

Women's Participation in Decision Making in Public and Political Spheres in Ghana: Constrains and Strategies

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Abstract

The participation of women in public and political decision making process is a gender issue which has attracted a lot of attention. Despite constituting 51.2 per cent of the population, women in Ghana are still underrepresented in political and public decision making. Despite several instruments that make provision for women's participation in political and public life, they still face numerous challenges. This paper examines existing literature on political and public decision making in order to (a) highlight the current status of women's participation in political and public life, (b) identify factors that affect the participation of women in decision making and (c) give recommendations on what can be done to promote the participation of women in decision making at high levels. In Ghana, there are disparities between men and women with regard to equal access to public and political positions. Patriarchy, women playing multiple roles, lack of resources, male dominated work patterns are some of the factors that hinder the participation of women in political decision making processes. Strategies which include introduction of quotas, women empowerment and enforcement of affirmative action policies are suggested.

Keywords: Strategies, Response, Participation, Decision making, Ghana, Gender

1. Introduction

In many African societies there is the tendency to assume that women are meant to be seen, but not heard, disregarding their historical role in national development. This sums up the way in which gender inequality raises its ugly head, in relation to women's participation in decision making. The participation of women in public and political decision making processes is a gender issue which has attracted a lot of attention. Women in Africa, and other developing nations are prevented from participating in decision making by numerous factors which include lack of education, culture, structural barriers, lack of resources, the aggressive nature of politics, and ascribed roles given to women as carers (Agbalajobi, 2010; Dube, 2013; Bawa & Sanyare 2013; Tagoe & Abakah, 2015).

History has shown that women have been left out of political life and decision making processes (United Nations, 2014). Women in history had to fight to be allowed to vote. Even though today, women's right to vote has been secured in almost every country in the world, this right to vote can sometimes be meaningless, if women still find it difficult to be heard due to one reason or another. According to the UN (2014) women are still underrepresented at all levels of government. While some countries (Rwanda, South Africa, Uganda) have attained reasonable numbers of women in politics, research indicates that in others including Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Bangladesh and Ghana, women are still underrepresented in decision making, despite constituting the majority (Chowdhury, 2009; Agbalajobi, 2010; Dube, 2013; Bawa & Sanyare, 2013; Bishaw, 2014; Tagoe & Abakah, 2015).

The public and political life of a country according to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979) is a broad concept, which refers to the exercise of political power, in particular legislative, judicial, executive and administrative, all aspects of public administration and the formulation and implementation of policy at the international, national, regional and local levels. Women's right to participation also includes their participation in public boards, civil society, trade unions, professional or industry associations, local councils, activities of political parties and other organisations concerned with public and political life (CEDAW, 1979).

1.1 Problem Statement

Despite constituting the majority (51.2 %), women in Ghana are underrepresented in decision making at higher political and public levels (Tagoe & Abakah, 2015). Ghana governments over the years have made efforts to mainstream gender and enhance women's participation in politics through various interventions; policies, programs and projects with the view to creating balance and equality across various activities targeted at women and men. According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, everyone has the right to take part in the government of his or her country. Article 7 of the CEDAW stresses women's access to decision making in political and public life. The following rights were specifically stipulated a) to vote in all elections and public referendums and to be eligible for elections to all publicly elected bodies, b) to participation in the formulation of government policy and its implementation, to hold public office and to perform all public functions at all levels

of government and c) to participate in non-governmental organisations or associations concerned with the public and political life of the country. Governments were therefore, charged to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of its countries, and specifically to ensure that women on equal terms with men, have the opportunity to represent their governments at the international level and to participate in the work of international organisations (CEDAW, 1979).

Additionally, the United Nation Millennium Goal 3 (MDG 3), which sought to achieve gender equality and empower women, charge governments to make a commitment to promote systems that give women a voice in politics and governance institutions (UN, 2014). One of the targets of the MDG 3 was to increase the proportion of seats held by women in parliament. Currently, Sustainable Development Goal 5 which seeks to promote gender equality recommends that governments should ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision making in political and public life. Again, the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) set a target for 30 per cent representation of women in all decision making positions at all levels. Ghana is a signatory to this instrument and many other Charters and Conventions, which put emphasis on women's participation and representation in politics and all levels of power. The constitution of Ghana in Article 35, section 6d also mandates the state to make democracy a reality through the decentralisation of the administrative and financial machinery of government to the local levels. This then implies that citizens will be given the opportunity to participate in decision making at all levels in national and government spheres (Ghana Government, 1992). Despite these, the participation of Ghanaian women in political and public life decision making is still lagging behind. The goal of equality in decision making is still elusive and a rhetoric for Ghanaian women. There are huge disparities between men and women, with regard to equal access to public and political positions.

