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A Review of the Cultural Gender Norms Contributing to Gender Inequality in Ghana: An Ecological Systems Perspective

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Abstract

While significant progress has been made in improving the wellbeing of women and girls around the world, a gender gap still exists between men and women which is very evident in Ghana. Gender inequalities continue to persist in Ghana because of cultural gender norms that exalt and favor men and put women in subordinate and subservient roles. These cultural gender norms hinder women's development and widen gender inequality between men and women in different system levels of society. Therefore, there is a need to examine the influence of these cultural gender norms on women's lives using a systems framework to capture a full picture of women's experiences at these systemic levels of society. In this paper, we use Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems multilevel approach to examine the impact of these cultural gender norms on women's lives at the different system levels. We conducted a desk review of studies published in sub-Saharan Africa focused on cultural gender norms and gender inequality. The findings showed that the impact of cultural gender norms on gender inequality at the levels of the four social systems (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem) are interconnected, creating and widening the inequality gap between men and women. Cultural gender norms influence gender role socialization in the home, which then transmits to the school and religious institutions as the mesosystem. At the school level, cultural gender norms act as a mesosystem manifest through discriminatory classroom practices, gender role assignment of school responsibilities, and gender role representations in textbooks. In Christianity and Islam, cultural gender norms create doctrines that enforce men's domination over women, and, in the workplace, cultural gender norms have gendered labor by defining a man's occupation and limiting women to domestic and low-paying occupations. The mass media is the exosystem that displays images of women to fit cultural gender norms of what is defined as acceptable for women. Finally, the macrosystem is the overall sociocultural norms that have been accepted by society that perpetuate discriminatory practices against women.

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Introduction

Human development is the capability of all individuals, irrespective of gender, to have dignity, self-determination, freedom from discrimination, good health, and access to knowledge, human security, a decent standard of living, and human rights (UNDP, 2016). Women make up half of the world's population (UNDP, 2016), yet their treatment as second class is still persistent in many parts of the world (Surdaso et al., 2019). Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is one of the regions where significant gender inequalities continue to exist. For instance, women make up 50.2% of the 302.7 million people in the region living below a pay rate of $1.90 a day compared to 49.8% of men (Munoz et al., 2018). Women make up less than 20% of landholders globally and about 15% in SSA (UN Women, 2015). About 23% of parliamentary seats are held by women in SSA while men occupy the remaining 77% (UN Women, 2019). In addition, 12% of women aged 20-24 in SSA were married before age 15 (UN Women, 2019) compared to 4% of men married before age 18 (Gastón et al., 2019). Gender inequality continues to be a fundamental impediment to human progress. Gender equality and the achievement of human development goals, which include health, education, and the realization of social and economic rights, are inextricably linked. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), there is a relationship between gender inequality and human development outcomes, with low-Human Development Index (HDI) countries scoring significantly worse on gender inequality measures than high-HDI countries (UNDP, 2016). Gender inequality is a social phenomenon wherein men and women are not treated equally (Ferrant, 2015).

Ghana, an SSA country, also struggles with gender inequality. The population of women in Ghana stands at 15 million, approximately half of the country's total population (World Bank, 2020), yet it has a Gender Development Index of 0.912, meaning there is still a significant gender disparity between men and women (UNDP, 2019). For example, the UN Women report on the "Progress of the World's Women 2019–2020," indicates that 19.2% of women in Ghana aged 15-24 were sexually or physically abused by an intimate partner, and literacy rates in the country are 78.3% for men and 65.3% for women (UN Women, 2019). Approximately 11% of women (compared to 8.8% of men) are employed below the international poverty line. Women and girls aged 15 and above spend 15.5% of their time on unpaid care and domestic work as compared to 4.6% of men's time. Also, the representation of women in parliament is only 13.1% (World Bank, 2020). As such, programming focused on addressing these barriers is critical if we are to achieve the UN's fifth sustainable goal focused on achieving gender equality and empowering all girls and women by 2030.

