EXPERIENCES OF FEMALE ACADEMICS IN GHANA: NEGOTIATION AND STRENGTHS AS STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESSFUL CAREERS

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ABSTRACT

Throughout history, women have been tasked with caring for children and keeping homes; being good wives to their husbands and mothers to their children. Women who pursue professional careers, therefore, are met with hostility, ridicule and other forms of social sanctions, especially if the field is considered to be the preserve of men. A few decades ago, the field of academia was considered an exclusive domain for men. While women have broken into and are doing well in academe, they face several challenges, many of which are rooted in patriarchy. This notwithstanding, these women have navigated this terrain and made it to the top. Using the strengths-based approach, this paper discusses the various strategies employed by some female academic staff from three public universities in Ghana to overcome the challenges that often serve as a hindrance to women's career advancement in patriarchal societies. The implications of the research for social work practice are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

In many instances, men and women in academia face great challenges with combining their domestic and professional responsibilities (O'Laughlin and Bischoff, 2005). However, the challenges are compounded for women due to their roles as carers for children and keepers of homes. This has often prevented many women from actively pursuing careers that compete with their domestic responsibilities. As a result, when women venture out of the house to pursue professional careers, they are often met with social sanctions that range from hostility to outright rejection (Domenico and Jones, 2006; Parks-Stamm et al., 2008; Prentice and Carranza, 2012). Indeed, studies indicate that women who venture into male dominated fields and excel are often "sanctioned and disliked" (Parks-Stamm et al., 2008) by their fellow women as well as men. The punishments often take the form of name calling, low evaluation at work, and outright rejection as being 'un-feminine'.

These kinds of negative experiences women have in male-dominated organizations are no different from that of academia. The very institution of academia was once considered a terrain solely reserved for men (Romito and Volpato, 2005), and when women were eventually given access, it was to train them to become better wives who would help their husbands to live the 'colonial dream' (Tamale and Oloka-Onyango, 1997; Mama, 2003). In recent times, however, women's efforts in academia are increasingly being recognized by governments, university councils and society at large. The 24 February 2014 edition of *The Guardian* reported that despite accounting for 45% of the academic workforce, women hold only 20% of professorships in UK universities, and just 15.3% of such posts in Cambridge (The Guardian, 2014). Similar statistics are recorded in many universities across Africa as women continue to face many hardships, gender stereotypes and general discrimination in their day to day activities on campuses (Adusah-Karikari, 2008; Mama, 2003; Prah, 2013).

The ascription of the primary responsibilities of childcare and keeping the home to women continue to hinder many Ghanaian women from pursuing a career or progressing in their careers. As Kuenyehia (1995) notes, life in Ghanaian society is organized around an unwritten social contract – the gender contract – within which women assume the building of family care and domestic functions (cited in Adusah-Karikari 2008, 17). The many things women in academia have to do on a daily basis to achieve a work-life balance and attain success in their careers are often outside the purview of the many girls who take these women as role models. While many scholars in Africa (Adusah-Karikari 2008; Britwum, Oduro and Prah 2013; Mama 2003; Prah 2004) have shed light on the struggles and challenges of women in academia, not much attention has been devoted to the strategies they employ to overcome such challenges and succeed in their careers. It is therefore important to discuss the experiences of some women in academia, and to highlight the different ways through which they built resilience and self-efficacy to attain the successes they are enjoying in their careers and homes.

Against this backdrop, this paper contributes to the body of scholarship by examining the strategies employed by some female academic staff from three public universities in Ghana to overcome their challenges and how they built the needed resilience to succeed in their careers.

AN OVERVIEW OF WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES IN ACADEMIA

Over the past few decades, women's experiences in academia have received much attention from international and local scholars (Acker and Feuerverger 1996; Adusah-Karikari 2008; Prah 2004). Mama (2003) affirms that public higher education continues to remain the main route to career advancement for many women in Africa. "Their constrained access, therefore, poses a constraint to the pursuit of more equitable and just modes of political, economic, and social development" (Mama, 2003:102). Also, women in academia are known to play diverse roles, serving on boards and taking active part in the day-to-day affairs of their communities. While Mama (2003) asserts that women have never been excluded from Africa's post-independence universities, the fact remains that culturally and numerically, universities across Africa remain male dominated spaces with sub-cultures and norms that prevent women from progressing as fast as men (Britwum et al., 2013). It is worthy of note, that although universities are the "frontiers of discovery", they also "guard the heritage of the past" (Assie-Lumumba, 2005:5) and one of those heritages of Post-colonial African universities is their male domination.

