

Original Paper

Barriers to Women Participation in Formal and Traditional Governance in Ghana

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Abstract

Mainstreaming women through gender specific policies is an acknowledged precondition for achieving meaningful development in any developing country such as Ghana. Regrettably, it is only recently that issues of women participation have been recognized as such in the context of policy reforms in both administrative and local government arenas in Ghana. Even with that, recent local government reforms in Ghana have not given opportunity for the creation of quota for women in grassroots democratic institutions. In the context of governance, women's concerns had surfaced intermittently and have merely been highlighted in political party manifestoes and agenda. Most areas of Ghana are rural and lack essential services. And considering their role in rural community development, the state of women's participation in the governance process is crucial and deserves special attention if development is to be delivered in a more sustainable and efficient manner.

To do this effectively, the obstacles to women participation must be unveiled and eliminated to overcome some of the challenges in rural development delivery. The study established that there are serious challenges in gender balancing both in terms of formal and traditional governance policy and reform agenda in Ghana. Consequently, female representation in both formal and traditional governance systems has been very minimal. Some suggestions have been recommended as the way forward in overcoming the obstacles to women participation in governance processes.

Keywords

participation, formal governance, traditional governance, obstacles

1. Introduction

Since independence, Ghana has carried out various transformational efforts to decentralise political and administrative authority from the centre to the local level. The latest and most comprehensive effort began in 1988 through the introduction of the New Local Government System. By this, extensive powers and competencies were transferred to districts and one hundred and ten district assemblies were created as legislative, executive, planning and rating authorities.

The local government effort was undertaken having in mind certain key aspirations including the following:

- to provide more responsive, equitable and participatory development;
- to bring government and decision-making nearer to the people and quicken the processes;
- and to serve as a training ground in political activity.

The structure of the new local government system as practised in the Fourth Republic is made up of a Regional Coordinating Council and a four-tier Metropolitan and three-tier Municipal/District Assembly system. Under Article 241 (1) of the Constitution, it is stated that, “for the purposes of local government, Ghana shall be deemed to have been divided into the Districts in existence immediately before the coming into force of the Constitution”. In other words, the one hundred and ten districts in existence immediately before the Constitution came into force were deemed to have continued in existence. This was the situation for the first ten years of the existence of the Constitution.

In exercise of the powers given him by Article 241 (2) of the Constitution, the president, under the “Creation of Districts Instrument”, 2003, and the ‘Creation of Districts’ (No.2) Instrument, 2003, created twenty-eight more districts in 2003 in addition to the existing one hundred and ten, making a total of one hundred and thirty-eight districts. Thirty-two more districts were created in 2007 to bring the total number of districts to one hundred and seventy. The Ministry of Local Government subsequently issued the necessary Legislative Instruments establishing District Assemblies for the newly created districts (Ahwoi, 2010).

In terms of composition, the 1992 constitution changed the membership of the District Assemblies slightly from what obtained under the PNDCL 207. Instead of two-thirds elected and one-third appointed, the Assembly is now composed of seventy per cent elected and thirty per cent appointed. The Member or Members of Parliament from constituencies in the district have also been made non-voting members of the Assembly. The District Chief Executive (DCE) continues to be a member. However, the Local Government Service (LGS) Act, 2003, Act 656, appears to have taken a step backwards as far as this constitutional provision is concerned. Section 25 of Act 656 vests all powers of appointment of the staff of the LGS, and this is defined to include the staff of the DAs in the President, except that under subsection (4), the President may delegate this power. Thus theoretically, every member of the LGS from the conservancy labourer to the District Coordinating Director (DCD) is appointed by the President. This according to Ahwoi (2010), is a retrograde step because under effective decentralisation, the movement is in the direction of vesting the power of appointment directly in the local authorities, as indeed Article

240 (2) (d) of the Constitution seeks to do, not centralising it and permitting a delegation of the exercise of that power. In Uganda, for example, District Service Commissioners are established in every district by the District Councils themselves. Then within the framework of broad policy on appointments provided by the Ugandan Public Services Commission, each District Service Commission advertises and recruits its own staff and other employees.