A significant barrier to achieving gender equality is gendered cultural norms. Gendered cultural norms are valued attributes that define acceptable behaviors for men and women (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020). These norms are embedded in social institutions and determine who holds decision-making power and who exercises control (Heise et al., 2019). Gendered norms create a normalized culture of male dominance and female obedience, contributing to gender disparities across different aspects of society (Breger, 2014; Sikweyiya et al., 2020). For example, gender norms assign household leadership and decision-making power solely to men, while prescribing submission and obedience to women (Dako-Gyekye & Owusu, 2013). More often than men, women are left with no choice but to comply with cultural roles and expectations that society assigns to them (Adinkrah, 2004; Dako-Gyeke & Owusu**,** 2013). Compared to women, men are less likely to adopt more progressive gender norms (Akotia & Anum, 2015), because traditional

gender norms tend to favor them (Alhassan & Odame, 2015). For instance, when resources are scarce, boys are more likely to be sent to school than girls (Ombati & Ombati, 2012), resulting in lower educational enrollment, retention, and attainment for girls (Ahonsi et al., 2019; Alhassan & Odame, 2015). Cultural gender norms have been associated with negative outcomes for women, including violence against women, increased school dropout, lower female education, disproportionate health problems, discriminatory cultural practices, and lower political representation. Additionally, discrepancies such as women lacking access to lands, receiving less pay than their male counterparts for equal work, and forcibly migrating to engage in strenuous work to sustain their families, have all been associated with cultural gender norms (Adinkrah, 2004; Dako-Gyeke & Owusu, 2013; Forkuor et al., 2020; Ombati & Ombati, 2012).

Many studies (Ahonsi et al., 2019; Dako-Gyeke & Owusu, 2013) looked at the impact of gendered cultural norms on specific aspects of women's and girls' lives in isolation from each other and have missed the opportunity to portray a full picture of how these norms are interconnected and impact every aspect of girls' and women's lives. Hence, this paper uses Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST) as a multilevel approach to considering how various factors at multiple environmental system levels impact girls and women and further contribute to widened gender inequality.

Method

This article includes a desk review of peer-reviewed literature on cultural gender norms and gender inequality in Ghana obtained from social science and development journals. Legal documents and international reports from international organizations such as the UN Agencies and the World Bank were also reviewed to find credible data on the extent of gender inequality in Ghana.
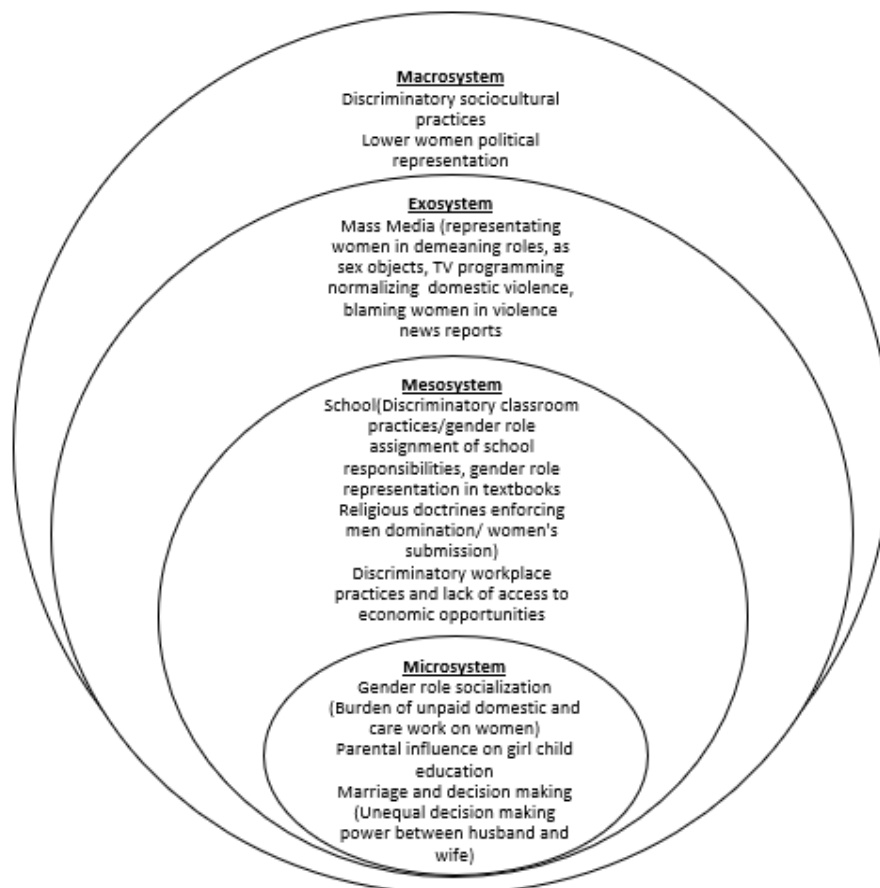
Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST)