1.2 Objectives

The objectives of this review were to:

- Highlight the status of women's participation in decision making in political and public life in Ghana.
- Identify factors that affect the participation of women in decision making in Ghana.
- Give recommendations on what can be done to revamp participation of women in decision making in Ghana.

2. Status of Women's Participation in Political and Public Life in Ghana

In Ghana, women constitute 51.2 per cent of the total population (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012). Their participation in politics and public life has seen a steady increase since the 1990s. Agbalajobi (2010) asserts that, participation can be measured by certain standards like the number of women who vote in elections; the number of public offices held by women and the number of women related policies implemented by government among others. However, based on the indicators cited by Agbalajobi, women are still underrepresented in decision making in political and public life. The Ghana Human Development Report (2007) indicates that, in the 1996 parliamentary elections, 19 women were selected out of the 59 who contested. Again, in 2000, the number of female candidates increased to 101, but those elected were just 18 representing (9%) of a 200-member parliament. In 2004, the number of women who contested increased to 104; including 14 sitting MPs, out of which 25 (10.9%) women were elected out of 230-member parliament.

In 2008, 103 women contested the elections out of a total of 959 parliamentary candidates. Of the 103 women candidates, only 19 (8%) were elected to a 230-member parliament. In 2012, out of a total of 1332 candidates made of 1199 males and 133 females, only 29 (10%) women were elected to a 275-member parliament (Tagoe & Abakah, 2015). Data also showed that out of the 16 vice chancellors in the universities across Ghana only 1 was a female (GES, 2005, as cited in Tagoe & Abakah, 2015). This notwithstanding, women made some achievements, to make their visibility seen in male dominated spaces, specifically the appointment of Mrs. Bamford Addo a retired Supreme Court judge as the Speaker of parliament (Iddrisu, 2010). In 2014 women occupied only 30 out of the 275 parliamentary seats. By 2016, there was a marginal increase in the number of female Parliamentarians from 10% (2012) to 13% (2016) (i.e. from 29 to 35), about 7% increase which is still below the 30% threshold set by the United Nations for effective representation in decision making.

3. Factors Affecting Women's Participation in Political and Public Decision making

Many factors have contributed to the exclusion of women from participating in decision making at both political and public levels in Ghana. Six of these are discussed below:

3.1 State and Family Patriarchy

Many systems and structures in Ghana are patriarchal in nature, and therefore act as barriers to the participation of women in decision making at all levels of their lives. Jongwiliwan and Thompson (2013) assert that, the socioeconomic, cultural, religious, and political systems at both public and private levels privilege men over

women. Patriarchy according to Chowdhury (2009) is a system in which decision making and economic control are vested in the hands of men. The Ghanaian society is characterised by patriarchal gender relations, which often place women in subordinate positions to men, with regards to decision making. A study by Hamah (2015) on women's participation in politics discovered that male in institutions as one contributing factor to women's [participation in politics. In another study, Tagoe and Abakah (2015) discovered that the norms and values that govern how men and women should behave discourage women from running for offices. Women who are bold enough to enter into male dominated spaces, such as politics are culturally regarded with disdain, thus undergo multitude traditional and cultural upheavals. The media has been found to be a tool used to attack women's personalities with the aim of scandalising their efforts. This further relegates women to the background (Hama, 2015). As Tamale (2000) puts it 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".

There is a general consensus among some women that politics is dirty which is why they tend to stay away. Decision making in the public and political sphere is seen as preserve for men, as such women who attempt to participate are seen as insolent. Tagoe and Abakah (2015) in their study on women's participation in decision making, found out that, women are not able to exercise their freedom of speech due to certain traditions that prohibit women from talking in certain places. Cultural norms defines what women can and cannot do in the social, political, religious and economic settings, hence become an obstacle to women's participation in decision making processes.