In terms of participation at the DAs, Article 240 (2) (e) provides that “to ensure the accountability of local government authorities, people in particular local government areas shall, as far as practicable be afforded the opportunity to participate effectively in their governance”. Various strategies have been introduced to achieve this constitutional decentralisation objective. The “ordinary residence requirement” in the qualification criteria for candidacy for local government elections; the anti-poverty features such as making local government elections free and state sponsored, the non-partisan character of local government elections, are all designed to ensure not just participation, but participation by the people that decisions affect most directly. Similarly, the local hearing requirements of the National Development Planning (System) Act are also designed to ensure effective participation. District planning Authorities are required to conduct public hearings on proposed district development plans and shall consider the views expressed at the hearings before the adoption of the proposed district development plans.

Other spheres of government in Ghana are the regions and the central government. Each geographic region is made up of a number of districts and there are ten regions in Ghana. Their function is to coordinate and monitor the activities and plans of districts and to ensure that they are in consonance with national aspirations, policy and direction. The region will also undertake larger projects that benefit more than one district. There is a regional coordinating council (RCC) headed by a politically appointed regional minister. The regional coordinating council is made up of the district chief executives, presiding members of the district assemblies under the region as well as representatives of the traditional authorities. The RCC is serviced by the regional coordinating director and a team of bureaucrats and regional heads of departments. The function of central government in all of this is to provide overall policy direction, and to coordinate, monitor and evaluate development efforts at the national level.

In Ghana, the 1992 Constitution enjoined on development programming to ensure that culture informs all development activities. The original notion of separating the cultural dimension from development and seeing culture only for tourism purposes is becoming a thing of the past (Kendie & Guri, 2007). Indeed, new partnerships are being sought between the “traditional” and the “formal” systems for local level development. From historical development most activities, be they social, economic, political or spiritual, revolve around traditional authorities (chiefs and elders) in the rural areas (Wayo, 2006). The responsibility of the traditional governance is to maintain the link between people and the government, to maintain law and order, to promote development and ensure sustainability of development (Busia, 1968; Nukunya, 2003). The traditional leaders, thus, become the focal point around which all development activities are expected to be performed at the local level. In other words, getting local people

to participate in development activities requires the active involvement of traditional authorities since they are the pivot of all activity in rural areas.

It is evident in the Ghanaian set up that the presence of a strong traditional institution, such as the chieftaincy institution, in rural areas has served as one of the best ways of getting the people involved in non-routine activities aimed at improving their welfare. This is attributable to the respect citizens have for the traditional leaders and how they also have the welfare of their citizens at heart. It is obligatory for such authority to ensure the welfare of their areas of rule as is enshrined in most of the oaths traditional leaders (chiefs) swear when they assume the throne.

However, one aspect of the governance process remains critical to rural development efforts: the representation and participation of women in the governance process both traditional and formal governance. The involvement of this category of people would give the government and traditional authorities more control over local development. However, On the global scale, Ghana ranks 122nd out of 190 countries with 8.7% female representation in parliament according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) in 2010. Rwanda ranked first on the world scale with 56.3 per cent female representation in parliament.

2. Objective

This work is an attempt to explore the level of women's participation in governance and examines the factors that hinder women's participation. At the same time the work will suggest some remedial measures to uplift the situation.

3. Methodology

This paper was based on the review of information collected from secondary sources i.e. published books, reports, research works, journals and newspapers. Trend analysis was adopted to discuss electoral data gathered basically from the offices of the Electoral Commission of Ghana. Some information was also collected through interviews and questionnaire administration from a cross section of women parliamentarians, female assembly members and women in administrative positions as well as traditional authorities.

