration and care over

hierarchical authority, promoting a relational approach that strengthens teacher engagement. In this sense, the post-COVID curriculum leadership of female departmental heads is a manifestation of feminist praxis, transforming traditional bureaucratic curriculum management into an inclusive, people-centred process that foregrounds teacher support, emotional well-being, and learner equity.

The participants' emphasis on flexibility and innovation, such as differentiated instruction, play-based learning, and integration of digital tools like robotics, shows how curriculum leadership has evolved to embrace learner diversity. This aligns with Sahlberg's (2021) view that flexible learning models are essential for ensuring continuity and inclusivity during educational disruptions. It also echoes the assertion of Lumby and Azaola (2014) that women leaders often bring collaborative and empathetic approaches to leadership, fostering school cultures that value collective participation and relational accountability. By integrating technological literacy into curriculum design, female departmental heads are not only responding to post-pandemic imperatives but also advancing equity-driven digital transformation in education, particularly within under-resourced contexts (Li, 2022; Afzal et al., 2023). Furthermore, professional development emerges as a cornerstone of sustainable curriculum reform. The participants' commitment to mentoring teachers and collaboratively designing assessments reflects the notion that leadership is a shared enterprise. This is supported by Fullan (2016) and Leithwood et al. (2020), who argue that empowering teachers through ongoing professional learning enhances curriculum ownership and implementation fidelity. From a critical feminist lens, such practices represent acts of agency and resistance, as they challenge patriarchal norms that often marginalise women leaders in decision-making processes (Arinder, 2020; Hooks, 2015). Through fostering collective curriculum leadership, female departmental heads embody CFT's transformative justice principle by redistributing power and promoting inclusivity in educational spaces. The data suggest that female departmental heads navigate curriculum leadership in the post-COVID-19 era through resilience, innovation, and empathy-driven strategies. Their adaptive responses illustrate the intersection of gender, leadership, and social transformation in education. Guided by CFT, these leaders redefine curriculum development as a relational and equity-oriented process, one that values collaboration, inclusivity, and contextual responsiveness. Hence, their leadership exemplifies how feminist-informed approaches can disrupt hierarchical traditions and foster sustainable educational recovery in the post-pandemic landscape.

The data illustrates how female departmental heads have redefined their leadership strategies in the post-COVID-19 era by fostering teamwork, open communication, and shared vision. The pandemic underscored the interdependence of school stakeholders, prompting leaders to shift from hierarchical management to participatory and relational leadership models. Female departmental heads in this study highlighted how collaboration strengthened trust, improved efficiency, and created supportive work environments where all members felt valued. This finding aligns with the assertion that female leaders often draw upon relational and collective leadership approaches, rooted in empathy and inclusivity, to drive institutional improvement (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023; Madsen & Longman, 2020). Collaborative leadership has thus emerged as a critical mechanism for enhancing resilience and adaptability in post-pandemic educational

contexts. Improved collaboration also reflects the influence of CFT, which challenges traditional patriarchal and hierarchical leadership models by emphasising collective decision-making, shared power, and mutual respect (Katsiampoura, 2024; Hooks, 2015). Through this lens, female departmental heads' collaborative practices can be viewed as acts of resistance against gendered power structures that have historically marginalised women in educational leadership. Their intentional efforts to promote inclusive participation, trust, and empathy among teachers signify a shift towards transformative and equity-centred leadership. Lumby and Azaola (2014) observe that women leaders tend to prioritise relationality, emotional connection, and participatory engagement, values that align with feminist principles of empowerment and collective agency. By organising social gatherings, encouraging team-based problem-solving, and maintaining open channels of communication, female leaders are redefining leadership as a communal process rather than an individualistic pursuit of authority.

