

The Changing Status of Women in Politics and Society: Ghana
A Case Study

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Since becoming the first African nation to gain independence in 1957, Ghana has been a trendsetter in many political endeavors. With an established presidential democracy, a diverse ethnic population of over 27 million, and one of the strongest economies in continental Africa, Ghana is a leader in development. Even though it has been able to maintain free and fair elections and has established many government programs to promote civic participation and engagement, Ghana is still lacking behind its Western counterparts in gender equality in the workforce and in government. As noted by historians Jane Parpart and Kathleen Staudt (1998, p. 98): "Patriarchal traditions are so ingrained in the fabric of society [that] women's struggle for emancipation is replete with contradictions, ambivalence, and silence." Taking certain steps to increase women's presence and participation in government would yield enormous benefits for the nation as a whole, including social, economical, and environmental returns. To support this theory, I will draw upon my own experience working for the National Commission for Civic Engagement in Gomoa Benso, Ghana.

1. Pre-Colonialism

I will begin by discussing the role of women in society in pre-colonial Ghana. African women were often considered to be highly valuable within social institutions, mostly in relation to their role as mothers. A child was commonly viewed as a source of wealth because it could provide a family with three things: a working income, security for the parents in old age, and guarantee that one would be immortalized in their society as an ancestor. Because of this value that was assigned to women, they typically experienced a higher status and more autonomy than women in other regions of the world at this time.

Another interesting distinction of African culture is the idea of the “bridewealth,” or, money paid to the family of the bride from the family of the groom. This can also manifest in the form of something of high monetary value, such as cattle. The purpose of the bridewealth is to compensate for the family’s loss of the bride’s income potential as well as the children that the bride would bear (Gordon, 1996). The bridewealth is the opposite of a dowry, which was common in traditional societies such as India, in which the bride’s family paid the groom’s family. Another fascinating aspect of gender relations in traditional African societies is the widespread acceptance of polygyny. This practice involved the marriage of one man to multiple women. African chiefs and kings, in particular, were permitted to have hundreds, and sometimes, even thousands of wives. Although western societies attributed this practice to the low status of women in society, this was not the case in Africa. Polygyny more often indicated the “centrality of women to the well-being of the family” (Gordon, 1996). Numerous wives shared the responsibilities of child-rearing and maintaining the home, provided companionship to one another, and relieved women who were pregnant, nursing, or elderly of their sexual responsibilities to the king.

Women in pre-colonial times shared some degree of political power and influence. Ghana in particular is a very interesting example of women holding positions of power. Many societies created equal councils of respected men and women. In Ghana, however, a council of highly-respected senior women would elect a Queen Mother, who could participate in the all-men’s council, serving as the representative of women. It was understood that “men could best make decisions about men’s affairs, as could women about their own conditions” (Gordon, 1996, pg. 124). The council of women often chose the men who would assume leadership roles in the community. Although the Queen Mother

herself could not be ruler, her approval was necessary in the selection of the ruler. She was the ultimate authority regarding many aspects of local life. Another way in which women could assume power was when a male family member became somehow incapacitated or unable to hold his position. During the fight for independence, women were even allowed leadership roles within the military. Perhaps the most famous female leader of Ghana was Queen Mother Yaa Asantewa, of the Asante people. When the current leader, and Yaa Asantewa's own grandson, was exiled by the British in 1896, the elders held a secret meeting to scheme for the return of their king. It was decided at this meeting that Yaa Asantewa would lead the Asante army in a rebellion against British forces known as the War of the Golden Stool. Although many military leaders, including Yaa Asantewa, were captured and exiled, she remains one of the most celebrated female leaders of Ghanaian history, and the only woman ever to hold such a prestigious title in the military (Korsah, 2016).

Women played a large role in the perpetuation of the local economy in pre-colonial times. Women were often responsible for collecting wood and water, growing most of the food for their family and preparing meals. They even helped to build the family home (Gordon, 1996). In traditional marriages, men and women often owned separate properties and kept separate, independent financial accounts. This allowed women to retain a relatively high degree of financial independence. The Bete people, now predominantly found in Cote D'Ivoire, relied on women for the kola-nut trade in the early nineteenth century. Older Bete women created a highly complex trading network that depended on younger women for transporting the goods to all corners of the region. Historians believe this female-only network was exceedingly profitable at its peak (Coquery-Vidrovitch,

2010). Another aspect of a women's economic authority depended on the linear structure of her society. Ghana is considered matrilineal and matrilocal, meaning that family lineage is traced through the mother, and that children from the marriage live in the mother's family village (Schraeder, 2012). Economic wealth had to be passed down the female line of inheritance, and property would be passed from uncle to sister's son.