This review is situated within the Ecological Systems Theory (EST) of human development in which the structures in the immediate settings of a developing person are seen as interrelated (Darling, 2007). Bronfenbrenner (1979) described the ecological environment as nested and interdependent environmental systems that influence human behavior throughout the lifespan. Thus, the ecological environment must be examined as an interdependent whole to fully understand the forces surrounding a developing individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Neal & Neal, 2013).

Specifically, EST identifies four system levels—the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem—that are nested around a focal individual like a set of concentric circles (Darling, 2007). The microsystem level, which is the first in the nested hierarchy, consists of settings/contexts where the individual plays a direct role and directly interacts with others. For example, the family is part of one's microsystem where the woman or girl plays the role of a mother, wife, daughter, or sibling, has first-hand experiences of assigned roles, and closely interacts with others in her assigned role (Brofenbrenner, 1979, p. 22; Darling, 2007). Mesosystems are the places where different microsystems connect and interact. Mesosystems include the workplace, school, community, and any religious group that the individual is part of. Exosystems are settings that the individual does not directly participate in, but they exert an indirect influence on the individual (Brofenbrenner, 1979, p. 25; Darling, 2007). A girl child does not play a direct role in the education policy-making community, but educational policies nonetheless influence her school experience. Finally, macrosystems, within which exosystems are nested,

include broad cultural influences or traditional ideologies that have long-ranging consequences for the girl or woman (Brofenbrenner, 1979, p. 26). See Figure 1 below for a summary of how cultural gender norms manifest at the multiple levels of the ecosystem which creates gender inequality between men and women in Ghana.

Figure 1: Cultural Gender Norms at Multi-levels of the Ecosystem Creating Gender Inequality in Ghana

Macrosystem
Discriminatory sociocultural practices
Lower women political representation

Exosystem
Mass Media (representating women in demeaning roles, as sex objects, TV programming normalizing domestic violence, blaming women in violence news reports

Mesosystem
School(Discriminatory classroom practices/gender role assignment of school responsibilities, gender role representation in textbooks Religious doctrines enforcing men domination/ women's submission) Discriminatory workplace practices and lack of access to economic opportunities

Microsystem
Gender role socialization (Burden of unpaid domestic and care work on women) Parental influence on girl child education Marriage and decision making (Unequal decision making power between husband and wife)

Source: Adapted from Neal and Neal (2013)

Microsystem Factors Contributing to Gender Inequality in Ghana

Gender Role Socialization in the Family

Parents are active agents in the socialization process of the child (McHale et al., 1999). Gender role discrimination in Ghana starts at birth (Worku, 2001). A mother who gives birth to a baby boy is welcomed by her husband and congratulated by society, but it is otherwise for one who gives birth to a baby girl (Worku, 2001). This is due to the belief that sons ensure the posterity of families (Okonkwo, 2013). Through gender role socialization, parents, directly and indirectly, influence children to fit into expected gender roles from birth (Okonkwo, 2013). This gender role socialization sustains differing expectations for boys and girls (Anyan & Hjemdal, 2018). Boys are socialized to take risks, resolve conflicts with aggression, and not express emotions (Momoh

et al., 2007). Girls are socialized to be quiet, shy, play less vigorous games, and always stay neat (Worku, 2001). These affirm the gender stereotypes of courage, boldness, and authority assigned to men, and vulnerability and dependence assigned to women (Gemignani, 2017). In addition, adolescent boys are socialized to believe that men have more authority and power than women, expressed in the idea of a man's world, where men's domination and women's subordination start (Anyan & Hjemdal, 2018; Okonkwo, 2013). As a result, boys enjoy some liberty, while the girls are restricted and raised as dependent persons to be given into marriage (Abuya et al., 2014; Okonkwo, 2013; Worku, 2001).

