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## SOCIOLOGY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Participation without a voice? Rural women's experiences and participation in local governance activities in the Abura–Asebu–Kwamankese district of Ghana

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**Abstract:** This paper reports on a study conducted to explore rural women's experiences and participation in local governance activities in the Abura–Asebu–Kwamankese district of Ghana. Using a qualitative case study design, the study collected data from 53 women with different socio-economic backgrounds in focus group discussions and interview sessions. The study results show that while women are as likely as men to be engaged in local governance activities, they are less likely to be recruited into key decision-making roles. Women's participation is linked more to physical presence during local governance activities without much power to influence and control decisions. The study found that women want to be more empowered through their formal and “political” education in order to increase their levels of assertiveness and confidence to enable them assume key decision-making roles during their participation in local governance activities. Also, government must enforce strictly the implementation of the quota system to increase women's appointments into the district assemblies. Finally, the local government elections



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### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

In Ghana, women constitute more than half of the country's population according to the 2010 Population and Housing Census Report. Yet, women in Ghana are the least heard in decision-making processes due to factors such as patriarchy, lower levels of education and the very nature of political institution interacting to preclude women from their meaningful engagements. This paper explores women's participation and roles within the local governance space in Ghana. The study found that very few women are able to permeate the gendered political landscape with the majority of women voting and galvanising support for political parties during elections. This situation resonates women's participation in social/community activities where women are only physically present without any form of authority to control decisions regarding their participation. The study thus calls for the need to increase women's voice in their participation by recruiting them into key decision-making roles.

should be regulated to adhere to its non-partisan nature in order to stimulate more women's interest and participation.

**Subjects: Political Behaviour and Participation; Gender Studies – Soc Sci; Gender and Development**

**Keywords: Local governance; decision-making; politics; social/community participation; decentralisation**

## 1. Introduction

Many democratic societies today are faced with the challenge of increasing women's visibility in public life and other key decision-making roles. This is in spite of the implementation of considerable gender-related protocols (such as the Platform for Action, Millennium Development Goals, Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discriminations against Women and more recently the Sustainable Development Goals) that aim to bring more women into decision-making roles. While these policy implementations have increased general awareness of the inequalities in societies, issues of gender-related inequalities still persist in governance and other public activities, especially in developing countries (Tripp, 2013). Nevertheless, it is prudent to recount some achievements in as far as women in governance are concerned.

Available statistics on women in political governance show that African countries have some of the world's highest rates of women representation in national parliaments. Currently, women constitute about 23.6% of parliamentarians in sub-Saharan African countries with Rwanda leading with a world record of 61.3% female parliamentary representation (Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), 2018). Namibia, South Africa and Senegal also have more than 40% of their parliamentary seats held by women. Regardless of these great achievements, other African countries are still struggling to ensure equal leverage of participation across genders, as there is gross underrepresentation of women politicians. For example, women have only a 7.2% parliamentary representation in Benin, 6.2% in Swaziland and 5.6% in Nigeria (Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), 2018).

As a developing country, Ghana is well touted for its achievements, efforts and commitments towards engendering her governance processes. Ratification of the many international conventions on women has been the primary mechanism used to bridge the lacunae between men and women's participation in governance and other decision-making roles in Ghana. In addition, many intervention strategies have been implemented to encourage equal participation of both genders in public life. For instance, there has been gender mainstreaming into the sector programmes of Government Ministries, Departments and Agencies and Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies to ensure national commitment to gender equality and women's right (Minsitry of Gender Children and Social Protection (MGCSP), 2014). There is currently the Affirmative Action Bill before the parliament of Ghana that will promote women's empowerment for sustainable development.

Yet, implementation strategies over the years have yielded minimal impacts as far as increasing women's visibility in leadership in governance institutions and other political offices are concerned. Currently, there are only 9 (out of 33) cabinet positions held by women in Ghana (Donkor, 2017). In the Judiciary, only 29% of the Supreme Court Judges and 25% of High Court judges are women. The same can be said about civil service, where women constitute only 24% of chief directors (Minsitry of Gender Children and Social Protection (MGCSP), 2014). Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that, at present, there are historic appointments of women into key political positions, including the secretary to the cabinet, deputy majority leader, chief of staff and chief justice (Donkor, 2017). Although these feats are commendable, there are still serious deficits in Ghana's efforts in ensuring women's meaningful participation especially in local governance, which cannot be overlooked.

At the local level, the presence of women is yet to be felt in representation and in other decision-making roles. A critical look at women's achievements and roles in local governance (see Table 2)

raises concern about the efficacy of implemented gender policies to encourage women's participation in decision-making at the local government level. This is because while men continue to wield decision-making power within the local governance space, women's participation within the same governance activities has been argued as "tokenistic" where participation is proffered to women but yet restricted in power and voice to influence decisions regarding those activities. Women's participation is constrained to voting in electoral process and providing services as labour during community implementation projects without being recruited into important decision-making roles (Abakah, 2012).

This study thus argues for the need to have women's voices matter in their participation in local governance activities, be it politics or in social/community projects and activities. The study examines women's participation and roles in local politics and in social/community activities in Ghana. It addresses the following research questions:

- (1) How are rural women involved in politics and in social/community activities under the local government system?
- (2) What roles do women assume in their political and social participation within the local government space?
- (3) What strategies can be adopted to add more "voice" to women's participation through the assumption of key decision-making roles?