3.2 Women's Multiple Roles and Responsibilities

Several studies in Ghana (Bawa & Sanyare, 2013; Tagoe and Abakah, 2015) indicate that the roles multiple women play as wives, mothers and caretakers do not allow them to compete on level ground with men. The roles that women perform are many and as such they are left with little or no time for political activities. In a study by Bawa and Sanyare (2013) one of the participants cited how difficult it is for a woman to juggle her multiple roles, as indicated "*my husband called me in the middle of the meeting that he wanted to eat food cooked by me today. I had three children and a keeper in the house who could have prepared food for him, but he insisted that I move from the meeting to go and cook. I asked permission to leave and went to cook for him*". If Ghanaian women therefore are to have time to explore opportunities in politics and other public offices that are male dominated, they must be relieved of some of their roles in the home and community. Again, women who desire to pursue political and public offices should disregard the cultural normative expectations and obligations.

3.3 Lack of Resources

Culture and some social arrangements guarantee men more capital and property than women. Women's property rights and access to resources tend to be less secure due to inheritance rights. Inheritance rights, it is argued, place family property and resources in the hands of male adults. Customarily, access to productive resources such as land is largely dependent and regulated by men (Agbalajobi, 2010; Tagoe & Abakah, 2015). These issues contribute to the low socio-economic status of women because they prohibit women from accessing education and social status, which results in feminisation of poverty. In spite of this, some women through hard work have been able to acquire properties; however the majority still has to rely on family lands and properties to earn a living. Multiparty democracy practiced in Ghana makes it difficult and expensive thus women are unable to contend with their male counterparts since they do not have enough financial power. This therefore means that women's lack of economic power robs them of opportunities as they cannot compete with men for positions in politics and other relevant offices.

Studies in Ghana show that women are hesitant to run for political offices because of the financial investment required. For instance, campaigns for public or political office often require financial investment for poster printing, payment of staff and meeting the needs of supporters (Bawa & Sanyare, 2013; Hamah, 2015). Tagoe and Abakah (2015) found financial muscle to be a deterrent to women's participation at the local government political level. Women therefore, cannot contribute in cash toward political endeavors rather they usually participate in voluntary activities to support male politicians.

3.4 Lack of Affirmative Action Legislation

Affirmative action is a policy purposely designed to create equal opportunities to groups who have not only benefited from existing processes and structures, but are affected negatively because of the situation (Agbalajobi, 2010; Iddrisu, 2010). Ghana at the moment has no comprehensive legal framework to enforce Affirmative Action Policies. Iddrisu (2010) contends that, Affirmative Action policies can be used to address issues such as low participation of women in political and public life as well as low education levels of women and girls. The affirmative Action legislation by the Ghana government stipulated a quota system of 30 per cent representation of women in Parliament, District Assemblies, public and political offices in conformity with the provisions

provided at the Beijing Platform for Action stipulating a 30 per cent reservation of public seats and positions for women. Many countries in Africa, such as Rwanda, Uganda, South Africa, Namibia and others, used Affirmative Action policies effectively to increase the participation of women in public and political spheres (Iddrisu, 2010; Bawa & Sanyare, 2013). In Ghana, however, this is still far from reach for women because, even though the policy is there, it lacks effective enforcement for it to actually yield positive results.

3.5 Male Dominated Work Pattern in Politics and Public Agenda

Politics and public offices in Ghana and Africa at large are dominated by men. Many offices in politics and other public institutions are won through the use of intimidation of opponents. In Ghana this intimidation takes the form of the use of “macho men” and dirty tricks, which many women cannot do (Tagoe, 2006, as cited in Tagoe & Abakah, 2015). Many campaigns for office are characterised by the recruitment of foot soldiers and macho men, who terrorise opponents and their supporters. Political or public office, the aggressiveness of would-be office holders which includes violence, bribery and corruption, is in many cases too much for women to handle. Dube (2013) sums up by saying, “Politics is a dirty game”, implying that, it is as an expression that legitimises aggressive, masculine and anti-women strategies that often results in violent clashes between supporters of political parties.