Women are considered caretakers of the home with the responsibilities of cooking, cleaning, fetching water, collecting firewood, hut-making, and taking care of animals, children, the sick, and the elderly (Anbacha & Kjosavik, 2019; Gemignani, 2017). These gender roles assigned to women are too numerous and routinized, demanding daily labor and time (Anbacha & Kjosavik, 2019). Therefore, girls are confronted with the burden of managing the home. For example, in the northern region of Ghana, girls as young as 12 years old are made to work as head porters or house helps to earn income to support their family and brothers' education (Iddrisu, 2020). Additionally, due to the reverence associated with marriage in Ghanaian society, mothers socialize their girl children with the idea of preparing them to become good wives and mothers in the future (Ahonsi et al., 2019). Boys are allowed to go outside and participate in outdoor games, while girls are confined to the home, engaged in household chores, and are allowed to play few indoor games (Okonkwo, 2013). Adolescents have a fully developed understanding of gender expectations concerning domestic chores through observation, pretend-play, language, and myths. For instance, a Ghanaian myth states that when a man is whipped with a broom, he becomes impotent, and this justifies why men would leave sweeping for women. Being socialized into this cultural system through the telling and retelling of these Ghanaian myths and stories, both boys and girls internalize and normalize these expectations (Iddrisu, 2020).

Gender Norms and Parental Influence on Educational Enrollment

Traditional gender roles that view women only as mothers and wives restrict girls' access to formal education (Gemignani, 2017). Despite the country's Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education policy, which allows every school-aged child to enroll in school, education for boys is supported much more so than for girls (Ahiakpor et al., 2014). In cases where a family has inadequate resources, girls are made to sacrifice their schooling for their male siblings (Ombati & Ombati, 2012). Parents often promise to enroll girls once their brothers have completed their education (Abuya et al., 2014). Sadly, this promise never gets fulfilled because parents become reluctant to enroll their girls, or it becomes too late, as girls might have been married off or have become pregnant. Thus, the number of enrolled girls decreases as they move higher through the educational system. Analyzing the 2010 PHC Report, Osei-Assibey (2014) asserts that there are 95 girls for every 100 boys at the primary school level. However, there are 88 girls for every 100 boys in secondary school and 71 girls for every 100 boys at the university level.

Many children in rural areas s in Ghana must cover long dangerous distances to schools in nearby communities (Ombati & Ombati, 2012; Senadza, 2012), and these pose security and safety risks to children, especially girls who may be additionally vulnerable to kidnapping or rape. Further, in sending girls to school, rural families potentially expose their daughters to sexual relationships with male teachers and male peers that may result in pregnancy before maturity (Abuya et al. 2014; Ombati & Ombati, 2012; Gemignani, 2017). Thus, some parents become

unwilling to enroll their girls in school due to these insecurities (Ahonsi et al., 2019; Ombati & Ombati, 2012).

Marriage and Decision-making

As already stated, cultural gender norms regard men as the principal providers for the household. A woman is only expected to manage the household and support her husband (Lambrecht et al., 2018; Lodin et al., 2019). This gender role of the principal provider determines who has access to productive resources. Thus, men have unrestricted access to economic resources including agricultural goods and land (Lambrecht et al., 2018). Married women's productive activities are deemed supportive of their husband, the perceived main provider (Lodin et al., 2019). In many rural communities, women are not expected to earn more than their husbands as this undermines the husband''s position and authority as the head of the household head (Lodin et al., 2019). Major decision-making then becomes the sole responsibility of the man since he controls household assets and productive resources (Withers et al., 2015). Therefore, women only make minor decisions such as cooking, while men make major decisions about economic production and childbearing. In a study about men's perception of their role in family planning, participants reported doubt about their wives' capacity to choose the best contraceptive method and hence requested to be involved in the decision-making process (Withers et al., 2015).