## 2. Participation and local governance

### 2.1. Concepts of participation

Following the UN declaration for human rights, the Platform of Action and the implementation of gender-related protocols, the concept "participation" has been synonymous with power, empowerment, and the need to include the "have-nots" in the decision-making processes, especially in matters that affect their own lives (Arnstein, 1969; Kabeer, 2001). Hence, to many developmental theorists, the term participation implies the need to involve the disadvantaged segments of the population in the design and implementation of policies that concerns their well-being (Gaventa & Valderrama, 1999; Khan & Ara, 2006). This study adopts a more feminist perspective to the concept of participation in relation to governance processes. From engagements with politics and governance, Santos-Maranan, Parreño and Fabros (2007, p. 5) defined participation as:

...the physical presence, voice and ability to influence outcomes of decision-making spaces in the public sphere, from national-locals, electoral politics to small community organisations to sectorial organisations, from assuming key positions in decision-making processes/bodies to mobilisation demanding gender responsive governance.

Understanding women's participation also means understanding issues of power (Wilcox, 1994), that is, the exercise of power to make decisions or influence a decision-making process. In this study, power is also related to the "voice" required to make and influence decisions during participation. Therefore, through participation, women should have the power to decide on a preferred government system as well as a "voice" in influencing decisions and policies that affect their lives. To this end, Arnstein (1969) argues that there is a critical difference between going through an empty ritual of participation and having the real power needed to affect the outcome of the process. She believes that "participation without the redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating processes for the powerless" (p. 216). Therefore, women's participation should come with the needed power to influence decisions on policies and in other matters that concern their well-being.

Another area of concern associated with women's participation is the issue of empowerment (Holcombe, 1995). While participation represents action, or being part of an action such as decision-making process, empowerment represents sharing control, the ability to participate, to

influence decision as well as allocation of resources (Addae, 2010). Kabeer (1999) in her empowerment framework argues that empowering women for effective participation constitutes three critical and interrelated dimensions: resources, agency and achievements. All three dimensions are essential to enable women to develop the voice as well as the capacity to make decisions and to fulfil their own aspirations (Yount, 2017).

Resources include human (such as education, self-efficacy), social (including participation in voluntary organisations, access to peer networks or mentors) and material resources (earnings, property). Agency requires the ability to define one's goals and act upon them. It includes the observable actions, the meaning, motivation and purposes with which individuals bring to their activity (Kabeer, 1999). Kabeer (1999) also described women's sense of agency as the "the power within" (p. 438). Achievements on the other hand reflect the well-being outcomes of any action. In her framework, Kabeer (1999) considers education as a potential resource or catalyst of empowerment. However, access to resources such as education is less valuable as a measure of empowerment than the potential that resources have to enhance women's capacity for self-determination (Murphy-Graham, 2008).

In sum, for meaningful participation, women must be part of an activity, possess control over such an activity and must exhibit decision-making authority over such activity. Participation must imply representation, involvement in decision-making processes, and power to influence decision outcomes and must be used as powerful instrument to empower women as marginalised group within societies.

## **2.2. Citizens' participation in local governance**

While there are different approaches of participation, Gaventa and Valderrama (1999) argue for the need to intersperse multiple approaches, especially in looking at citizens' participation in local governance. Here, emphasis is placed on the intersection of politics, social/community engagements as citizenship participation within the local governance space.

On one hand, participation in local governance has been a key focus occurring within development projects and programmes as implemented in local communities. Participation within this scope represents the process by which members of a community influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources that affect them (World Bank, 1995). From this perspective however, participation could be seen in the level of consultation or decision-making in all phases of a project cycle, from needs assessment, to appraisal, to implementation, to monitoring and to evaluation (Gaventa & Valderrama, 1999). An individual is assumed to have fully participated socially when such an individual is present, is involved and exerts control during implementation of social interventions.

On the other hand, there is the tradition of political participation through which citizens engage in the traditional forms of political involvement such as campaigns and voting, collective action around policies, contacting political representatives and protests and demonstrations (Bratton, 1992). However, Gaventa and Valderrama (1999) argue that within the context of local governance, these two notions of participation (social and political) should be linked to the broader notion of participation as citizenship or citizen participation. According to them, the move from government towards governance offers new spaces in which the concept of participation may be expanded to one of citizenship, one that involves linking participation in the political and social spheres. Citizenship as participation represents the human agency in the political arena where citizens have the right to acts as agents (Lister, 1998). It refers to the intervention of private citizens with determined social interests in public activities (Gaventa & Valderrama, 1999). It incorporates civic education and also expresses itself in knowledge about fundamental human rights and civic responsibilities, public debating and discussions on issues, and public activities.

Even though citizens participate as part of their fundamental human right as encoded in the United Nation's 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (later in 1976 as the International

Covenant on Civil and Political Rights), there are certain demand and supply-side factors that challenge women's meaningful participation. These factors emerge from women's own personal characteristics such as their dispositions in terms of personal self-efficacy, resources and motivation (supply-side factors) for political activities and systematic or institutional factors (demand-side factors) that either facilitate or constrict tendencies for women's political activities (Krook, 2010; Norris & Lovenduski, 1995; Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995). Resources include education, time, money, civic skills and experiences essential to facilitate participation (Verba et al., 1995).