4. Level of Women Participation in Formal Governance in Ghana

Various provisions in the design of the decentralisation and local governance process should have made the participation of women in public decision-making easier. These provisions include those for a non-partisan local government system, the freedom to use the local language for the business of the assembly and the discretion in creating additional sub-committees. The latter could have provided a sharper focus on responding to the concerns of various sections of the population, including women. But it did not. The initial participation of women in local government was low and has remained so. In 2004, women made up about 12.5% of Members of Parliament (25 out of 200). In 2008, the figure reduced both nominally

and proportionately to 20 and 8.7% respectively. This was very interesting given that women constitute more than half of the total population of Ghana. However, in the 2012 elections the figure rose to 29 representing 10.5% an improvement on the 2008 figure but still below the proportionate figure in 2004. During the Seventh Parliament of the Fourth Republic, the number of female parliamentarians elected in the 2016 elections was 34 out of 275 seats. The figure represents about 12.6% of the seats in parliament. This was an improvement over the representative status of women in the Sixth Parliament of the Fourth Republic. The 2020 elections further recorded a marginal increase in the number of women that were elected to parliament from 34 to 40 out of the 275 seats in the house. There was an appreciation of about 2% from the 12.6% in the 2016 elections to 14.5%.

Even though there have been marginal gains in the recent past two elections held in 2016 and 2020, the target of 30% has not even been achieved half way. This shows that there is still a lot of work to be done in an attempt to bridge the gap between the representation between men and women in the Ghanaian parliament.

With respect to the District Assembly elections, in 1998, the Government of Ghana gave a directive that reserved 30% of the appointed membership of assemblies for women. Examination of the proportions of appointed members suggests that assemblies selected just around 30%, even though that was supposed to be the minimum. Only 3 of the 110 Presiding Members were women. In the same year, the total number of male contestants in the district assembly elections was 12,625 compared to 547 female contestants with 196 women elected into the assemblies. Although in 2002 there was an almost 50 per cent increase in the participation of women (from 547 to 965) the number of male contestants was still disproportionately high: 13,170. It was a similar story for 2006 when there was another remarkable increase in the number of female contestants (1772) and less than half (478) were elected into the assemblies.

In the 2010 District Assembly elections, 1,376 representing 7.95% of the 17,315 candidates were females as against 15,939 representing 92.05% males. This was contained in the Electoral Commission's nomination statistics as reported by the Ghana News Agency on December 27, 2010. Out of these numbers, 412 representing 7.95% and 5,681 representing 92.05% of women and men were elected respectively.

The 2015 District Assembly elections witnessed a drop in the number of female contestants from the 1,376 to 1,182. Out of the number that contested, only 4.6% representing 282 were elected. With an increase in the population, one would have assumed that both the number of contestants and the elected members would have increased. But this was not to be as reflected in the outcome of the elections that year.

Many of the current assemblies in the country have two or three elected females, as against 16 or 17 males. Despite efforts by governments to increase the percentage of women in the district assemblies, the unfortunate reality is, most regions had failed to meet the governments' quota. The government reserved the rights to appoint 30 per cent of all district assembly members and had further reserved 50

per cent of its appointed seats to women. However, in most regions the numbers of female assembly appointees are about 35 per cent.

Perhaps part of the difficulty of making women's presence felt at the district assembly level is the general paucity of women in government administration itself, both as politically appointed heads of districts and as administrators and civil servants. Out of nine district chief executives in the Upper West Region in 2012 for instance, only one was a woman (11.1%). The situation is similar for women as civil servants and administrators. Women constitute 32 per cent of the entire civil service and 24 per cent of those in local government with most being in the secretarial and clerical classes. Only 12 per cent of the decision-influencing category -the administrative class- is female. In 1999, there were only 3 women amongst the 110 district coordinating directors (3.6%). In 2012, there was only one female District Coordinating Director in the Upper West Region. As at 2022, the narrative had not changed since the region still has only one female as a District Coordinating Director. The story is not different in the other regions of the country. This low representation is disturbing given that the district coordinating directors provide technical guidance to the assemblies. They are therefore responsible for providing inputs for planning, ensuring equity in implementation, monitoring for efficiency and effectiveness, and evaluating for impacts.