Meso-level Factors Contributing to Gender Inequality in Ghana

School Curriculum, School Policies, and Classroom Practices

Curricula used in schools are extensions of cultural gender norms. Recommended school textbooks portray men and women in traditional gender stereotypes underpinned by sociocultural norms. Primary and secondary school textbooks portray women and girls in domestic roles and men and boys in more satisfying, external salaried occupations (Mburu & Nyagah, 2012; Worku, 2001). In textbooks, political offices, leadership, and decision-making roles are all represented as men's work (Mburu & Nyagah, 2012) while helping occupations such as teaching and nursing are usually associated with women (Mburu & Nyagah, 2012). Undoubtedly, children are inspired to mirror what they see and read from learning materials, where women are described in domestic and low-paying occupations while men engage in technology, engineering, and other highly paid occupations (Ombati & Ombati, 2012). Moreover, in the process of teaching and learning, schoolteachers regularly assigned leadership roles to boys and classroom chores like sweeping and cleaning to girls (Kendall, 2008). These school materials and practices enforce cultural gender roles initiated in the home.

Workplace and Economic Opportunities

Gender inequality in education has produced more women with less education; thus, many women are unable to secure employment with good income (Dako-Gyeke & Owusu, 2013). The labor force in Ghana, though not explicitly stated, is gendered. For example, women form about 75% of the healthcare workforce in Ghana, yet leadership in healthcare organizations is significantly male dominated (Ghana Statistical Service, 2019). Women are often found in domestic and low-paying occupations, while men are given privileged access to positions of power, where they are given status, freedom, growth, and self-worth (Awumbila, 2006). In addition, women in formal occupational settings are often paid less for the same job compared to their male counterparts (Forkuor et al., 2020), with a wage gap average of 7%-12% (Khalid, 2017). Another example of unequal economic access is unequal property rights, which is a major factor

responsible for plunging most women and women-headed households into generational poverty (McFerson, 2010). Patriarchal institutions such as chieftaincy, kinship, and lineage are responsible for the control and distribution of resources including lands. Cultural gender norms favor male inheritance and are less supportive of female inheritance (Akotia & Anum, 2015; McFerson, 2010). Particularly, women usually acquire lands through marriage and lose them when the marriage ends. Women are mostly denied access to their husband's land in the event of a divorce or death. Children from these households are thereby forced to drop out of school, intensifying the cycle of poverty (Awumbila, 2006; McFerson, 2010). For women to continue to have access to economic resources including land, they are often forced to remain married and endure challenging relationships.

Religious Institutions

The two main religions practiced in Ghana are Christianity and Islam. Data from Ghana's 2010 Population and Housing Census (PHC) report 71% of Ghanaians self-identify as Christians, 17% as Muslims, and the rest belong to traditional religions (Takyi & Lamptey, 2020). Both the Bible and the Qur'an have codes meant to guide gender relations, such as Ephesians 5:22 in the Christian Bible and Sura 4:34 in the Quran. Ephesians chapter 5 verse 22 in the Bible admonishes wives to "submit to their own husbands" because their husbands are their heads (*Holy Bible: New International Version*, 2011, Eph. 5:22). This scripture is sometimes misinterpreted to cause women to submit to men who are not their husbands. In the Qur'an, Sura chapter 4 verse 34 describes righteous women as obedient and encourages men to discipline disobedient women (Saheeh International, 2004, Sura 4:34). These religious ideas have sometimes been used to widen gender inequality between men and women (Fuseini & Kalule-Sabiti, 2015). The level of inequality that exists between men and women within Ghanaian society is not exempt from Islam and Christianity. Certain scriptures from the Bible are quoted frequently in church and within a household in order to establish and justify the suppression of women by men (Tanye, 2008). For example, first Corinthians 14:34 reads, "let your women keep silent in church, for it is not permitted unto them to speak: but they are commanded to be under the obedience of men, said the Lord" (*Holy Bible New International Version*, 2011, 1 Cor. 14:34). Another example is first Timothy 2:12 which also states, "I do not allow them to teach or have authority over men, they must be quiet" (Tanye, 2008; *Holy Bible New International Version*, 2011, 1 Tim. 2:12). These religious codes have determined women's traditional gender roles within the church that include the provision of unpaid domestic and care work for church communities as part of their assumed socio-religious responsibilities (Bawa, 2017).