It is argued that supply-side factors have a strategic influence to enhance women's political participation in local governance (Boateng & Kosi, 2015; Krook, 2010), especially in contestation and appointments into key political offices. Participation is likely to increase if women's own socio-economic resources are aligned with politics and are also motivated by friends and associates in their interpersonal networks to do so (Verba et al., 1995). While the supply-side factors are critical, it is worthy of mention that women's self-efficacy, beliefs, abilities and success to permeate the gendered political "glass ceiling" depend heavily on demand-side factors (Boateng & Kosi, 2015). Demand-side factors such as electoral systems, political parties and the very institution of politics can influence the probability that women will be drawn for meaningful political activities as well as their appointments into key political decision-making positions.

### **3. Contextualising women's participation in local governance in Ghana**

This section provides contextual information about women's participation in local governance activities in Ghana. The section examines the current status of women in political decision-making roles in Ghana and explores the demand and supply-side factors that affect women's meaningful participation in local governance in Ghana.

#### **3.1. The status of women in political decision-making roles in Ghana**

Women's participation in decision-making roles in politics in Ghana has only witnessed a modest growth over the years (Minsitry of Gender Children and Social Protection (MGCSP), 2014). Women's formal participation in political activities could be traced to the First Republic when women supported the activities of the Convention People's Party (CPP) and participated in the political process as members of the National Assembly (Parkes, 1992). Hence, between 1960 and 1966, there were 10 women elected to the National Assembly (Donkor, 2017); however, subsequent governments after the CPP could not do much to ensure women's visibility in political activities. Thus, it was not until the 1980s that women began to organise themselves into a political force through the activities of the 31st December Women's Movement with the ultimate aim of helping women to become more visible and having their voices heard in society (Donkor, 2017; Tagoe & Abakah, 2015).

Hitherto, the establishment of the National Commission on Women and Development (NCWD), in 1975, gave some impetus for the mobilisation of more women for political engagements (Boateng & Kosi, 2015). The NCWD was tasked to ensure that Ghana is committed to the achievement of the objectives of the International Women's Year and that of UN Decade for Women. Accordingly, between 1975 and 1986, Ghana initiated and implemented programmes, projects and activities to increase women's participation in public life at the local and national levels. These activities aimed to enhance women's access to formal education and professional training, improve upon their standard of living and their status in society by increasing their income earning capacity to assist in the development of their individual communities (Awumbila, 2001; Odame, 2010).

The further introduction and implementation of decentralisation, local governance and the district assembly policies increased the tempo of women's political engagements in the country as these policies shifted the locus of power to the grassroots and consequently paving the way for ordinary citizens to participate in local politics on a non-party basis. In so doing, opportunity was created for women to have equal chances as men to participate in local politics at the local government level. However, while historically, women have been of considerable support and

involved with activities of political parties; their roles have been organisers and mobilisers for electoral wins. When it comes to decision-making and wielding key political positions through contestations for political positions, the status of women has been low at both the macro parliamentary level and micro local governance level (see Tables 1 and 2, respectively).

For instance in 2004, there were only 104 women who contested parliamentary seats out of which only 25, representing 10.9%, were elected out of the total 230 parliamentarians. In 2008, out of the 103 women candidates, only 18 representing 7.8% were elected. In 2012, only 30 women representing 10.9% were elected into a 275-member parliament of Ghana. This figure appreciated marginally during the 2016 parliamentary elections where 36 women representing 13.1% were elected into national parliament in Ghana. While this increment is encouraging, more efforts and initiatives need to be implemented to bridge the wider lacunae between men and women parliamentarians in Ghana. Table 1 provides a summary of women elected into parliament from 1960 to 2016.

The limited representation of women in national politics and governance mirrors the status of women in local governance. In the face of many institutional measures to encourage more participation, women’s contestation and election as well as recruitment through appointments into district assemblies has been persistently low. Table 2 presents a synoptic view of women and men’s representation in district assembly elections in Ghana.

**Table 1. Women elected into Ghanaian parliament from 1960 to 2016**

Year	Men	Women	Total no. of parliamentary seats	Percentage of women
1960	94	10	104	9.6
1969	138	2	140	1.4
1979	135	5	140	3.6
1992	194	6	200	3
1996	182	18	200	9
2000	181	19	200	9.5
2004	205	25	230	10.9
2008	212	18	230	7.8
2012	245	30	275	10.9
2016	239	36	275	13.1

Source: Adapted from Donkor (2017).

**Table 2. Women representation in district assembly elections in Ghana from 1994 to 2015**

Year	Contested			Elected				
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Percentage	Male	Percentage	Total
1994	N/A	N/A	NA	122	2.9	4,082	97.1	4,204
1998	547	14,696	15,243	196	4.1	4,624	95.9	4,820
2002	965	12,625	13,590	341	7.4	4,241	92.6	4,582
2006	1,772	13,084	14,856	478	10.1	4,254	89.9	4,732
2010	1,376	15,939	17,315	412	7.95	5,681	92.05	6,093
2015	1,182	17,756	18,938	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Source: Adapted from ABANTU (2013) and Agyare-Kwabi (2013), Ofei-Aboagye (2000).