2. Colonialism

The relative power and influence women had become accustomed to in traditional society all but completely diminished during the period of British colonialism. For much of continental Africa, colonialism was characterized as being "extractive, coercive, brutal, exploitative, and racially divided" (Kisangani, 2017). The first colony established in Ghana was the Gold Coast, an area controlled by the Portuguese for over a century. The colony was passed around from the Portuguese to the Dutch, the Dutch to the Danish and the Swedish, and finally became official property of the British crown in 1874 (Owusu-Ansah, 1957). For a time, the British remained confined to the coast where they traded gold and slaves. The Ashanti, who were the largest and most powerful ethnic group at the time, were not exceptionally thrilled with British occupation, but attempted to make peace and establish a trading relationship with them anyway. This continued until 1896, when British forces invaded Ashanti territory and overthrew the leader, replacing him with a British general. The Ashanti revolted in 1900, but were defeated. After exiling all current Ashanti council members, a new British commissioner was assigned to each Ashanti territory. Each commissioner was able to rule his own territory as he saw fit, but ultimately answered to the British governor of the Gold Coast, who in turn answered to the British King (Owusu-

Ansah, 1957). Regional commissioners would then tax the inhabitants of their respective region; investing forty percent to meet local needs and sending sixty percent back to the British crown.

The British style of colonization was categorized as “indirect rule” (Kisangani, 2017). They allowed the people of Ghana to continue the traditional hierarchy that was already in place. Part of this approach was the appointing of “warrant chiefs,” or, existing Ashanti chiefs who were responsible for taxing citizens of their community. Great Britain took care to isolate ethnic groups of Ghana, primarily out of fear of a trans-ethnic revolt. As a result, anti-colonial movements had become almost obsolete.

Women of Ghana were disproportionately hurt by the British occupation. They lost much of their economic independence and political power with the British introduction of cash crops. Instead of farming crops to feed their families, as they had been doing for thousands of years, Ghanaians had to produce crops almost exclusively for the purpose of being sold, just to keep up with the taxes they were now required to pay. As the local marketplace became globalized, women were excluded from the buying and selling of goods, and in turn, became more financially dependent on men (Schraeder, 2012). This gender gap widened as men travelled further away from home to conduct business and benefitted without contributing to the various forms of unpaid labor carried out by the woman at home. The migration of men to urban areas worsened the poverty of the already impoverished rural areas and increased the workload for the women left behind. The women remained the primary producers of food in most parts of Ghana, but they were unable to grow and sell cash crops while simultaneously growing and preparing food for their families. Thus, a sexual division in agriculture emerged. This is exemplified in Ghana’s

cocoa production industry. Men alone were provided access to cultivate cocoa for export sales. They were able to save enough profit to buy private ownership of trees, more advanced cultivation technology, and hired labor. According to Dr. Mechtild Petritsch, then-consultant for the United Nations Secretariat, “It was [these] changes in production priorities (. . .) that led to a disruption of the traditional household economy with negative consequences for women.” It was the harmful combination of increasing women’s workload and responsibilities while diminishing their income that has resulted in “reduced health, reduced time for meaningful education and reduced possibilities for breaking out of this vicious circle and dependency” (Petritsch, 1981, p. 67).

In regards to the development of legal standards, women were again disadvantaged. Laws regarding marriage and divorce were built solely the testimony of men, thus often deprived women of the right to marry or divorce without the authorization of a male family member. In establishing local governance, British authorities essentially disregarded any political influence that women had once experienced (Schraeder, 2012). The British did not recognize or acknowledge the councils of elder women that had been a long-established tradition in Ghana.

Around the end of the 18th century, the Pan-African Movement began to emerge and gain momentum. It was essentially a call to action directed at anyone with African heritage to band together to “improve the livelihood of all Africans everywhere” (Kisangani, 2017). Notable leaders of the movement included Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. Du Bois, and later, the first president of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah. This ideology appealed for a de-emphasis of individual ethnic identity and sought to replace it with solidarity of all Africans throughout the globe. The goal was to liberate African nations of colonial hold and free black slaves in

the United States. Early movements consisted of “uprisings of African peoples, in the form of armed and unarmed rebellion, resisting colonial occupation and enslavement while pursuing visions of ‘Black Republics’” (Abbas, 2014). Although this was a major step toward Independence, the women of Ghana yet again found themselves excluded.