5. Level of Women Participation in Traditional Governance in Ghana

In Ghana, traditional authority is based at the grassroots on community chiefs and elders. Traditional authority revolves around such leaders as chiefs, elders, clan heads, family heads, landlords, queen mothers, and chief priests or priestesses. According to Boateng (1994), communities are organised under sub-divisions, divisions and paramountcies. However, in the case of northern Ghana, except in a few areas, there is no provision for the queen mother and the priestesses, making traditional governance a male affair in this part of the country. According to Ibrahim (2004), in Dagbon, three chieftaincy positions Gundogu, Kpatuya and Kululogu are reserved for daughters of the Ya Na, the paramount chief of Dagbon. Also, among the Nanumba, there are female chiefs with the title Pona meaning 'female chief'. Except in these few instances, women in northern Ghana do not become chiefs. Women in northern Ghana, therefore, are not privileged like their southern women in the decision-making processes of traditional governance where the institution of chieftaincy involves the queen mother.

In summary, while the visibility of women in formal government has increased, the numbers are still very low—both as administrators and as assembly members/parliamentary representatives. The issue is not the numbers of women alone, but their self-knowledge, confidence, clarity of purpose, priorities, commitment and ability to skilfully present their perspectives. Their participation in traditional governance has not improved especially in the three northern regions where there is no vacancy in majority of cases for women in the traditional chieftaincy systems.

6. Barriers to Women's Participation in Formal and Traditional Governance in Ghana

The elected women member's participation in local government bodies remains generally insignificant, as they are not given any specific duties. The absence of operational guidelines and terms of reference for female elected representatives, the limited capacity of the female elected representatives to operate in public institutions of this nature, the lack of awareness over their roles and responsibilities, the systematic discrimination and biases by male elected colleagues all these are seen as factors impeding women's meaningful participation in local government. Some of the major problems to women's participation in local government in Ghana include the following:

Although the constitution guaranteed the equal rights for women, the reality is that they are not seen as equal, their roles are closely tied to their reproductive and household activities only. At the same time women are considered as unfit to perform political and community affairs. This is due to lack of clarity in the constitution and some traditional systems in northern Ghana on the role of women in development. This is especially serious with traditional governance in northern Ghana, where women do not have the opportunity of becoming queen mothers in the chieftaincy institution like their southern counterparts.

Patriarchy as a system, an ideology and practice tend to impact in different ways on the lives of women in northern Ghana. Patriarchal attitudes become so embedded that they are taken as natural. Even where there is supposed equality, these attitudes tend to prevail. Socio-cultural norms and religious misinterpretations are used frequently for challenging and reinterpreting women's rights and create insecurity for women. And although women have equal political rights to participate as voters and representatives, in reality they can be actively discouraged to do so. The patriarchal system in this part of the country enforces rules and laws in such way that affect the self-confidence of women, limit their access to resources and information and thus keep them in a lower status than men. This in no little way affects their involvement in both formal and traditional governance systems in the country.

The male-biased environment within political institutions in the country also deters women from participation. The fact that there are few women on decision-making bodies means that these women have to work within styles and modes acceptable to men. As a result, women cannot give attention to their issues. Sometimes they are treated by their colleagues and society harshly. Many-if not all-male elected members harbour negative attitude towards elected women members. They believe women should not run for general seats. Lack of cooperation by men in the traditional sector is a significant barrier to women's participation and effectiveness in decision-making in the sector especially in northern Ghana.

The widely-held perception, that political activity is "dirty" and not for decent women is also a barrier. Women have also not been voted for because politics is often viewed as belonging to an arena which is best managed by men. Husbands and families are reluctant to have their women in the public eye. Women are said to lack public arena skills and some complain of intimidation by male opponents.