Since 1994, none of the district assembly elections has recorded more than 10% of female representation. The 2006 district assembly elections recorded the highest so far with 10.1% women representation with a decline during the 2010 district assembly elections. During the recent district assembly elections in 2015, only 1,182 women contested from a total of 18,965 contestants (The Ghanaian Times, 2015). While women's participation in terms of contesting and getting elected in the district assembly elections is marginal, appointments into the assembly in spite of the quota system are equally low. For instance, in 2013, out of the 216 Metropolitan, Municipal and District Chief Executive (MMDCEs) appointment positions, only 11 were women. Currently, there are only 26 out of MMDCEs who are women, a figure representing only 17% of women appointment into the assembly.

It is equally essential to identify that while numerically, women's contestation, election and appointments into the district assembly has been low, in terms of meaningful participation in community organised activities, women are found only at the periphery without any significant contribution to decision-making on said activities. A study done by Addae (2010) on participation of leaders in community development activities in northern Ghana found that women tend to be benefactors to community development projects and programmes but seldom assume any leadership positions during the planning and implementations of such activities. Similarly, a study by Abakah (2012) on participation of women in local governance in central Ghana also found that while a majority of women participate in community initiated programmes and projects, their participation is limited to offering services without much power and voice to influence decisions during such participation. Indeed, if local governance is to be effective and to achieve its purpose of bringing governance to the local people, women must not be left at the periphery. They must have a voice through their recruitment into key decision-making positions within the local governance space.

### **3.2. Factors that affect women's participation in local governance in Ghana**

The concept of local governance and decentralisation ideally offer rather more conducive opportunities for women to have control over decisions that affect their lives. Local governance can ensure a more participatory approach to development by integrating and giving opportunities to more women to equally have a say in the development agenda of their communities (Ferrazzi, 2006). There are both supply and demand-side factors that limit the capacity of rural women to participate meaningfully in local governance activities in their communities. These factors disadvantage women more than men in political participation and in other key decision-making roles within the local governance space.

Among the supply side, factors are the resources (finance, education, time) required for meaningful participation. Economically, rural women in Ghana are poorer than their male counterparts, which is as a result of the uneven economic resources and the lack of employment opportunities for rural women (UNICEF, 2013). Consequently, while political activities are increasingly becoming commercialised even at the local levels, most women are unable to contest for political positions because they lack the economic power to do so (Boateng, 2017; Tagoe & Abakah, 2015).

Another significant resource for local governance participation is education, which is a useful determinant for recruitment into decision-making roles. However, there are more women (2.7 million) in Ghana with no formal education than men (1.4 million) (Ghana Statistical Service, 2013). This presupposes that more men will be likely to be recruited into key decision-making roles in governance than women. At the local level, even though level of education is not a requirement, formal education equips women with relevant resources in terms of the civic skills, knowledge and attitudes needed for effective political engagements. It also provides the network of association from which social capital could be drawn for political participation (Verba et al., 1995). Therefore, the lower level of women's education implies that women do not only lack the requisite confidence and skills for participation but

also will miss out of potential friends and associates who could motivate and recruit them into politics.

Demand-side or structural factors also affect women's participation. The very nature of the institution of politics and local government structures affect women's engagement with politics. The "culture of insults", which has gradually gained grounds within Ghanaian political cycles where persons who hold political and other key decision-making positions are subjected to public ridicule deter most suitable and qualified women from political engagements (Abakah, 2012). Similarly, the persistent act of violence and the use of "thugs" (commonly referred to in Ghana as macho men) on major political opponents have rather tended to deepen the already existing gender gap in political participation (Tagoe & Abakah, 2015). Issues of assaults, verbal attacks and the perception that women who assume key decision-making roles made their way through sexual favours continue to discourage more capable women from participation. The rippling effect is that, more educated and qualified women with the needed resources and motivation spurn politics and lurk behind as "watch dogs" where they are virtually unconcerned and mere spectators in political discourses and participation.

Furthermore, the continual interference of political parties in district assembly elections affects women's contestations and appointments into district assemblies. In spite of the non-partisan nature of the local district assembly elections, political parties are involved in endorsing, sponsoring and offering platform to their preferred candidates who happen to be men. Such practices situate women in a much more disadvantageous positions as far as their contestation, election and appointments are concerned.

Finally, in addition to both the supply and demand-side factors that affect women's participation, there are also customs, beliefs and practices embedded in the very patriarchal nature of Ghanaian society that also work to affect women's position in governance and the visibility in other public lives (Shiraz, 2015; Boateng, 2017). Such structures within the traditional Ghanaian societies are endemic with cultural barriers that negatively affect women's potentials and decision to engage in politics (Bauer & Britton, 2006). For instance, culturally, women are not allowed to participate in the political space freely as men, as the act of public participation has been observed as the reserved for men. The customary male preference of leadership tends to also put men ahead of women in their political participation.

#### 4. Methods

A qualitative descriptive case study design was used to investigate in depth the phenomenon of women's exclusion from local governance participation. According to Yin (2015), this design is appropriate to investigate a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context. The design also made it possible for investigation into the problem of the study in a more holistic and intensive manner (Merriam, 2001).

The population comprised all women in the Abura-Asebu-Kwamankese (AAK) district. Purposeful sampling was used to select three communities in the district based on their relevance to the district as a whole. Also, purposive and homogenous sampling strategies were used to select the women respondents for inclusion in the study. While purposive sampling enabled the researcher to identify and select specific participants from which information could be obtained for the study (Patton, 1990), homogenous sampling technique allowed the description of the experiences of women who shared similar characteristics. In all 53 women constituted the sample for the study.