The data also demonstrate that effective collaboration in schools extends beyond task completion; it fosters a sense of belonging and shared responsibility among staff. As Participant 6's experience illustrates, collaboration involves emotional intelligence and relational care, which help sustain morale and prevent burnout. Such practices echo Collins' (1990) notion of intersectionality, which recognises how inclusive leadership must address the diverse experiences and emotional needs of team members. Moreover, this approach resonates with recent research emphasising emotional intelligence and empathy as key attributes of effective post-pandemic leadership (Gómez et al., 2024; Ward, 2023). Female departmental heads' deliberate cultivation of trust and openness not only improves teacher cohesion but also enhances collective efficacy, a vital component in navigating the complex post-COVID educational landscape. Interpretively, the data suggest that improved collaboration functions as both a leadership strategy and a form of social reconstruction. It enables female leaders to rebuild fragmented school communities affected by the pandemic, mitigate emotional strain, and foster professional solidarity. This aligns with Hooks' (2015) view that feminist leadership is transformative when grounded in community, empathy, and justice. Collaborative leadership, therefore, becomes a space where power is redistributed, voices are amplified, and collective well-being is prioritised over individual control. Within the South African context, where gender inequalities and socio-economic disparities persist, such collaboration not only strengthens institutional performance but also advances social equity in education. Hence, female departmental heads are not merely adapting to post-pandemic realities; they are actively reconstructing school cultures into more compassionate, participatory, and resilient communities.

The data reveal that female departmental heads act as crucial intermediaries between their departments and school administrations, particularly in navigating post-COVID-19 educational challenges. Their liaison role extends beyond communication to encompass resource coordination, policy alignment, and advocacy. These leaders have demonstrated adaptive and relational leadership by ensuring that departmental needs are effectively represented and that administrative directives are contextualised for teachers' realities. This relational mediation is especially important in the post-pandemic landscape, where resource shortages and increased accountability have heightened the need for

clear communication and collaborative problem-solving. As Busher et al. (2017) highlight, departmental heads play a pivotal role in bridging the communication gap between school leadership and teaching staff to sustain institutional coherence and staff morale. In the post-COVID-19 era, female departmental heads' liaison roles have become more complex due to heightened administrative demands and persistent resource constraints. These leaders not only negotiate for resources and materials but also ensure that curriculum delivery continues without disruption, a finding echoed by Fullan and Hargreaves (2016), who note that effective liaison fosters both teacher motivation and continuity in learning. This dynamic reflects elements of CFT, which views women's leadership as transformative, collaborative, and grounded in equity-driven praxis. According to Katsiampoura (2024) and Hooks (2015), feminist leadership rejects hierarchical dominance in favour of relational, inclusive practices that empower others. The female departmental heads in this study embody these principles by balancing advocacy and collaboration, leveraging empathy and negotiation to align departmental goals with broader institutional priorities.

From an interpretive standpoint, this liaison role highlights female departmental heads' agency and resistance within structurally constrained educational systems. Drawing on CFT, their leadership reflects situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988), derived from lived experiences of navigating gendered institutional hierarchies. Their actions demonstrate agency through collaborative problem-solving and resistance by asserting departmental needs in male-dominated administrative spaces. In resource-scarce environments, their strategic negotiation with principals and external stakeholders illustrates how female leaders operationalise relational power to achieve equitable outcomes, a finding consistent with African studies emphasising relational and community-based leadership (Kalane & Rambuda, 2022). Thus, in the post-pandemic context, female departmental heads' liaison roles exemplify transformative feminist leadership that not only bridges communication gaps but also fosters inclusion, resilience, and sustainability in school management.

The data reveal that female departmental heads in the post-COVID-19 era have developed greater adaptability and responsiveness in their leadership practices. This increased flexibility signifies a shift from rigid, top-down management approaches to more dynamic, context-sensitive leadership styles. The participants' reflections illustrate how the pandemic experience compelled them to re-evaluate conventional routines, integrate technology, and adopt fluid decision-making strategies to manage uncertainties. This aligns with Gómez et al. (2024) and Ozdenerol et al. (2023), who note that the pandemic accelerated the need for adaptive leadership in education, where leaders must continuously adjust to changing teaching modalities and institutional demands. Flexibility thus emerges as a key leadership competency for navigating complexity and sustaining organisational resilience. Increased flexibility also reflects a broader redefinition of leadership within feminist and critical frameworks. Drawing on CFT, female departmental heads' adaptive leadership demonstrates agency and resistance within patriarchal educational structures. CFT, as discussed by Hooks (2015) and Arinder (2020), emphasises women's capacity to negotiate systemic constraints through intersectional awareness and transformative practices. In this study, flexibility becomes an expression

of that agency; female leaders not only adapt to external disruptions but also reshape institutional norms by incorporating inclusive and collaborative decision-making processes. This echoes Lumby and Azaola (2014), who highlight that women's leadership tends to value participatory and relational models that challenge traditional hierarchical systems. By promoting flexibility, these leaders are fostering shared ownership, innovation, and collective problem-solving, principles that resonate strongly with feminist notions of empowerment and equity.