In many Christian churches across the country, women outnumber men in congregations, but leadership is mainly a man's role in both charismatic and orthodox churches (Adasi, 2013; Bawa, 2017). Women are mostly leaders of predominantly women-attended organizations and groups in the church (Bawa, 2017). Though there are a few women in prominent church leadership positions, Soothill (2007) argued that this does not imply emancipation for all women because this is not representative of all women's experiences in church. Moreover, the church states that the status of wife is the highest status a woman can attain in life (Adasi, 2013; Gbagbo et al., 2015). Thus, unmarried women are advised by male pastors to be submissive in order to be marriageable. Also, pregnancy out of wedlock is unacceptable in many of these churches (Gbagbo et al., 2015). For example, an unmarried pregnant woman or teenage girl is publicly penalized in the church to serve as a warning to others. These women are made to sit at the back of the pews, while the men responsible for the pregnancies walk about freely (Amenga-Etego, 2006). These acts of emotional

abuse negatively affect the mental health and self-confidence of affected women (Amenga-Etego, 2006; Gbagbo et al., 2015). In cases of domestic violence, churches use Biblical scriptures to advise women to be patient, humble, and to pray for their abusive men to change, while they continue to endure the abuse (Amenga-Etego, 2006).

In some Islamic communities, women are often not allowed to be part of Islamic leadership, and their activities are mostly regarded as complementary rather than essential (Creevey, 1996). Islamic theology believes that women can only lead groups of other women (Badru & Sackey, 2013). In many mosques in Ghana, as commonly practiced elsewhere, women pray behind men, usually separated by a wall. The reason as presented by Badru and Sackey (2013) is to prevent male-female sexual attraction when men and women stand side-by-side to worship (Badru & Sackey, 2013).

Exo-level Factors Contributing to Gender Inequality in Ghana

Mass Media

Like school curricula, television programs feature men in dominant and leadership roles, while showing women in subservient and domestic roles (Witt, 2000). In a study of television advertisements, men were more likely than women to be portrayed in professional work settings—17.7% for men and 3.3% for women. These advertisements become a conduit for enforcing cultural gender norms of women as caretakers and men as breadwinners (Furnham & Paltzer, 2010). In addition, women are mostly portrayed as sex objects and sometimes abused by men in movies (Sherman & Dominick, 1986). These movies tend to normalize violence against women and teach children, especially boys, that it is acceptable to "discipline" a woman into submission (Sikweyiya et al., 2020). It is worth noting that journalists report violence against women by mostly placing the blame on women and girls while exonerating the male perpetrators. In a news article published online, the journalist reported that 183 women were sexually abused by one perpetrator within a year because of the women's desire for money which caused them to devalue themselves to be abused (Owusu-Addo et al., 2018).

Macro-level Factors Contributing to Gender Inequality in Ghana

Sociocultural Norms

Wife inheritance and dowry payments, forced marriages, widowhood rites, female genital mutilation, and *trokosi* (a Ghanaian word meaning "slaves for the gods") are effects of gendered cultural norms that have been associated with violence against women (Tenkorang et al., 2013). Female genital mutilation, child marriage, and puberty rites portray adolescent girls as mature and ready for sexual relations and marriage (Ombati & Ombati, 2012). These cultural gender norms have contributed to teenage pregnancies and increased school dropout rates for girls (Haberland et al., 2018; Senadza, 2012). *Trokosi* is a cultural practice in Ghana that enslaves young virgin girls to work in shrines as atonement for the sins of their relatives. *Trokosi* is practiced among some societies in the Volta region of Ghana, Benin, and Togo (Bawa, 2017). These girls perform domestic and sexual roles for the male fetish priests (who serve as mediators between spirits and the living). The girls spend their lifetimes in the shrines, lose their rights and access to education and social life, and are physically, sexually, and emotionally abused by the fetish priest (Bawa, 2017; Ombati & Ombati, 2012). Another inhumane cultural practice is widowhood rites, where a widow is compelled to undergo certain demeaning rituals upon the death of her husband as part of

the funeral rites for the departed or to prove their innocence in their husband's death. Men and boys do not experience any of these discriminatory cultural practices (Bawa, 2017).