Similarly to the emancipation of slavery in the United States, many people decided the fight for women’s rights would divide and belittle the overarching goal of racial equality, and were ultimately unwilling to risk losing the progress they had made by trying to also include women in their political agenda. It became evident that Pan-Africanism was meant to unite all men of African descent, rather than all people. This notion became vividly clear after Ghana declared independence from Britain in 1957 and promptly reestablished the political marginalization and exclusion of women that had become the status quo during British rule. Queen Mothers and all-female councils were reinstated in some parts of the Ashanti regions but only in rural areas, and with a much more limited role in the politics of their districts. Women were not included at any level in the newly formed federal government until the election of Susanna Al-Hassan in 1961. Al-Hassan, a member of the Convention People’s Party, held a seat in parliament from 1961 to 1966. This gender disparity in wage earning potential, legal autonomy within marriage, and participation in federal government remains prevalent even today.

3. The Current Status of Women

a. Education

After independence, the new Ghanaian government implemented various programs to improve the quality and access of education for all students, women in particular. These

programs were highly effective, resulting in a massive increase in educated populace on a national level. Unfortunately, the education of women incurred stagnation in 1970 and has been declining in more recent years. Much of this can be accredited to any economic crises that Ghana experiences. When the economy takes a hit, formal education becomes less necessary and less relevant. Today, women are strategically excluded from receiving education in fields such as science, technology, business, and agriculture, further preventing them from professional success. Ghana's current education system does very little to address the needs of rural and urban women, due to the areas of study, location of schools, and outdated selection process. Women's participation in all levels of education is consistently lower than men's, and it is on the decline (Petritisch, 1981). In addition to its plunging relevance, various explanations for this pattern have been identified. Most middle and lower class women enter the informal workforce at a young age, whether in agriculture, trade, or as hired household help in urban cities. The current marginalization of women's education serves to isolate them from the "information process" and replenishes the cheap, unskilled labor force. Finally, formal education does not arm women with the tools to combat poverty and malnutrition, both issues of much greater importance for the vast majority of urban and rural women. An additional setback for women is literacy. Although major improvements have been made, and Ghana's literacy rate has almost doubled since 1970, the ratio of literate males to literate females has remained intact. According to the UNESCO Atlas of Literacy, 82% of Ghanaian men are literate and 71% of Ghanaian women are literate. This disproportionate growth can drastically restrict women's potential for economic advancement. The low participation of women in school is coupled with a correspondingly high dropout rate. Girls drop out of school because of

pregnancy, early marriage, or simply the family's preference to favor the boy's education (Petritsch, 1981). Vocational school and technical training may seem less biased, but they usually are not. Women are unable to access formal education in agriculture, despite the fact that they comprise a majority of the agricultural sector. Even at the agricultural college of Kwadaso, women report receiving home economics training only (Hesse, 1973). Reports of increasing enrollment of women in technical schools may appear progressive, but 70% of the women in these programs are learning clerical skills (Hesse, 1973). Lack of government funding for educational and social services may also be to blame for the bleak prospects of a creating a highly skilled and highly education female workforce.

b. Agriculture Sector

Today, women's ability to advance financially and compete for economic resources is hindered by their inability to access or own land, hire paid labor, and maintain their own assets. Women's restricted access to land ownership is influenced by inheritance. Men typically inherit the land, and the women of the family are required to work there. Since the fertile land of higher quality is usually given prioritized for cash crop farming, the less-fertile leftovers are given to women. Even if fertile land was available to them, women rarely have the equipment necessary to clear the forest. Moreover, legal control over the distribution of land is entirely controlled by men. In most situations, men prefer that women work on the community plot, where they can control the distribution of any surplus. In contrast, any yield from a private plot would be at the discretion of the woman, making this route much less favorable. Women's low household income often prevents them from being able to hire paid labor, and the migration of men has shrunk the pool of

available paid labor anyway. What remains is a large population of women workers who are able to accrue marginal personal profits and have very little time leftover to pursue other means of income after they have met all of their responsibilities. Women can sell surplus crops and small non-food items, but with local money lending firms charging interest rates of up to 50 percent (Petritsch, 1981), it is still extremely difficult to accumulate enough profit to buy property or expand one's business. Women find themselves unable to purchase transportation, storage, and equipment. Although there are local women's associations to address these issues, and a National Council on Women and Development, national priority is still given to production and distribution of cash crops. These restrictions have not only hurt women's status, but the neglect of subsistence agriculture has created mass food shortages and rising prices, impairing the health of the country as a whole (Petritsch, 1981).