The study used multiple data collection tools of focus groups and in-depth interviews. Focus groups were held with women in the three purposefully selected communities of Moree, Asebu and Abura-Dunkwa. There were six sessions of the focus groups with two sessions for each group. Each group session was made up of eight women. Focus groups were conducted from 8 to 13 February 2016. In-depth interviews were also conducted with five key informants because of

their roles and experiences in the administration of the district. These women were the presiding member of the district assembly, district health director, district educational director, a government appointee in the district assembly and a chair for the committee on women and children's affairs. These interviews were held from 11 and 15 December 2017. All interviews took place in the various offices of the participants.

Questions were asked on women's participation in politics and in social activities. There were also questions to describe roles and to share experiences about participation in both political and social activities in the district. Women responded to the same semi-structured questions during the focus groups in all the communities (see Appendix 1). Both the interviews and focus group discussions were tape-recorded and later translated. Focus group discussions were conducted in the Fantse language but were given to language experts at the University of Ghana language centre for transcription.

Themes were extracted to form the basis of the analysis. The process of theme extraction was guided by Braun and Clarke (2006) criterion for thematic data analysis involving the following: familiarisation with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report. Themes generated were also guided by the study's research questions.

Prior to the commencement of the fieldwork, the Department of Adult Education, University of Ghana, approved the study and a formal introductory letter was given to enable entry into the communities under investigation. The official letter was used to seek permission from the District Assembly, which happens to be the administrative head of all the local communities. Once the permission was granted, local assembly members were used as informants who in some cases aided to recruit participants for the focus groups. All participants were briefed about the purpose of the research and they consented to be part of the study.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. Demographics of respondents

Table 3 provides the demographic details of all respondents who participated in the study. This includes both participants in focus group discussions and the personal interviews (key informants).

The demographic characteristics of women in the study showed the majority (30) within the age group of 18–30. There were three women who were above age 50. Twenty nine of the women were married. The data on women's economic activities showed that most of the women were self-employed (26) engaging in the sale of fish and farming as the predominant activities with a few involved in trading, dressmaking and hairdressing. About two-fifths of the women had no formal education (23). Only five respondents had obtained higher education.

### 5.2. Women's participation in political activities

To determine the level and role of women's participation in political activities in the districts, women were asked to describe any political activity they had engaged in over the past 5 years at the local level.

It was observed that voting was a predominant political activity for all women. While all respondents described their participation in voting in national and district assembly elections as a political process, only four women indicated that they have stood for a political position at the local level as assembly women (two women) and as treasurer and women's organiser for a political party. One key informant indicated that they had contested for a chair position of a political party but later had to withdraw from contesting:

I have been active in politics in my district. I have been voted for at the assembly level to lead and in all those instances I can confidently say I performed my duties with diligence ...

**Table 3. Demographics of respondents**

Demographics	Frequency
<i>Age</i>	
18–30	30
31–50	20
51+	3
Total	53
<i>Marital status</i>	
Married	29
Single	14
Divorced	6
Widowed	4
Total	53
<i>Educational level</i>	
No formal education	23
Basic education	16
Senior High School (SHS)/Vocational/Technical	9
Tertiary	4
Postgraduate	1
Total	53
<i>Occupation</i>	
Public servants	14
Civil servants	2
Self-employed	26
Private	5
Unemployed	6
Total	53

But surprisingly when I decided to go for the chairmanship position within my own political party, I had all the backlash that you can imagine. Some thought of me as been too ambitious and fixated with power ... in fact my party was just not ready to have a woman as a chairperson ... to make matters even worse my husband asked I choose to either contest or be a divorcee ... in the long run I had to save my marriage (Personal interview, key informant 1).

Another respondent also shared experience of having to withdraw from contesting for political position in her community. In her experience, local community leaders asked her to withdraw her candidature for her male opponent. She explained:

When I decided to contest in the just ended district assembly elections, I didn't get the support. Even my own family didn't buy into the idea ... even some elders in my locality approached me asking me not to contest so I can allow the male to go. The pressure was coming from so many angles that I had to bow out. I didn't contest anymore (Focus Group 1 – participant 1).

Apart from the lack of support from family and political party for women in leadership positions, there were also experiences of victimisation and name calling from women themselves. A respondent shared a personal experience when she contested for assemblywoman position in her electoral area:

It is always true that we are our own enemies. When I contested during the last election, my fellow women called me all sort of names, they insulted me and thought of me it is because I don't have a husband that is why I want to do politics ... I didn't win because even my fellow women whom I thought to represent their interest rejected me (Focus Group 2 – participant 1).

Interestingly when asked if they would vote for a fellow woman as a member of parliament, out of the 53 women respondents, only 12 answered in the affirmative. Women who would not vote explained their minimal confidence in women to succeed in such capacities.

I will not vote for a woman MP, because she cannot perform like the men. Politics is men's business it is tough, we women we cant handle that so I believe if we should just allow the men to do their own thing (Focus Group 2 – participant 1).