Political Representation and Leadership

Gender roles that portray men as leaders, and women as subordinates (Tenkorang et al., 2013) discourage women from participating in politics. In the workplace, women are expected to be in subordinate roles to follow rules made by men (Dako-Gyeke & Owusu, 2013). As a result, women have experienced glass ceilings in rising to managerial positions in public and political offices in the country (Ohemeng & Adusah-Karikari, 2015). Managerial positions in public organizations are male-dominated, influencing workplace policies to be biased in favor of men (Ohemeng & Adusah-Karikari, 2015). According to the Ghana Statistical Service (2019), 51.4% of employable women and 48.6% of employable men with an average of basic education joined the labor market between 2016 and 2017. Nevertheless, despite equal education, only 7% of employable women compared to 93% of employable men were selected for high leadership positions. These statistics underlie the need for intervention for women to be able to progress to higher positions.

In politics, the low representation of women points to the fact that women's voices are missing in policy formulation and strategic planning. From its inception in 1992, the parliament of Ghana has had a rate of women's representation in politics of around 10% (Ofei-Aboagye, 2004), despite the country's Affirmative Action policy that reserves a 40% quota for women's representation in all government and public offices (Government of Ghana, 2013). Political parties over the years have engaged in what Forkuor and associates (2020) termed "tokenism," the practice of appointing a few women into political offices to prove an anti-discriminatory stance.

Discussion

In this review, we sought to explore women's experiences of gender inequality influenced by cultural gender norms. Guided by the Ecological Systems Theory of human development, we find that the contributory factors of cultural gender norms to gender inequality are multiple and interconnected. Cultural gender norms influence gender role discrimination from birth through gender role socialization, enrollment in formal education, marriage, and decision-making in the home as a microsystem (Okonkwo, 2013; Worku, 2001). Traditional gender roles extend into the mesosystems which are the school, workplace, and religious institutions. School policies, curricula, recommended textbooks, and classroom practices put men and women in roles that enforce dominant roles for men and demeaning positions for women (Mburu & Nyagah, 2012; Ombati & Ombati, 2012). These lower-status roles for women also translate into Christian and Islamic institutions, as the two main religions widely practiced in Ghana (Fuseini & Kalule-Sabiti, 2015). At the exo-level system, the mass media serves as a medium to communicate and enforce these traditional gender norms through television programs that feature men in dominant leadership roles while showing women in subservient and domestic roles (Furnham & Paltzer, 2010). Lastly, at the macro-level system, sociocultural norms have created socio-cultural practices that perpetuate violence against women, which inhibits their progress and development (Tenkorang et al., 2013). Wife inheritance and dowry payments, forced marriages, widowhood rites, female genital mutilation, and *trokosi* are cultural factors that have subjected women to discriminatory practices, oppression, and violence (Bawa, 2017). Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory has shown that cultural gender norms which manifest at the different system levels of society are multifaceted, interrelated, and collectively create gender inequality between men and

women. Thus, programs aimed at empowering women and girls must be tailored to suit specific populations in target communities as women are not a homogenous group. Though the above experiences affect all women, instances of gender inequality impact women differently based on their geographic location, age, level of education, religion, employment status, and disability. Hence, interventions addressing gender inequality should target multiple levels of society and must include men to effectively address gender inequality.

We recommend the engagement of boys and men in gender-transformative programming designed to combat gender inequality to address barriers to gender equality. Engaging men and boys alongside girls in gender-transformative programming has been acknowledged as an essential part of the global strategy to achieve gender equality (UN Women, 2014). A gender-transformative approach is a strategy that aims to fight gender inequality by modifying detrimental gender norms, roles, and relations through programmatic inclusion of strategies to facilitate significant reforms in power relationships between women and men. This recommendation is based on a systematic review conducted by Jewkes and colleagues (2015) on interventions that engaged men and boys to change social norms and reduce inequities in gender relations that promoted violence against women and girls in South Africa. Their findings reported significant effects of the intervention in reducing violence against women by specifically addressing the norms, behaviors, and relationships associated with ideals of manhood. Ruane-McAteer and associates (2020) also conducted a systematic review on gender-transformative interventions with men and boys to improve sexual and reproductive health and rights for women. Ruane-McAteer and colleagues found that engaging men and boys improved sexual and reproductive health (SRHR) and access to SRHR services for women (Ruane-McAteer et al., 2020). When men and boys are engaged in gender-transformative programming, they may begin to regard women as partners in national development who must be supported and not viewed as a threat to their authority (Ohemeng & Adusah-Karikari, 2015).