Education is the strongest factor influencing women's control of their own fate. Women are further handicapped because of lower educational achievements and the prevalence of social norms that severely

restrict their freedom of movement in the public place. And so, they do not show interest in participating in both traditional and formal government activities that open them up for public assessment and criticism. Women's lower economic and social status, multiple roles and lack of time all limit their access to formal social services and general advancement. With comparatively little education, poorer state of health and greater food insecurity, women in the Ghana are particularly vulnerable. Women, especially widows, childless, disabled and aged are also at risk of public ridicule and abuse when they attempt to compete with men for political positions. Chieftaincy, which is the major traditional institution in the country responsible for traditional governance, is a no-go area for women in the northern part of the country. While their southern counterparts are privileged to have the feminine equivalence of the chief "queen mother", all royalties to the stool are managed by the chief (that is, the male). Their multiple roles as wives, mothers, daughters, community workers and income-generators severely limit their time for community interaction and mobilisation.

Inside the assembly, women have yet to make their presence felt. In spite of the increases in their numbers provided for by government directive, their performance has been muted. This has been attributed to lack of self-confidence, a limited capacity to communicate in English and a lack of understanding of assembly procedures. Other problems include being shouted at in assembly proceedings or being ignored by presiding members when they (women members) want to make interventions. The short notices for meetings and transportation costs incurred during assembly work have also been indicated as constraints for them. Women members employed in the formal sector also identify difficulties in combining assembly responsibilities with their jobs such as getting time off to attend to assembly and community business. Elected women also worry about being able to undertake development activities to justify their selection. Women have been constrained from entering local level politics by the lack of finances for campaigning and time constraints needed to manage domestic responsibilities, income-generation activities and political work.

7. Policy Recommendations

Women in Ghana have low political status as compared to men. Their participation results from their low socioeconomic status stemming from social norms of a male dominated society confining women to the household. Their unequal status in society gives them unequal access to the educational, economic and other opportunities offered by the state and society. All these factors reinforce each other to keep women's political participation low. But women's adequate political participation is a precondition for bringing women in the mainstream of development process as a way of making development more sustainable and meaningful.

Due to socio-political and religious bindings, women especially elected women cannot play their role and thus people's aspiration and expectation of them were not met up. To ensure a meaningful participation of elected women members and women in general as an essential step towards ensuring development at the rural areas, the following policy prescriptions may be taken into consideration:

- 1). To create greater awareness among women about their low status in society and the need to improve it, motivational programs along with programs for expanding opportunities for education, health care and employment should be launched. Specific programs should be undertaken by the government and non-government organizations in order to create an awareness among the women in the grass roots levels that political participation would give them an access to the political decision-making process relating to the allocation of resources.
- 2). Mass media should be used to educate and mobilize public opinion in such a way that the realization about the benefits of women's full participation in the national development efforts is created among people.
- 3). Women should be given various opportunities for leadership training, training regarding the activities of governance and education in order to encourage them to take up political and leadership position. Supportive services should be provided to allow women participate in these training courses.
- 4). There is urgent need to undertake research on women's participation in politics, their voting behaviour, consciousness and participation in the political parties.
- 5). Women should be introduced into the chieftaincy institution in the northern part of the country and concerted efforts made to create an outfit for them as it pertains in the southern part of the country.
- 6). Finally, increasing the number of women in decision making positions does not in itself translate into greater empowerment for women. Measures to increase the number of women representatives need to be accompanied by measures to improve the quality of participation.

8. Conclusion

Women have acquired some legitimate space in rural political institutions that can raise their marginalized position, though they are still a minority. Merely having women Assembly and Parliamentary Members does not automatically mean that the interests of women in the rural community are represented. Without women's needs and interests being taken into account, without opportunity for them to participate in and influence decision-making, development interventions and planning, sustainable results will not come, Khan (2006).

Yet, having women in these leadership positions is an important step in changing the male-dominated political agenda. At least they have the opportunity to attend the meetings, interact with officials and take part in important discussions. It also ensures their mobility across the social hierarchy. In order to support and accelerate the rural development process through formal and traditional governance, additional strategies have to be employed, which promote the self-reliance of women (economically as well as socially), build women's capacities and remove structural obstacles.

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