As for me I don't trust women in higher positions. It will get into their head and before you know it they will begin to abuse their power and be rude to everybody (Focus Group 1 – participant 1)

My religion does not allow women to lead even in prayer sessions, so why should I vote for a woman to lead? (Focus Group 1 – participant 1)

The foregoing responses suggest that men continue to dominate the political space in Ghana. This is reinforced by the very nature of the traditional system where leadership roles and positions are perceived of as suitable only for men.

Aside from voting and contesting political positions, there were few women who participated in political rallies. Yet, some women admitted that they were excited about the fact that a few other women were defying odds to make influence within the political scene. For instance, a respondent made the following observation about the increasing involvement of women in national politics:

Over the years we are witness[ing] changes in our politics, we were not contesting at first but in my observation, more women are now coming forward. During the last district assembly elections I saw many more women contesting. We need to encourage them and support them and canvass votes for them so that when they contest they can win (Focus Group 2 – participant 2)

Gradually we are getting there. We used not to be visible at all but now we have women in key positions in the country. In the last parliament, we had a woman as the Speaker, we have the chief Justice as a woman too. At the local level we are still struggling with women appointments but the future is bright (Personal interview, key informant 5).

Meanwhile, women attributed their limited participation in political activities to their low formal education, lack of economic sustainability, the low trust in politicians as well as the negative perceptions towards women politicians. Some of the perceptions shared include the following:

I don't think I can do politics like going to stand for elections. They won't even vote for me. I don't have the formal education and I am not even good to stand in public and speak. These are all virtues of politicians and I don't have them (Focus Group 2 – participant 3).

As for me the whole institution of politics does not entice me. Politicians are liars, they come to you with one song during their campaign and when they win it another song. I don't trust them so I don't even want to me one (Focus Group 1 – participant 1).

Look at what I do now? I am a poor farmer; I have my family to feed than to go follow a political activity. I can be injured during the process and there will be no one to come to my aid. My party may even abandon me in the process. I have seen some before. So I will rather concentrate in providing daily meal for my family (Focus Group 1 – participant 2).

The findings suggest minimal involvement of women in political activities in the AAK district and also illuminate the critical role of support in recruiting women into key political decision-making roles.

### **5.3. Women's participation in social/community activities**

Under the Local Government Act, district assemblies are mandated to plan, initiate and implement projects in consultation with local community members. In this study, women were asked to indicate and describe their involvements in community/social projects implemented by the district assembly and the local communities. Women described participation in physical projects (such as construction of school building and hospitals, roads, markets) and health-related programmes (such as safe motherhood programmes, maternal health programmes and community health programmes). Respondents also described their participation in entrepreneurial programmes that aimed to equip them with livelihood skills. These include vocational training and assistance programme, Gari processing programme and small-scale enterprise programmes which were implemented in all the three communities.

#### **5.3.1. Role of women during social/community projects**

The results showed that women were passive participants during the implementation of projects/programme in their communities. Women's participation was limited to providing labour during implementation without any power to affect decisions during the initiation, planning and implementation phases of the projects. A respondent shared her sentiments during one of the sessions of the focus group discussions:

Ideally, I think before they bring these projects they should do the least thing by asking our opinions on what we need or at least inform us about a coming project but nothing of this sort has ever happened in this community ... for instance when we desperately needed a path walk over a big gutter for our children to walk on to school, the assembly put up a market for us but my sister we don't need a market ... that is why we have still not moved into that market space (Focus Group 1 – participant 2).

Another woman expressed the following views:

When projects come to our community, it is only the opinion leaders who are consulted before and during project planning and implementation. But these opinion leaders are men! They take the decision on our behalves and they only communicate it to us through the gong-gong beater that there is going to be this kind of project so we need this or that ... so we are only involved when we are asked to fetch sand, water, stones or even cook for the workers during construction. This has been the tradition so I am not even bothered (Focus Group 2 – participant 4).

As limited as women's roles were in their political community participation, women were found to participate more in social/community projects than in political activities. This was because of the perceived benefits of the social activity to their immediate need and well-being and due to the possible sanctions that come with non-participation in social/community activities. A respondent remarked:

When it comes to community initiated projects or doing communal labour in our community we participate even more than the men ... you will be asked to pay a fine if you don't participate but when it comes to politics, nobody can arrest you if you don't go for a rally or contest for assembly woman ... besides we benefit a lot from the projects and programmes that are being initiated (Focus Group 1 – participant 2).

In addition the study found that women's participation was high in programmes that addressed the immediate needs of women, especially programmes that dealt with their health and that of their children. This was corroborated by an observation made by the district health director:

Women are doing well in the implementation of health-related programmes. Their numbers during health programmes are very encouraging and they get actively involved. We bring them to the front-line and we give them roles of which they perform so well. We appoint women as leaders during some of these programmes and incredibly during discussions, you will be amazed the kind of ideas they will suggest. So I think women are really doing so much well especially in health related programmes that we organise (Personal interview, key informant 2).

Although women significantly participated in social/community projects in their various communities, their participation can only be seen in the light of their physical presence without meaningful influence over the decisions regarding those activities. As Pateman (1970 cited in Addae, 2010) suggests, participation exclude the following situations: when an individual merely takes part in a group activity, where an individual is merely given information on a decision affecting him or her before it is executed, or an individual is present at a meeting but has no influence.

#### **5.4. Enhancing women's participation in local government activities**

The following three themes emerged from women's discussions on improving women's participation in local government activities.