While this story is gradually changing, and women are beginning to gain great strides in African universities, the pace at which the gap is being bridged is rather slow. As at January, 2017, the story of gender parity among teaching and research faculty at the University of Ghana, is not that impressive. Senior members who are made up of teaching and research faculty are ranked from assistant lecturers or assistant research fellows at the bottom ranks, followed by lecturers or research fellows, senior lecturers or senior research fellows, associate professors and professors (Tsikata, 2007). Available statistics indicate that of the teaching and research faculty, approximately 73% are males while 27% are female. Out of the over 80 faculty who are of the professorial rank, only 7 are females. There are over 150 Associate professors of which 38 are females, while senior lectures make up about 420 of which 85 are females (UG Basic Statistics, 2016). These numbers at the University of Ghana reflect the trend in all public and private universities across the country and go to confirm that indeed African universities have not shed their colonial ideologies.

Despite the widespread introduction of equal opportunity policies in higher education, women have, notably, not been more successful in reaching senior positions in academe. This can be attributed to the endemic sociocultural and systemic barriers that many female academics face in universities across the world. Many authors who have written on the subject-matter allude to several factors as the cause of these low numbers of female academics rising to top positions within the academe. On a positive note, however, in spite of the challenges that continue to confront many women across universities in Ghana, findings of this study indicate that female academics have learnt to take them in their stride and more importantly, to find ingenious ways of overcoming the challenges.

GENDER, COLONIALISM AND INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE IN AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

Almost all African Universities operate with some institutional cultures that are attributable to the legacies of colonialism, neo-liberal economic issues of the early 80s and socio-cultural factors peculiar to the African continent. Several African scholars (Assie-Lumumba, 2005; Mama, 2003; Tamale and Oloka-Onyango, 1997; and Tsikata, 2007) have spoken to the impacts of colonialism on the gendered nature of campuses across Africa. Fundamental to all their arguments is the fact that colonialists' conception of education being the preserve of men was handed down to African Universities and ensured that for many decades, women were kept out of the walls of institutions of higher learning. Women were eventually allowed entry, as both students and faculty, but not for them to compete with men for space, recognition and promotion.

However, culturally and socio-politically, the notion of women in the public sphere is not completely alien even though it had to a large extent, eroded during colonial rule. Prah (2004) argues that it was rather the imposition of Victorian values during colonial times that resulted in men being regarded as heads of households which relegated women to the background in terms of access to education, health and decision making.

The colonial legacy has continued up to today, resulting in female academics facing many challenges in their day-to-day activities. Rabaru (2015) identifies some of these barriers as the significant impact of culture, family-work tensions, gender role expectations, male-dominated university culture, and lack of role models and mentors. Adusah-Karikari (2008) also cites socio-cultural factors, institutionalized gender discrimination, lack of female role models and mentors, as well as inability to form women's networks on campuses as some major impediments to female academics' rise to the top of their careers in Ghana.

For a woman to survive and become successful in such an environment, it takes resilience and self-efficacy, but female academics must also learn the art of nego-feminism (Nnaemeka, 2004). In her words:

> African feminism (or feminism as I have seen it practiced in Africa) challenges through negotiations and compromise. It knows when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal land mines; it also knows when, where, and how to go around patriarchal land mines. In other words, it knows when, where, and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts. For African women, feminism is an act that evokes the dynamism and shifts of a process as opposed to the stability and reification of a construct, a framework
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> (Nnaemeka, 2004:378).

It would be more beneficial for female academics to continually draw from both their innate and external resources to negotiate for spaces within the academe, rather than to go fighting for rights and recognition. Female academics, must, as a matter of urgency, know when and how to pick their battles, when to exercise agency and when to give space. As Tsikata (2007:39) notes, "…for these women to succeed in the university, they would have to conform to certain norms and accept certain disadvantages as normal". Encouraging "flexibility and openness to change in one's approach to daily schedules, assignments, and work-related activities" (Burke and Attridge 2011:179) will go a long way to change the status quo.

THE STRENGTHS PERSPECTIVE

This study utilizes the strengths perspective of social work practice which has been identified as a significant approach for social work theory and practice. The strengths perspective is selected because it is known to have a broad applicability across a number of practice settings and a wide range of populations, but more especially, for use with vulnerable groups (Cox, 2001). Irrespective of all the challenges that make women in Ghana vulnerable, they have been able to draw on their capabilities and resources to attain growth and success in what they do. The strengths perspective in social work is presented as a challenging alternative approach to practice, as it marks a shift away from a problem-focus to one that is possibility-focused and therefore, challenges social work's historical overreliance on deficiencies and problems (Saleebey, cited in Oko 2006). According to Tong (2011), the strengths-based approach assumes that everyone has a wide range of gifts, capacities, skills, resources, and aspirations, which they can make use of to attain growth if their positive personality and abilities are concerned.

Social workers who adopt the strengths approach identify and encourage the client's strengths and assets in assisting them with their problems and goals (Saleebey, 2006). The strengths perspective integrates concepts of resilience, empowerment, hope, healing, and meaning construction in all aspects of the working relationship. The perspective, therefore, aims at uncovering the people's strengths and hope, and putting them into action, as opposed to the traditional deficit-focused approach.