From a practical standpoint, the participants' adoption of flexible approaches, such as digital submissions, hybrid meetings, and robotics integration, illustrates how post-pandemic leadership embraces digital literacy and innovation. According to Leithwood and Jantzi (2015), adaptive leadership enables schools to respond effectively to technological transitions while maintaining pedagogical quality. Similarly, Collie et al. (2020) argue that flexible leaders create responsive learning environments that support both teacher autonomy and learner engagement. In the South African context, this adaptability is particularly relevant given the resource disparities across schools. Female departmental heads' willingness to integrate technology and encourage staff adaptability reflects resilience in action, as described by Macalalag et al. (2022), who view flexibility as an essential component of leaders' emotional and strategic intelligence. Interpreting these data through the lens of CFT reveals that post-COVID flexibility among female departmental heads is not merely a managerial adjustment but a transformative feminist act. It symbolises a departure from rigid, patriarchal modes of leadership towards a more inclusive, collaborative, and socially responsive model. As Katsiampoura (2024) posits, empowerment arises when women's lived experiences inform leadership practices that challenge systemic inequalities. By fostering adaptability, empathy, and innovation, female departmental heads are redefining leadership as an evolving process grounded in care and collective strength. Their flexible leadership styles thus contribute not only to institutional recovery but also to advancing gender-responsive and socially just educational leadership in the post-pandemic era.

### **CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY**

This study contributes to the growing body of scholarship on gender and educational leadership in post-crisis contexts by providing an integrated understanding of how female departmental heads navigate leadership roles in the post-COVID-19 era. By synthesising the findings across the themes of digital literacy, leadership style transformation, staff development, curriculum development, collaboration, liaison leadership, and flexibility, the study demonstrates that female departmental heads employ adaptive and transformative leadership strategies to sustain departmental functioning and promote educational continuity. Collectively, these themes reveal that leadership in post-pandemic schools is increasingly characterised by relational, collaborative, and technologically informed practices, which enable female leaders to respond effectively to complex educational demands. The findings show that female departmental heads are not merely adapting to change but are actively reshaping leadership practices to foster inclusive and resilient school environments. Through digital engagement, collaborative decision-making, and supportive professional development initiatives, these leaders demonstrate

how leadership grounded in empathy and flexibility can strengthen institutional recovery and educational innovation in the post-COVID-19 landscape.

From a theoretical perspective, the study extends the application of CFT within educational leadership research by illustrating how female departmental heads challenge traditional patriarchal leadership norms and construct alternative leadership practices centred on empathy, collaboration, and shared power. The findings reveal that female leaders enact agency by redefining leadership beyond hierarchical control toward relational engagement and collective empowerment. For instance, the integration of digital literacy and collaborative decision-making illustrates how female departmental heads resist historically gendered assumptions that marginalise women's authority within educational institutions. By embracing participatory leadership and supporting teacher well-being, these leaders demonstrate feminist-informed leadership practices that align with CFT's emphasis on agency, resistance, and the transformation of gendered power relations (Hooks, 2015; Katsiampoura, 2024). Consequently, the study expands CFT by showing how feminist leadership principles are enacted in post-crisis educational environments, where resilience and relational leadership become essential components of effective school leadership.

