



GHANA: BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN PARTY POLITICS

In February and March 2018, IRI conducted a qualitative research study in Ghana to gain greater understanding of the barriers preventing the full participation of women in the country's political parties. The study also explored factors and initiatives that may support women's full participation in political parties and the alternative paths available to women seeking to become politically engaged.

IRI partnered with the research firm Pan African Field Services to host seven focus group discussions (FGDs), six of which were conducted with Ghanaian women political party members from the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the National Democratic Congress (NDC). IRI also held an additional FGD with female civil society actors and five in-depth key informant interviews with female political office holders. To ensure diverse geographic coverage, IRI conducted the FGDs in Accra, Tamale, and Kumasi – regions that comprise the largest population concentrations in Ghana and represent the southern coastal belt, as well as the central and northern provinces.

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KEY FINDINGS

Finding #1: Although progress has been made in women's political participation in Ghana, social factors like family support, marriage, and community respect play a significant role in determining the level of women's political engagement.

According to a majority of participants in IRI's study, there has been progress in women's political participation in Ghana in recent years. Most feel that the country has moved on from an era when women were not allowed to engage in politics to the present day when women can decide to join politics. A NDC participant from Accra observed, "In past years... women have been frowned upon for wanting power... in most people's opinions, your position as a woman is as a caregiver... [but] in recent years we are seeing women making progress."¹

Family support, especially from husbands and parents, is essential for women seeking a role in party politics.

FGD participants pointed out that support from husbands is particularly crucial in creating the space for women to become involved in politics. "A lot of women in Ghana would have loved to be in leadership positions, but are being restricted by their husbands, cultural backgrounds, and religious backgrounds," said a NDC participant from Accra. Another participant observed that broader social pressures may inhibit women's political activity. She said that her husband is supportive of her political endeavors, but other members of the community have questioned his support. She commented that "...Someone told my

¹ Quotes cited in this report were minimally treated for quality. The speaker's original voice was preserved as much as possible, including syntax/grammar/word choice errors.

husband ‘Why do you allow your wife to be doing this kind of politics, come home late and that kind of thing...?’ My husband told that person ‘That is what my wife loves doing, and I will allow her to do it.’” Parents also play an important role in supporting daughters who want to participate in political parties. One participant’s mother was an assembly member who inspired her daughter to pursue the same path. That same participant has encouraged three other women in her community to play a more active role in politics.

Finding #2: The hostile political environment, socioeconomic barriers, some religious traditions and tribalism negatively affect women’s participation in political parties in Ghana.

Negative societal perceptions of female politicians often discourage women from actively engaging in political party activities.

Across party lines, participants agreed that name-calling is often a deterrent to engaging in politics. A participant from Accra said, “There are lots of intimidation and insults... One of the reasons why women are not moving ahead is to avoid being insulted, [for example] to be called a prostitute and all sorts of nonsense.” The participants also said that such intimidation not only stems from the broader society but from within the political parties, and in most cases the instigators are men. One participant shared her experience as the deputy coordinator of her political party. She often experienced discouragement from her male boss who constantly questioned her ideas, positions, and statements. When she confronted him about this, the boss unashamedly attributed his suspicion of her to the fact that she was female.

Women face higher ethical and moral standards than men in society and must earn respect to qualify for political party leadership.

According to participants, women are expected to offer support to society and “conduct themselves well” before they can participate in party politics. Many frown upon women going into party politics, and these women must often work twice as hard to overcome stereotypes.

Women in political parties are conscious of the security risks posed by active participation in party politics and take potential threats and intimidation very seriously.

Participants observed that threats to personal security increase when women become more involved in

politics. These security risks were reportedly highest among opponents or rivals within the same political party. Participants noted that women who do engage in politics often take precautions such as not driving at night, changing their daily routines, not eating out, or even owning a firearm for self-defense. Some female politicians have devised ways of dealing with the risks, but these threats have prevented other women from joining politics altogether. There was a shared feeling among female civil society activists that participating in civic activism in Ghana is much safer than being in politics.

Financial constraints are a common barrier to entry for Ghanaian women in party politics.

A majority of the participants observed that most women lack the financial means to enter and fully participate in politics. Ghanaian women often do not have the resources or financial independence to compete against men when running for office as men are commonly the breadwinners. Participants noted that women who are perceived to be financially stable are more respectable in Ghanaian society and are therefore more likely to attract support when venturing into politics. A participant from Tamale also observed that there is an expectation for politicians to provide financial support to constituents facing hardships—a practice which discourages Ghanaians with limited financial means from venturing into politics.

Traditional interpretations of religious teachings in certain regions of Ghana act as an additional barrier to women’s political engagement.

Religion influences many aspects of life in Ghana and plays a critical role in women’s involvement in politics. Some participants, especially from the Muslim-majority Northern Region, feel that religion has hindered their full participation in politics. Some participants believe that their religious teachings imply that women should not lead. A woman from Accra stated, “I think as [a] Muslim woman, let me use myself as an example, we have not been encouraged to be with a party leadership because in our religion a woman doesn’t...lead men.” A participant from Tamale echoed these sentiments, observing that, “Women... are to be submissive to whoever they are under, especially if it is a man... As a Muslim, they expect you to respect... your husband.”