Another significant group that must be involved in gender-transformative programming is traditional/community leaders. Traditional leaders are major stakeholders in gender equality because they are usually the custodians of sociocultural practices in many communities across the country. These leaders must be sensitized and actively involved in the dismantling of cultural norms that are discriminatory against women (Treves-Kagan et al., 2020; Van de Berg et al., 2013). An evaluation study of a gender-transformative intervention to shift gendered decision-making roles in Rwanda reported the positive impact of local leaders in promoting progressive gender norms after they participated in the gender-transformative intervention (Stern et al., 2018). Specifically, the study found that local leaders held couples accountable for making joint decisions about property, as required by reforms in the Rwandan property law. Rwandan community leaders made and enforced rules that barred land buyers from using lands with documents that did not include the signature of the seller's wife (Stern et al., 2018). This study provides evidence of the significant influence of traditional/community leaders on shifting social expectations around cultural gendered norms.

In Ghanaian society, traditional female leaders, known as "queen mothers" are involved in the administrative, legislative, and judicial authority of the community (Odame, 2014). Queen mothers function alongside male chiefs (traditional political head) and are highly recognized and responsible for women's and children's issues (Drah, 2014; Odame, 2014; Ubink, 2018). Considering their critical position in society and in ensuring the wellbeing of women, they are an influential force in the elimination of discriminatory gendered cultural norms and practices in Ghana (Ubink, 2018). They have been found significantly effective in addressing major issues

including the fight against HIV (USAID, 2002) and providing care for orphaned children (Drah, 2014). Faith-based organizations must also be included in this sensitization and stakeholders' engagement process, and they must be encouraged to provide progressive gender-equal interpretations of faith teachings (Winterford et al., 2020).

To dismantle cultural stereotypes and achieve gender equality, women's representation in decision-making is critical. Women leaders best represent the needs of women (Vongalis-Macrow, 2016), particularly women with low literacy.

Duflo (2012) stated that to increase women's political power is to directly affect their representation through quotas or reservation policies. Another developing country, India, has seen some success through their reservation policy, which specifies that, at each election, one-third of randomly selected villages must elect a woman as the head of the local council (Duflo, 2012). These women-led villages have implemented infrastructure responding to the needs of women such as providing good drinking water. In a similar vein, the Government of Ghana can enforce its Affirmative Action policy of 40% representation of women in Parliament. The Government of Ghana must apply sanctions to political parties that do not present at least 40% women candidates for parliamentary elections. Furthermore, there must be public education on the importance of women's political participation to increase electoral support for women in politics. Additionally, enforcement of Affirmative Action policies on education must go hand in hand with financial support for women, as a lack of financial resources has been reported as a major barrier to girls' education (Sensoy Bahar et al., 2020). In the workplace, women in managerial positions need to assist women in lower ranks to break glass ceilings using their own experience as a model for others (Ohemeng & Adusah-Karikari, 2015). Another means to increase women's decision-making power and protect them from domestic violence is legal support. If women are left with no other options besides marriage, then they cannot divorce and are influenced or forced to stay in abusive marriages. Hence, policies that secure women's welfare and protect children born outside of marriage must be implemented and enforced. This would empower women to not condone or withstand gender-based violence in or outside of marriage.

Lastly, the increase of women role models in schools, especially in rural areas, is significant in promoting gender equality in education, as girls would be motivated to remain in school and pursue higher education (Akotia & Anum, 2015). Gendered stereotypical content in curriculum and required reading texts must be revised to reflect gender equality and elevate women's status above domestic roles (Winterford et al., 2020). Importantly, women empowerment programs must be multilevel programs to reach not just the girls or women but also empower their significant others, such as caregivers and husbands, to support women's development (Haberland et. al., 2018). Women's empowerment programs must be designed to suit specific demographic needs because women are not a homogenous group (Follingstad & Rogers, 2012).

Limitations

Given our focus on existing data, we were limited to very few studies on the impact of mass media and gendered cultural norms on women, so we could not comprehensively explore that subject. Further study of this topic would provide appropriate interventions for women in Ghana regarding mass media.

Funding

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