The findings further suggest that existing conceptualisations of critical feminist theory in educational leadership may require refinement to fully account for the unique demands of post-pandemic contexts. While CFT traditionally emphasises gendered power relations and institutional inequalities, the findings of this study reveal that digital competence and technological adaptability have emerged as new dimensions of leadership empowerment for women leaders. Female departmental heads' ability to master digital platforms and integrate technology into leadership practices not only enhances organisational efficiency but also represents a form of empowerment that challenges technological exclusion historically associated with gender disparities. This indicates that feminist leadership theory must increasingly incorporate digital agency and technological competence as critical dimensions of women's leadership in contemporary educational environments. In this sense, the study contributes to the evolution of CFT by demonstrating that feminist leadership praxis now intersects with digital transformation and adaptive leadership practices in schools.

The study also highlights how the identified themes intersect and reinforce one another in shaping female leadership practices. For example, digital literacy intersects with curriculum development and staff development, enabling female departmental heads to support teachers in adopting innovative teaching strategies and integrating technology into learning activities. Similarly, the shift in leadership style towards participatory and empathetic approaches strengthens collaboration and staff well-being, creating supportive professional environments where teachers feel valued and empowered. At the same time, the liaison role played by departmental heads bridges the gap between teachers and school administration, facilitating effective communication and resource allocation. These interconnected leadership practices demonstrate that effective post-pandemic leadership is not defined by isolated competencies but by the integration of technological, relational, and adaptive leadership capabilities. However, the findings also

reveal potential tensions between these themes, particularly when female leaders must balance administrative accountability with relational leadership responsibilities, highlighting the complex nature of leadership in contemporary educational contexts.

The study also makes important policy and practical contributions. From a policy perspective, the findings highlight the need for education systems to develop gender-responsive leadership policies that recognise and support the contributions of female leaders within schools. Policymakers and education authorities should prioritise leadership development programmes that strengthen digital competence, emotional intelligence, and adaptive leadership skills among female departmental heads. Additionally, policies aimed at addressing digital inequalities and improving technological infrastructure in schools are essential to ensure that female leaders can sustain the digital transformation initiated during the pandemic. From a practical perspective, the study provides valuable insights for school management teams and leadership development institutions by highlighting the leadership strategies that enable female departmental heads to support teachers, maintain curriculum standards, and foster collaborative school cultures in the post-COVID-19 era. These insights can inform professional development initiatives designed to enhance leadership capacity and institutional resilience within schools.

Beyond its theoretical and practical implications, the study contributes to the broader discourse on gender equity in educational leadership by foregrounding the lived experiences and leadership practices of female departmental heads in South African public schools. By centring women's voices and leadership strategies, the research challenges dominant narratives that often marginalise women's leadership contributions within educational systems. The study demonstrates that female departmental heads play a pivotal role in stabilising schools during periods of crisis and recovery through leadership approaches that prioritise empathy, collaboration, and resilience. In doing so, the research not only expands scholarly understanding of post-pandemic educational leadership but also highlights the transformative potential of feminist-informed leadership practices in promoting inclusive and sustainable school leadership. Ultimately, the study contributes to the advancement of equitable, adaptive, and socially responsive leadership models capable of addressing the evolving challenges facing education systems in the post-COVID-19 era.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study investigated how female departmental heads navigate their leadership roles in the post-COVID-19 era. The findings reveal that female leaders have adopted adaptive and transformative leadership practices in response to the challenges and opportunities created by the pandemic. These practices include strengthening digital literacy, adopting more participatory and flexible leadership styles, prioritising staff development, rethinking curriculum implementation, fostering collaboration, and acting as intermediaries between their departments and school administration. Collectively, these strategies demonstrate how female departmental heads have redefined leadership practices to respond effectively to the evolving demands of contemporary education systems. The findings highlight that digital competence has become a critical component of educational

leadership in the post-pandemic era. Female departmental heads demonstrated significant growth in their ability to integrate technology into teaching, communication, and administrative practices. Through the use of digital platforms such as virtual meeting tools, online learning applications, and communication networks, these leaders were able to maintain instructional continuity and improve collaboration among teachers and stakeholders. This shift toward digital leadership not only enhanced institutional efficiency but also expanded opportunities for innovative teaching and learning practices within schools.