c. Trade Sector

By and large, the most common occupation that offers women the most scope and opportunity is trading. Women dominate the market trading industry in Western Africa, and women of Ghana are no exception. It is estimated that Makola Market, the largest market in the capital city of Accra, employs over 12,000 female traders, compared to 8 male traders (Petritsch, 1981). Trading provides women with a unique opportunity to bypass their minimal formal education and inadequate subsistence farming income. Unfortunately, in response to Ghana's deteriorating economy and growing dependence on foreign powers, many blame the market-trading industry for their suffering. The Specified Commodities Decree was issued in 1976 to try and stabilize Ghana's economy. This decree essentially

kept women from trading manufactured items, where the potential for the most profit was, and instead reduced them to trading solely perishable items. Women who tried to evade these restrictions were accused of profiteering. In 1979, Makola Market was completely destroyed by the government, with the stated aim of improving the economy by “excluding women from participating in the lucrative trade of non-perishable commodities” (Petritsch, 1981). Although it was later rebuilt, the original objective of this demolition had been realized: the exclusion of Ghanaian women from participating in politics and economics.

d. Employment Discrimination

Women face a different series of obstacles in their pursuit of employment. These include the woman’s traditional role as an unpaid family worker, the concept of gender roles and the woman’s “appropriate” place in society, and the funneling of women into low-skilled positions that are often regarded as an extension of their family responsibilities. Not unlike many parts of the West, a woman’s maternity status can also stand to hurt her professionally. The Ghanaian woman’s higher-than-average rate of reproduction makes her an expensive employee to view her as an investment, and a costly one at that. Men are often believed to be more productive in the workplace than women, and men are considered permanent and long-term, rather than temporary, employees. It should be noted that although traditional African societies did value women as mothers and homemakers, they also believed that part of a woman’s role was to earn an income and support herself financially. This directly contradicts the western standard that “a woman’s place” was only in the home. This distorted gender bias was introduced during British colonialism and has persisted today, with many people still regarding career-oriented women as “improper.” Although equal

pay legislation has been introduced, it is not always recognized. Furthermore, this legislation has actually resulted in employees being less willing to hire women for full-time positions. Similarly, maternity legislation that would grant women three month's¹ maternity leave with full pay in the public sector (half pay in the private sector) has also resulted in women's exclusion from jobs. Women are most often employed as nurses, elementary school teachers, and clerical workers. All of these are low-earning positions that require very little skill. What's more, all of these positions are "especially vulnerable to fluctuations in the economy, as they can be reduced or eliminated in times of economic recession or through mechanization" (Petritsch, 1981, pg. 58). None of these would be considered part of a career trajectory, with very little opportunity for advancement.

5. Steps Taken to Advance Women

Various government programs have been introduced in an effort to address some of the discrepancies mentioned above. The National Commission for Civic Education, for whom I was employed¹, was written into the 1993 constitution to "promote and sustain democracy and inculcate in the Ghanaian citizenry, the awareness of their rights and obligations, through civic education" (nccgh.org). Although not specifically designed to address gendered issues, the NCCE was put in place to educate the entire electorate of government processes, as well as their rights as protected by the constitution, in order to maintain a stable democracy. The National Council on Women and Development was introduced in 1975 with the purpose of addressing women's issues in particular. One action taken by the NCWD to help return women to their historical status of advisor was

¹ I was employed by the National Commission for Civic Education from May 2016 to August 2016

the creation of “a council of twenty persons, fifteen of whom had to be women, to advise the government on matters relating to the full integration of women in national development at all levels [and] to advise the government on specific areas where participation by women might be strengthened or initiated” (Ofori-Baodu, 2005, pg. 178). Since its establishment, the council has had a “favorable” effect on economic prospects of women in Ghana. International legislation that Ghana has ratified includes the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The ICCPR protects the right of every citizen to “take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives; [t]o vote and to be elected...; [and] [t]o have acceded, on general terms on equality, to public services in his [or her] country” (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights). These government agencies have been put in place to address Ghana’s problem of inequality, and although well-intentioned, it is government funding and widespread public support that will truly create sustainable change.