“I think as [a] Muslim woman... **we have not been encouraged** to be with a party leadership”

Finding #3: Designated positions for women in political parties provide opportunities to women, but often make it difficult for them to rise to leadership positions.

Ghanaian women feel that they need to begin their political careers in local politics before ascending into national politics.

Participants noted that women in particular must rise to leadership positions from within party systems. As a NDC participant from Accra observed, “You start from the local, then you move to constituency, then you move to region, then you move to national...” The participant also added that for a woman to move from the local to constituency level as a women’s organizer, she must have served within the party for at least two years to enable her to understand her constituency. Some participants noted that there were instances where individual women, either through party connections, luck, or financial resources had risen to national party leadership positions without going through party structures.

While women should be able to occupy any party position, many still believe that deficient education holds them back from contesting higher offices. Additionally, Ghanaian women believe designating certain positions for women is limiting their participation in other positions of leadership and reducing them to menial roles.

Participants noted that there is now greater knowledge and awareness of the fact that women can run for any position within political parties. This is largely attributed to better education and women being more engaged with politics.

Although the creation of female-specific party positions does not prevent women from running for other offices, women feel that they are being indirectly told to concentrate on “women-reserved” positions, and therefore feel discouraged from vying for higher offices. Many participants agreed that few women are elected to party executive positions due to perceived restrictions to designated offices set aside for women.

A lack of education was also cited by some participants— especially in NPP— as limiting the prospects for women to rise to leadership positions within parties. For instance, when asked whether all positions are open for anyone to contest within her political party, a NPP participant from Kumasi responded, “No... If you are not educated... you cannot

take any position in the party.” However, some participants also observed that even when a woman has attained the same level of education as a male counterpart, the man will likely be the frontrunner simply because he is a man.

Many positions that are reserved exclusively for women pertain to women’s affairs, narrowing their opportunities. According to participants, when political parties invite female organizers to events, their primary responsibilities are often reduced to stereotypical tasks like cooking and serving the male politicians. Another participant explained that the lack of financing and recognition for her office makes it difficult for her to achieve impact.

Nepotism and internal political party factions play a critical role in promoting women in political parties.

Participants in the FGDs noted that it is much more difficult for men and women to rise within political party ranks without connections to well-known mentors within parties. One female politician observed that women need to learn how to “correctly align” themselves within their political parties. She said that there are “camps” within her political party, which determine how successful any man or woman will be within the party.

“Even within the party itself, you have X’s camp [name withheld], Y’s camp [name withheld]... Actually, I was toeing that line, but it wasn’t too powerful... If your camp becomes more prominent then you are **lucky**.”

A female member of parliament (MP) reported that she has managed to succeed in Ghana’s political scene because she was born into a political family, and that even though her father died when she was young, she was able to leverage his name to campaign for a seat in parliament. Politically-connected Ghanaian women are at an advantage over many of their female peers who lack a strong social network and must often rely upon grassroots work in order to achieve success and status in the nation’s political structure.

Finding #4: Ghanaian women leaders believe that they should fight for the rights of other women and work with women across party lines.

Our FGDs reflected the view that women would have a better chance of assuming leadership positions by working across party lines to assert their equal rights. A participant from Accra said, “It will have a very good impact in the political institutions because women find themselves as leaders and also find themselves as sisters. So, they will start fighting for each other, and that will reduce the amount of insults that men rain on women.”

Participants noted the substantial role that women played in Ghana’s struggle for independence and how a similar revolution is needed to reform Ghana’s political scene for greater female inclusion.

Participants mentioned other beneficial strategies that may help women establish authority in party politics, such as exposing themselves to development work, connecting with people in communities, and being responsive to constituents. One participant described her strategy of working with schools within her community and asking them to donate amenities like computers. Her approach ensured that she remained visible to her community.



Female political party members at the multi-party conference in Accra in August 2018

Recommendations:

- It is vital for Ghanaian women to better understand their roles and responsibilities if they are to enhance their participation in party politics beyond designated women’s organizer positions. Political parties should develop specialized capacity building programs for women and invite regional and international experts to develop training programs that support women in their parties.
- Political parties should create an enabling environment that not only respects but encourages the role of women in political parties. Public recognition of female leaders and party messages that promote the respect of women in politics would go a long way toward achieving greater inclusion.
- Female leaders should build stronger inter-party coalitions to devise strategies and positions that amplify their voices within the party.
- Female political leaders should create peer-to-peer platforms to share the experiences and approaches that helped them overcome challenges and rise to leadership positions. These forums would provide a space for multi-generational women to share ideas on how to be more proactive in party politics.
- Political parties must fully implement policies to provide equal opportunities for both men and women to compete for leadership positions. The parties should develop additional policies on campaign financing and support structures, such as offices of ombudsmen, to ensure women’s complaints are heard, and to help minimize the intimidation and harassment targeted at female party members.
- Parties can minimize the influence of nepotism by creating well-resourced offices that specifically handle women’s issues and promote female participation in party politics. These offices would lead internal and external advocacy, seek technical and financial support, and implement projects that support women within the parties.
- Male and female Ghanaian leaders within political parties can defray the financial burdens imposed on them by their electorate by initiating community economic empowerment programs. Leaders can use their public office to channel community needs and lobby party leadership to use formal government institutions to advocate for financial resources to support these community projects.