Additionally, Bawa and Sanyare (2013) note that women continue to be marginalised from positions in public offices and politics because of the so-called foot soldiers, who agitate for appointments to reflect loyalty from party members. Women are not able to take active part in party politics, hence cannot be rewarded like their male counterparts. In instances where women are able to breakthrough in the male dominated spaces, such as public or political offices, they often face prejudices and are bullied and ridiculed by their male counterparts. Women in such positions most times, have to always try to prove to the men that they can perform as equally as them (men).

4 Way forward: Strategies and Recommendations

Some of the strategies and measures that can be used to address the exclusion of women from decision making include introduction of quotas, women empowerment and enforcement of affirmative action policies. On the recommendation of the UNDP through SDG 5, governments should adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls (UNDP, 2017). It has become imperative for the Ghana government to take steps towards ensuring women’s participation in political and public decision making.

4.1 Introduction of Quotas

Quotas compensate women for their exclusion from decision making at both public and political levels. Agbalajobi (2010) indicates that quotas are generally positive action of laws and their allocation assist in the promotion of gender balance in public life. Quotas if introduced and reinforced could accelerate women’s ascension to power. Based on this assertion, quotas should not be seen as discrimination towards men and cannot be acknowledged as unconstitutional as they are usually formulated under neutral basis (Agbalajobi, 2010; Iddrisu, 2010). As they are temporal, quotas are compensatory and fast-track measures to address historical injustices and practices that exclude women through discrimination from participation in decision making. For effective implementation, quotas should be established in a country’s constitution. Many countries in the world (Rwanda, Uganda, South Africa etc) have used quotas to significantly increase women’s participation and representation in the public and political spheres (Agbalajobi, 2010; Iddrisu, 2010). Therefore if Ghana is to achieve gender balance in decision making at the public and political levels, then quota systems must be introduced.

4.2 Women Empowerment Programmes

Women empowerment is a multidimensional process which involves the transformation of the economic, political, social, psychological and legal circumstances of the powerless with the aim of dismantling the cultural, traditional and social norms which disvalue, disempower and dispossess women. Its central objectives are tied to the needs of women, opportunities, facilities, skill acquisition and position of authority, especially within the political sphere (Brook & Halfari, n.d as cited in Agbalajobi, 2010). Tagoe and Abakah (2015) assert that empowerment should both be self and community if women are to unleash their potential and capabilities. Practical measures of women empowerment involve development NGOs and other organisations such as the Foundation for Rural Education Empowerment and Development (FREED), embarking on programmes such as workshops, seminars, conferences and symposiums where women can meet to discuss issues pertaining their involvement in decision making processes. Here, women are also given the opportunity to develop their individual talents, contribute meaningfully to societal development and most of all to challenge cultural and societal norms that disadvantage women. Access to micro finance is another crucial element of economic

empowerment for women because it reduces their poverty levels. If women are economically empowered they stand a good chance of competing with men for public and political positions.

4.3 Enforcement of Affirmative Action Policy

Even though currently Ghana has an Affirmative Action directive to ensure that 30 to 50 per cent of government appointees are women, the reality is far from being achieved because the policy is not constitutionalised. In addition the government ratified major international instruments that call for affirmative action policies, however these measures are not being enforced, thus do not reflect any change in the position of women in decision making (Bawa & Sanyare, 2013). If Ghana is to compete with other African countries that have effectively integrated women into decision making, then affirmative action policies must be enforced.

5 Conclusions

Even though the participation of women in decision making in Ghana is characterised by several barriers, women are making a mark in other areas especially academia and professions such as law and medicine. Women constitute 51 per cent of the total population therefore, their participation in decision making is crucial because their perspectives and voices are crucial if sustainable development is to be achieved. The social and economic development challenges being faced by the country currently can be solved if women are brought on board because again, women contribute both in the productive and reproductive spheres. Participation by women in decision making ensures that, their voices are heard and needs met, since most of them are vulnerable. The Ghana government should acknowledge the fact that, women are a driving force of development; therefore factors that limit their participation should be addressed as a matter of urgency. Gender parity in decision making is essential for development that is sustainable and in the long run would also reflect positively in other areas of inequality such as education, health, violence, poverty and career opportunities

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