6. Benefits of Equality

Advancing women’s participation in government and the economy will benefit all people of Ghana for various social, economic, and environmental reasons. One social benefit may be a reduction in rape and violence against women. Nations with more professional women and a smaller wage gap typically show lower rates of reported rape and sexual violence (World Health Organization, 2016). This is an especially pertinent issue in Ghana, where domestic abuse against women has become a national epidemic. Another possible outcome is that more women will wait to have children. More developed nations show a trend in first-time parents waiting until late twenties to early thirties, as opposed to

the youngest parents, late teens to early twenties, in Sub-Saharan Africa. The same studies show women of more developed nations choosing to have fewer children on average. This delay in the birth rate would immediately relieve some of the increasing pressure on Ghanaian farmers to produce enough food to feed the growing population. A final benefit is the personal impact of more women in business and government that would be felt by all women. Empowering women in Ghana “enhances the economic stability of families, increases women’s self-esteem, enables them to take advantage of legal rights [...] and contributes significantly to the economic strength of countries” (Ofori-Baodu, 2005, pg. 58).

Improving the status of women would yield numerous economic benefits, for the women themselves, for the nation, and for Ghana internationally. As discussed, women have been excluded from opportunity to advance financially. For the individual, economic empowerment would enable her to have her own savings account, to earn credit and purchase laborsaving materials. Women of Ghana deserve to reclaim the right to their own finances. They need to be able to purchase land and farm on the same quality plots as men, and women in government positions are well positioned to achieve this. This self-reliance will empower women to make their own choices and influence political control of resources. The ultimate product for individual women is “greater economic independence, a sense of freedom and personal pride, class consciousness, and new forms of solidarity among women” (Gordon, 1996, pg. 110).

The female domination of the agriculture sector should not be undermined. Measures that recognize this and specifically address women’s needs will “not only enable them to perform their traditional role in the formal sector, but also enhance the performance of the Ghanaian economy as a whole” (Ofori-Baodu, 2005, pg. 71). It is

absolutely necessary that the Parliament of Ghana consult women any time legislation regarding the sale or production of agriculture is being introduced. Women who are unable to perform to their peak abilities should be considered “a wasted human resource,” and empowering them needs to be seen as “essential to the development effort” (Gordon, 1996, pg. 89). This concerns the entire nation. Women have the potential to contribute far more to the national economy but gendered institutions are inhibiting them from doing so. Another national consideration is increasing the number of women who receive higher education and the quality of that education. Studies show that better education for girls yield national economic growth. According the United Nations, increased educational attainment accounts for about 50 per cent of the economic growth in developing countries over the past 50 years, of which over half is due to girls having had access to higher levels of education and achieving greater equality in the number of years spent in education between men and women (Zea, 2015). According to Winnie Byanyima, executive director of Oxfam International, there is evidence to show that “when you have more women in public decision-making, you get policies that benefit women, children and families in general,” (Jarroud, 2015). Again, families across the country stand to benefit from more female-oriented legislation.

More women in government could have international consequences for Ghana. Diversifying the federal government may put Ghana in the good graces of international organizations, such as the United Nations and the World Health Organization. Ghana was among the first African countries to declare independence, and since then has been a model for surrounding nations for a stable democratic transition. Ghana could continue its role as regional trendsetter by being one of the first to boast a great number of women in political

office. More women holding lower public offices would then diversify the gender dynamic of the “political pipeline.” That is, there would be more qualified, available women to assume higher office, possibly even president. In the last decade, female African lawyers and bankers have been hard at work with a proposal to establish an African Bank for Women. It would be a commercial bank with branches in all African countries that is entirely owned by women, with the primary goal of financing African women’s economic activity. The Deputy Governor of the Bank of Ghana, Obaapanyin Nana Amma Yeboaa was named Chairperson for this project. Although little has come into fruition since the original pitching of the idea in 1994, the idea is certainly exciting to say the least. (Ofori-Baodu, 2005). The possibilities of what other positive impacts this could have on women are numerous.

Finally, empowering women has proven environmental benefits. For starters, countries with more women in parliament are more likely to ratify environmental treaties, treaties with greater environmental consciousness, and restrictions involving the treatment of the environment. Moreover, increased education of girls restrains the population growth, which is undoubtedly a great stress on the planet on the natural resources of Ghana. New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristoff explained “the most effective way to fight global poverty, to reduce civil conflict, even to reduce long-term carbon emissions, is typically to invest in girls’ education and bring women into the formal labor force.” For the above-mentioned reasons, all people of Ghana stand to gain from improving women’s status in society and increasing the presence of women in politics. I was able to observe many of the aforementioned phenomena during my own field

experience, and I can personally attest to the societal boundaries in place that have kept women from reaching their full potential in business and government.