##### **5.4.1. Women's education**

All respondents underscored the need for education to enhance their participation in local governance. To the respondents, women's education meant "power" to lead, to influence and to be heard, especially in patriarchal societies where decision-making powers are vested in the hands of men. To be more visible in political activities, respondents also called for a kind of "political education" that should aim to equip women with the necessary civic skills and attitudes they need to enter into politics, especially in contesting political positions. In line with this suggestion was also the organisation of specific training sessions for women who exhibit interest in holding political offices:

Education is very essential but at the local level, I don't think formal education matters that much.... Women who are willing and show interest in local politics must be schooled through special education of political lessons or some mentoring approach to prepare them to contest and to holding offices within the assembly (Personal interview, key informant 3).

A similar view was shared during the focus group discussions:

There should be a course of study in a more non-formal manner that specifically should aim to prepare women who may want to be politicians and to prepare them for political activities so that right after their completion, they know they are prepared to take up any political roles at any levels in society. You see, becoming a politician involves a lot and our minimal educational level should not be a barrier, something like this sort ought to be done (Focus Group 1 – participant 3).

#### 5.4.2. *Participation in informal voluntary associations*

Respondents also suggested the need to encourage more women's participation in voluntary associations to serve as apprenticeships for future leadership roles. A respondent shared her experience of how serving as a leader in church and school shaped her political career:

I have been a member of various associations. I have been a head girl in my school days to a secretary and a treasure in my church. I have also served as a leader for GHAMSU (Ghana Methodist Students Union) during my training college days.... All these positions have helped to build my confidence as a young girl. Currently I am not old enough but I aspire to stand for a member of parliament when the right time comes (Focus Group 2 – participant 2).

A key informant during an interview session had this to share:

It will be a step in a right direction to encourage women's leadership in informal associations. It will serve as a training ground for them. It will increase their confidence and public speaking. You know most women won't go for decision-making positions because they can't stand to talk in public. If there is a congregation at the local town hall and you want them to talk they won't go forward ... but if we train them at that level we will be enhancing their public image for future leadership and decision-making roles both in the assembly and even at the community levels (Personal interview, key informant 4).

#### 5.4.3. *Strict enforcement of the quota system*

The Local Government Act (207) of Ghana provides that 70% of the assembly members are to be elected while 30% are to be appointed following consultation with stakeholders in the district. In addition, 50% of the appointed members are required to be women. Respondents, thus, questioned the extent to which this policy is being implemented and advocated for a more strict enforcement of the Local Government Act. They emphasised that 50% appointment of women into the assembly must be enforced to ensure more women in decision-making roles in the assembly.

It is sometimes incredible why successive governments have not given much attention to the quota. If we want to see more women in this assembly and not only this assembly even in national parliament, government should be serious with us. There is already a policy document that 50% of all appointments in the assembly must be women but what are we seeing now, men here, men there, men everywhere and we sit and talk of bringing more women on board into the assembly, how do we get in when there are a lot of men "mafias" in the system, how? Government only appoints women to be the treasures, women committee chair and what happens to the very key decision-making positions? I have to struggle my way through to become a presiding member for two consecutive times but the question is not all women can be like me (Personal interview, key informant 1).

#### 5.4.4. *Motivation for participation*

The major source of motivation women required was from family and friends. Respondents contended they support their fellow women who exhibit interest in contesting political positions. Similar suggestions were raised by Sossou (2011) in her study on Ghanaian women's perception about politics. Barkan (2004) asserts that people may have the resources and psychological engagement for political activity but still remain inactive unless asked by their network members to take part. A participant who aspires to be a politician someday shared how encouragements from her family and friends in school shaped her orientations towards politics. She commented:

Friends kept telling me I have the leadership qualities to be a leader so whenever we are to elect a prefect they mentioned my name, it was encouraging to me knowing that my friends believed in me to be able to occupy a position ... as for my family my dad keeps encouraging me to consider going into politics, and I am young now but will surely go into politics (Focus Group 2, participant 2).

## 6. Discussion, conclusion and recommendations

In spite of the attempts of the local government structures, opening up space for more inclusive participation, the study found that though women are engaged, their participation can be best described as “tokenistic,” where participation is devoid of the real power to control and influence decisions (Arnstein, 1969). Indeed, although women were widely found to be voting in elections just like men, they minimally contested or recruited into key political offices. While such a finding corroborates other studies in Ghana (Gyimah & Thompson, 2008; Sossou, 2011; Odoom, Opoku & Ntiakoh-Ayipah, 2017) and elsewhere (Burns, Schlozman, & Verba, 2001; Chowdhury, 2009), it is argued in the current study that meaningful political participation must come with significant women representation across all political engagements where they are part of decision-making processes and are able to wield some level of control over such decisions. Grants (1993) and Agbalajobi (2010) caution that women’s political participation must be seen beyond voting into holding of key political offices where decisions are made. Therefore, to the extent that women were only voters and mobilisers for electoral gains, their participation could not be suggested as active and meaningful.

The study also found evidence of both supply and demand-side factors that contributed to the exclusion of women from meaningful participation in local governance activities. These factors included women’s lower socio-economic resources such as education, income, time and civic skills (Verba et al., 1995). These resources increase women’s chance of being recruited into key political roles and again equip women with the requisite skills needed for effective participation. Barkan (2004) argues that people with higher socio-economic resources are more likely to be politically active than those with lower socio-economic resources. Unsurprisingly, women in the study found themselves unprepared for political activities due to their lower resources. This finding has been reported widely in literature as significant barriers to women’s political engagements (Bawa & Sanyare, 2013; Boateng, 2017; Schlozman, Burns, Verba, & Donahue, 1995).