The study also reveals that female departmental heads have embraced more inclusive and participatory leadership approaches following the pandemic. Their leadership practices now emphasise empathy, collaboration, and shared decision-making, reflecting a shift away from traditional hierarchical leadership models toward more relational and people-centred approaches. These leaders prioritised teamwork, open communication, and staff well-being, recognising that effective leadership in post-crisis contexts requires both emotional intelligence and collective engagement. By fostering supportive environments where teachers feel valued and empowered, female departmental heads contribute significantly to rebuilding trust and resilience within school communities. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that female departmental heads play a critical role in strengthening curriculum implementation and staff development in the post-COVID-19 era. Through mentorship, collaboration, and ongoing professional learning initiatives, they support teachers in adapting to new instructional practices and technological innovations. Their leadership also extends beyond departmental management, as they serve as essential links between teachers and school administration, ensuring effective communication, resource allocation, and policy implementation. In addition, the increased flexibility demonstrated by these leaders highlights their ability to navigate uncertainty and respond strategically to changing educational conditions.

In light of these findings, it is imperative for policymakers, education authorities, and school leadership structures to actively support and strengthen the leadership roles of female departmental heads in schools. Educational institutions must invest in leadership development programmes that enhance digital competencies, adaptive leadership skills, and collaborative management practices. Furthermore, schools should create supportive organisational cultures that recognise the significant contributions of female leaders and provide the necessary resources and professional support to sustain their leadership impact. By prioritising inclusive and transformative leadership development, the education sector can empower female departmental heads to continue leading effectively, promote institutional resilience, and contribute to sustainable educational transformation in the post-COVID-19 era.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

To strengthen the leadership effectiveness of female departmental heads in the post-COVID-19 era, the recommendations are prioritised according to the level of implementation and responsibility.

### **1. School-Level Recommendations**

At the school level, priority should be given to strengthening the capacity of female departmental heads to lead teaching and learning effectively in the post-COVID-19 era. School management teams should institutionalise staff development and mentorship programmes that promote continuous professional learning, peer support, and collaborative problem-solving among teachers. Female departmental heads should be supported in facilitating professional learning communities, mentoring less experienced teachers, and promoting innovative instructional approaches such as differentiated instruction and technology-enhanced learning. Schools should also foster collaborative and supportive organisational cultures characterised by open communication, shared decision-making, teamwork, and staff well-being. Such school-based interventions are critical because they directly influence classroom practice, teacher effectiveness, and learner outcomes.

## **2. District-Level Recommendations**

At the district level, education offices should provide sustained professional and technical support to female departmental heads to strengthen their leadership effectiveness. District officials should organise regular leadership development workshops, coaching programmes, and professional learning networks that focus on adaptive leadership, digital leadership, curriculum management, and emotional intelligence. In addition, district curriculum advisors and information and communication technology specialists should provide ongoing guidance to schools regarding curriculum implementation, technology integration, and instructional improvement. Establishing district-wide communities of practice for female departmental heads would further promote collaboration, knowledge sharing, and the dissemination of effective leadership practices across schools.

## **3. Provincial-Level Recommendations**

At the provincial level, education departments should create enabling conditions that support the long-term development and success of female educational leaders. This should include investing in digital infrastructure, particularly in under-resourced and rural schools, by providing reliable internet connectivity, digital devices, and access to educational technologies. Provincial departments should also implement gender-responsive leadership development programmes that address barriers faced by women in leadership and provide opportunities for mentorship, career advancement, and professional growth. Furthermore, provinces should allocate resources for teacher and leader well-being programmes to ensure that educational leaders are adequately supported in managing the ongoing challenges associated with post-pandemic schooling.

## **4. National Policy-Level Recommendations**

At the national policy level, the Department of Basic Education should develop and implement comprehensive policies that strengthen female educational leadership across the education system. National policies should establish a formal framework for the professional development, mentorship, and advancement of women in educational leadership positions, including female departmental heads. Furthermore, digital leadership should be recognised as a core leadership competency and integrated into national leadership standards, training programmes, and professional development initiatives. Existing gender equity policies should be reviewed and strengthened to remove barriers to women's progression into leadership roles, while greater support should be provided for research on female educational leadership and post-pandemic

educational transformation. Such national interventions would contribute to the development of a more equitable, resilient, and future-oriented education system.

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