7. Field Experience in Ghana

During the summer of 2016, I was employed by the National Commission for Civic Education in Gomoa East District, Ghana². The creation of the NCCE was written into the Constitution of Ghana, with the primary purpose of educating and encouraging the public to defend their Constitution at all times, against all forms of abuse and violation. I chose to work for the NCCE this summer because Ghana is considered a model for successful and stable democratic transition. Many other African countries' transition from independence to democracy has been met with corrupt elections, violence, and military coups.

Furthermore, 2016 was a presidential election year for Ghana, which is when the NCCE is most indispensable. It is their job to sensitize electorates about the voting procedure and their conduct before, during and after presidential and public elections to ensure smooth, timely, and legal transfers of power.

My primary responsibility was educating rural communities about democracy and voting procedure. I did this by hosting community forums and giving informal presentations at churches and schools. In addition, I was shadowing an Assemblyman of the Gomoa East District and sitting in on Assembly meetings. When not involved in either of these, I was tutoring English at elementary schools and coaching soccer for young girls, with the goal of promoting confidence and gender equality in athletics.

As a worker of the NCCE, I would accompany other full-time employees to site visits

² Gomoa East is located in the Central District of Ghana, west of the capital city Accra. The population is 194, 789 (Ghana Statistical Service, 2010).

around the community. These site visits varied in frequency, length, and purpose. The first site visit was to a high school about an hour away from where I was staying. I went with a Ghanaian NCCE worker and another intern. By 7:00 in the morning, we were on the road to the high school. When we got there, we were met by curious and eager stares from the high school students. The NCCE worker, named Joseph, started the presentation by giving the students a forceful, reprimanded overview of their constitutional rights as per the 1998 provisions. He impressed upon them the importance of studying to the peak of their abilities and how much getting pregnant before graduation would defer their goals and aspirations. After about an hour, Joseph turned to us and asked us to say a few words. I mentioned my passion for international travel and how my avoidance of teen pregnancy had helped me accomplish my goals. After a bit of awkwardness, we shook the hand of the headmaster and we were on our way. A different NCCE worker, Ernest, accompanied me on the second site visit we conducted. This time, we drove about two hours north to another rural village. We gathered at someone's house and met men and women who lived around the area. About 16 people in total were in attendance. Ernest led the discussion because the people there could not understand English. He introduced me and I sat patiently while he opened the discussion for the people to express their concerns with the local government. The community members had been given training to create a new kind of biscuit made from the Cassava plant, but had also been promised funding to get the project off the ground. The promised funding never came. They had grown distrustful of the government and claimed this was only one of many examples of empty and unfulfilled promises. A few people admitted they had no intention of voting in the upcoming presidential election. When it was my turn to speak, I turned the discussion to civic responsibility and how

essential civic participation is to the essence of a true democracy. I encouraged the women to participate in politics, even run for the local assembly election, to ensure their needs and concerns would be addressed. Ernest translated for me. I continued to accompany different site visits, but they usually followed suit. Sometimes we met at a church, or just outside. One of the challenges the NCCE deals with is actually getting the rural community members to gather. Since the majority of them are farmers, almost always with large families, communication and synchronization of scheduling can be extremely difficult. In addition, April through June is the rainy season for Ghana, so we occasionally had to cancel due to the weather. After these complications, site visits averaged around 2 per week.

I must disclose the range of my observations. Although I travelled extensively within the region, I did not venture outside the central region of Ghana and the following observations, though they may be applicable to other parts of the country, were studied within the borders of that particular area.

I was very surprised at the overall lack of women I encountered. I cannot conclude whether this was due to the women spending most of their time at home, or perhaps many of them had left their small towns and relocated to more urban areas in search of greater opportunities; perhaps both were true. In any case, just about every aspect of public life, including markets, churches, schools, and bars were male-dominated. The few women I did notice who were over the age of eighteen almost always had very young children with them. This is not to say that each and every one of them had actually mothered a child themselves, as it is common for women to share the responsibilities of child rearing. From my American perspective, the sheer number of pregnant and nursing women was exceedingly higher than that of the US. Of the women that were formally employed, they

mostly worked jobs involving unskilled labor (selling water, shoes, or other traded material goods) or craftsmanship (hair dressers or tailors). The nearest institutions of higher education are all located in the capital city of Accra. It is incredibly difficult for high school students to produce the funding not only for relocation to Accra, but for tuition and school-related costs as well. Students who had the grades and the ambition to pursue a higher degree would need the collective support of their community to be able to afford it. To earn this, the community must decide that the student in question is worth the investment, and that student would then have an obligation to contribute somehow to the betterment of that community after their graduation. This was rare for male students, and even more rare for female students.