In addition, women were also deterred by the very nature of political institution in Ghana. This was reinforced by the patriarchal traditional systems where decision-making and economic control are vested in the hands of men (Chowdhury, 2009). The traditional belief that leadership and authority are preserved for men and thus unsuitable for women entrenches the deep-seated assumption of “masculinity” of the institution of politics. While this belief affects greatly women’s contestation and recruitment into politics and other decision-making roles (Boateng & Kosi, 2015; Shiraz, 2015; Offei-Aboagye, 2004), any attempt by the few women into such a male-dominated field of politics is often discouraged. For instance, according to Key informant 1 and Focus Group 1, participant 1, their decisions to contest for political positions were discouraged by their own party members and community, respectively. This finding gives credence to the assertion made by Tamale (2000, p. 12) that “when women step over from the ‘private’ sphere to claim their rightful space in the ‘public’ arena, traditional values provide a ready tool for men to use to remind them of their ‘proper’ place”. It was thus not surprising that in the end, some of the women had to withdraw their nominations due to the very nature of the traditional systems that support male candidature at the expense of women. Interestingly, such traditional beliefs are so deeply rooted that women themselves have come to accept and internalised them. The repercussion is that women tend to develop low self and political efficacies, which are important resources for meaningful political engagements (Verba et al., 1995).

Socially, although women lack the decision-making power to control the initiation and implementation of projects in their communities, their participation was higher than their political engagements. The studies by Ajayi and Otuya (2005) and Ozor and Nwankwo (2008) on community participation in Nigeria corroborate with the study’s finding that though women participate in social development projects/programmes implemented in their communities, they seldom assume leadership and decision-making roles. The higher participation of women in social projects emanated from the fact that while there is no sanction associated with political non-participation, non-participation in communities sometimes attracted sanctions. Besides, social participation was more flexible and

could be easily combined with domestic responsibilities. Nonetheless, participation without power to control decisions has been argued to be insufficient, as it becomes an empty ritual of frustration of the powerless with no assurance of changing the status quo (Arnstein, 1969).

In conclusion, the study's findings demonstrate that in spite of Ghana's attempts to engender local governance participation, there continues to be impediments stemming largely from the patriarchal Ghanaian societies that privilege men in their participation than women. For this reason, although women are recently becoming more visible in local government activities, they are restricted in decision-making roles. Women must be seen as partners within the local governance space where they are allowed to negotiate and engage in trade-offs with their male contenders (Arnstein, 1969) and where their views and voices are mattered in decision-making. This is essential for achieving sustainable development and ensuring parity in other areas where inequality exists such as in education, violence, poverty and health.

The study recommends the following measures to enhance women's participation in local governance activities in Ghana.

First, women must be empowered individually and collectively for increased participation. As individuals, women must be resourced educationally and empowered through other non-formal educational activities (political education) to raise awareness of their limited participation and to equip them with the confidence, leadership competencies and civil skills needed for effective political participation. As a collective effort, women must be encouraged by friends and associates to participate in voluntary or non-political institutions' activities. By their involvement in groups, women can take organised actions to bring about desirable change. Such groups could also become social capital, which is a relevant resource for recruitment into political activities.

Second, local government structures must enforce its non-partisan nature in order to stimulate more women's interest and participation. Also, there is the need to create a tension-free political system where capable women will be comfortable to be recruited for participation. It should be noted that women will be comfortable to participate in situations where both national culture and traditions are progressive and not hostile to them (Hyden, 2012).

In addition, government must ensure strictly the enforcement of the quota system that stipulates that 30% of appointments into the local government leaderships are women. Such implemented quota will increase the number of women appointments into the local governance decision-making bodies. Elsewhere (Rwanda, Uganda, South Africa), implementation of quota systems has resulted in significant increase of women's participation and representation in public and political spheres (Agbalajobi, 2010). Related to the quota is the critical need for the enforcement of Affirmative Action Bill currently before parliament to be constitutionalised to ensure gender balance in political appointments.

Furthermore, government can liaise with Civil Society Organisations to introduce women electoral lobby organisations to encourage more women's active participation. Such organisations can support women aspirants by providing training and information and fund-raising for women's political activities. In New Zealand and Australia, such organisations have been used to support women's political activities (Drage, 2001).

Finally, in social participation, implemented community projects and programmes must be tailored to women's basic needs and women leaders well represented in making decisions regarding those activities. In so doing, women will feel part of the decision-making process and will feel committed in their participation.

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## Appendix

### Appendix 1. Interview and focus group questions

- Did you vote during the last general and district assembly elections?
- Describe your participation in any political activities you have engaged in during the past 5 years.
- What prevents you from taking part in politics in your community?
- Why do you think women should be involved in the governance of their area?
- Identify any social/community-implemented projects or programmes in your local communities.
- How would you describe your role in community projects or programmes initiated in your community?
- What are some of the reasons why you participate or do not participate in social projects initiated in your community?
- What should be done to increase your participation in local level politics?
- What measures should be put in place to ensure your participation in social community projects initiated in your community?



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