Voter turnout among women is especially low in the area in which I was primarily located. According to my findings, women's participation in the election process can primarily be contributed to low voter salience. This is the idea that a single vote is not important enough to justify the effort it would take to cast that vote. Even if they could sway the election in one direction or another, many women believe that the candidates on both sides are corrupt anyway and will not sanction significant change in their own lives. According to Afrobarometer's latest report, "89% of Ghanaians perceive corruption among "some" "most" or "all" politicians" (Afrobarometer, 2017). In the same regard, many rural women would not consider the idea of running for public office personally, even for a small, local position. This can be attributed to a few factors, namely that the women do not consider themselves educated or qualified enough to hold public office, and because they already have abundant responsibilities within their home and community and have deemed themselves incapable of assuming any more. When asked about women who

currently hold public office in the Ghanaian federal government, the rural women conclude that female politicians are an exception, not an example. They are typically born closer to the capital city, with greater access to good schools and less pressure to maintain the family home. That is not to say that women who grow up farther away from the capital don't get elected, but that they face arguably greater and more frequent obstacles in the attempt to do so.

Ghana is a multi-party system, but the primary political parties are the NPP (New Patriotic Party), considered center-right, and the National Democratic Congress (NDC), considered center-left. The political parties in Ghana are based primarily on ethnic groups or tribal affiliation and much less on ideology. As a result of this, party lines are relatively polarized and unchanging (Banks, 2010). The current president of Ghana is Nana Akufo-Addo, of the NPP, elected in the 2016 popular election by a margin of 9.45%.

Religion plays an objectively fascinating role in Ghanaian life and politics. Ghana is 71% Christian, 17.6% Muslim, and 5.2% Traditional Ghanaian religion. There was a single mosque in the region in which I was located, and hundreds of Christian churches. Christianity is carefully weaved into just about every aspect of life; be it eating, sleeping, shopping and even riding in the car. Most Ghanaian Christians have a seemingly unwavering faith God. They thank Him before every meal, and praise Him before bed. Images of Jesus Christ and crosses can be found everywhere, from bumper stickers to storefront windows and schools. If the weather is good or bad, it is God's will. If one is to finish school, if one is to give birth to a healthy baby, or if one's preferred candidate is to be elected, it is entirely dependent upon the will of God. In much of the central region, elements of Christianity have been intertwined with a traditional African religion, to form a

sort of hybrid religion. Most people strictly abide by certain Christian principles, such as praying, helping the poor and less fortunate, abstaining from sin, and attending Sunday mass. At the same time, they will also participate in traditional rituals such as naming ceremonies after the birth of a child or worshipping altars of deceased ancestors. It is quite remarkable to witness the discrepancy between the all-encompassing, resolute faith in religion compared to the cynical suspicion of government (refer to aforementioned Afrobarometer figure).

To my understanding, rural Ghanaian women face discrimination and violence based on sex quite regularly, and both have become widely normalized and accepted by not only men, but women as well. A few men went so far as to explain to me that the United States is actually sexist against men because they can face legal retribution for abusing their wives, whereas no such law exists in Ghana. If a woman is abused by her husband, it is usually assumed that she is at fault for being out. According to a Demographic and Health Survey from 2003, “19.8% of men and 34% of women found it socially acceptable for a husband to beat his wife if she went out without telling him. The survey also showed that 10.1% of men and 19.9% of women considered it acceptable for a husband to beat his wife for refusing to have sex with him” (Ahmadi, 2016). Women are generally taught that their worth comes from their ability to marry a successful man and bear many children for him. Despite any legal initiatives to incentivize more women in leadership roles, and the establishment of the Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit, reversing century-old distinct and accepted gender roles is no easy task. Even if a rural woman had the time, experience, and interest in holding some kind of public office, she may still be dissuaded

from doing so because of the belief that it is not her place as a woman to hold a government position.

In addition to the possible conclusions offered above for the various obstructions that keep women out of office, teenage girls face a huge risk: teenage pregnancy. Statistics from a Ghana Health Services report indicated that over 750,000 girls between age 15 and 19 were pregnant in 2014. Of these, the central region reported the highest number of pregnant teens (Buabeng, 2015). In 2016, addressing teen pregnancy moved to the front of the agenda of many government organizations, including the NCCE. It goes without saying that these teen mothers are at a much greater risk of not finishing high school, let alone any higher education. These alarming figures have all but sent the federal government into crisis. A skyrocketing birthrate that exceeds the rate of domestic food production could result in a devastating food shortage, and plummet the already impoverished parts of the country into even worse conditions. The cause of this trend is not entirely clear, although many believe that it may be a combination of the unavailability of birth control in rural districts, the preference of teens in rural districts to forego birth control when they do have access to it, and the overall lack of proper sex education in rural communities. Whatever the cause, teen pregnancy hurts the mother considerably more than it hurts the father. Due to the matrilineal nature of Ghanaian society, the child not only becomes the woman's sole responsibility to feed and raise, but the child will be expected to live and grow up in the house of the mother. Whereas the goals and aspirations of the young mother are compromised in their entirety, the father is essentially uninhibited to continue on with his life in the same manner, as if the child in question was not his at all. The issue of teen pregnancy is growing, and the responsibility of a child only adds to the social, political, and

economical disadvantages mentioned above that Ghanaian women are already burdened with. The presence of a child makes it harder for a woman to run for political office or seek higher education. Not unlike the United States, teen pregnancy inhibits a woman's ability to pursue any career. My observations during my time in Ghana mostly reflect many of the points discussed above, and provide further insight to societal trends on a local level.

8. Conclusion

The relative position of women in the hierarchy of private and public life and Ghana has fluctuated over time. The political prominence and economic independence women experienced before colonization was critically diminished during the period of British rule. Since independence, Ghana has made some strides to empower women, but certain societal norms and ingrained social structures have prevented them from accessing the same opportunities as men, and in turn have slowed down development progress for the nation overall. Ghana's prioritization of cash crops over subsistence crops, combined with the strict sexual division of labor and the decreasing relevance of education have kept women suppressed and made any kind of upward mobility virtually unachievable. This paired with other social factors, such as the role of women as mothers and providers for the home, and the docile attitude toward domestic abuse, have inhibited the progress that could have been made after the creation of The National Council on Women and Development. Sadly, the NCWD has been around for over 40 years and has not been as effective as it could be regarding significant change to the gendered landscape of Ghana.

Providing better academic opportunities for women and enabling them to advance in business and politics specifically would yield tremendous advantages for all Ghanaians.

Education of women typically results in lower rates of teen pregnancy, which helps the women individually and reduces the birth rate, which in turn relieves some of the pressure that overpopulation puts on the planet. Empowerment of women could reduce violence against women and increasing the number of female politicians and legislators tends to generate more women and family-oriented laws. Financially, the restriction of women to subsistence-only farming and the social stigma of marketplace trader women is massively limiting women's potential as a human labor resource.

Gender inequality in Ghana must be on the forefront of the national agenda. It is past time for women of Ghana to take back control of their own lives. As author and historian J.L. Parpart suggested, "The liberation of women hinges therefore on the emergence of a feminist consciousness as a source of moral anger and self-affirmation, and as an alternative to the male-constructed reality" (Parpart, 1989, pg. 8). There are some very concrete suggested solutions that would combat some of the great difficulties women of Ghana face. These include taxing men's produce to finance investments in women's produce, requiring quotas of women at higher education and training institutions, prioritizing women in informal sector services, and counterbalancing taxes and expenditures for cooking, cleaning, and child care to counteract unpaid domestic labor. Furthermore, access to maternity leave, clean tap water, and reliable electricity must be ensured for all women so they may be better able to earn an income (Gordon, 1996, pg. 67). It should be noted that international efforts of a similar nature have been exceedingly successful by also enlisting the support of men. Simply put, more women need to be encouraged to run for public office. A greater presence of women in government will lead to economic and political empowerment of all women. The International Federation of

Women Lawyers, Ghana, need to “educate women on their constitutional rights not to be discriminated against and explore ways [anti-discriminatory policy] can be used to enhance women’s economic opportunities” (Ofori-Baodu, 2005, pg. 115). The road to equality of all people is an uphill one, but Ghana has achieved much more than many of its western African neighbors and this should be no exception. According to author April Gordon, “the difficult challenge facing women everywhere, [. . .] is to convince men – husbands, brothers, fathers, employers, and policymakers [. . .] – that men have more to lose than gain from subordinating women, denying them basic rights, and obstructing the contributions women could make to the betterment of their societies, contributions that would benefit men as well as women” (Gordon, 1996, pg. 91). Empowerment of all women is the next big challenge, and the Black Star nation must rise to meet it.

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