Saleebey (1996) identifies resilience, empowerment and membership as the key principles of the strengths perspective. Gleason (2007) defines resilience as a successful adaptation, an ability to exploit positive features of the environment, and the positive ways people respond to stress, it refers to individual, familial, and environmental characteristics that modify risk and allow people to thrive despite at-risk circumstances. Resilience is the ability to sustain competence under pressure and the capacity to recover from trauma. People are, therefore, known to develop resilience when they are able to overcome challenges or adversity.

Empowerment, according to Saleebey (1996) means assisting individuals, families and communities in discovering and using the resources and tools within and around them. He further asserts that the empowerment imperative requires that individuals are helped to be aware of the tensions and conflicts that oppress and limit them in order to help them free themselves from these restrictions. The empowerment perspective identifies and builds upon the existing strengths of diverse groups which in turn lead to four psychological outcomes – increasing self-efficacy, developing group consciousness, reducing self-blame, and assuming personal responsibility for change (Cox, 2001).

The final principle of the strength's-based approach, membership, means that people need to be citizens – responsible and valued members in a viable group or community. To be without membership is to be alienated and to be at risk of marginalization and oppression, the enemies of civic and moral strength (Saleebey, 1996). The strengths perspective emphasizes the recognition and use of a person's cultural strength such as support of the extended family, spirituality, religion, domestic harmony, and survival skills (Lee, 2003) to assist clients in identifying, expanding, and utilizing strengths as rooted in their cultural contexts. For many years, studies on women, especially in Africa and other developing countries, have focused on their problems, challenges and deficits. Also, Western feminism has resulted in the poor conception of African women as weak and powerless (Mohanty, 1986). However, there are indications that women in Africa, generally, and Ghana in particular have been successful in many fields of enterprise (Prah, 2004). Again, the time has come to challenge the popular assumption that female academics from both the global North and South have same or similar experiences and turn attention to the specific issues that confront female academics from the global South (see Nnaemeka, 2004). This paper contributes to the discourse by throwing the spotlight on successful female academics so as to encourage other women to pursue and attain success in spite of the challenges or deficits they may have.

METHODOLOGY

The lived experience of female academic staff from three of Ghana's five public universities was captured with the research questions, 'What are the lived experiences of successful women in Ghana's academia?' and 'what factors account for the success of such women?' These questions were answered through phenomenology. A phenomenological study was conducted due to the emphasis on capturing the essence of the lived experiences of the participants (Moustakis, 1994). Phenomenological methods are particularly effective in bringing to the fore the experiences and perceptions of individuals from their own perspectives.

The sampling strategy used in this research was a non-probability one which allows for participants to be chosen by non-random methods (LoBiondo-Wood and Haber, 1998:251). The specific type of non-probability sampling applied was purposive sampling. According to Norwood (2000), purposive sampling allows the researcher to choose elements based on her knowledge of the population and of the needs of the study. The findings reported in this paper are based on in-depth open-ended interviews with ten women from three of Ghana's public universities. Each of these ten women was director of an academic or research unit, dean, registrar, or lecturer. The women were purposefully and critically selected based on their occupation of senior positions within their universities. Eight out of ten participants were PhD holders, while the remaining two had Master's degrees. The data were gathered through in-depth open-ended interviews. Interviews were conducted in English, each lasting between one and two hours. The interviews aimed to capture each participant's personal experience as a female in a male dominated environment.

For accurate presentation of participants' views, all the interviews were audio-recorded with their expressed consent. The recordings were done to help overcome the natural limitation of human memories and the intuitive glosses that may have occurred as a result of listening and writing at the same time. Additionally, they allowed for a thorough re-examination of what was said during the analysis (Maxwell, 1996). Since the interviews were semi-structured and informal, the collected data was organised and prepared for analysis by listening to the audio tapes of the interviews over and over to get a general sense of each interview and to ensure that all critical questions were answered.

The interviews were transcribed into text afterwards. The transcription was captured as "verbatim" as possible. The thematic network analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001) was used in analysing the data. In this method, common themes and underlying patterns were categorized together and organized to give coherence to the data. The themes were then analysed for each individual interview and across different interviews so that the interconnecting themes could be developed into a narrative that tells the stories of the selected women (Creswell, 2009). The themes that emerged from the interviews were interpreted and discussed to reflect the objectives of the study, incorporating the theories and observations from the secondary data reviewed. Pseudonyms are used to present all narratives in this paper to protect the anonymity of participants.

FINDINGS

Responding to gender stereotyping
Ghanaian women in academia have had to consistently fight for space within the academe, as they constantly face overt and covert forms of gender stereotypes. These stereotypes create contexts that tell women who are successful that they are exceptions, and women who have experienced setbacks that it is their own fault for failing to be sufficiently aggressive or committed to the job. Many of my research participants reported facing gender stereotypes at work, but they also talked about the various ways by which they are able to overcome these and focus on building their careers.

Betty is the only female academic in her department, a science field. She describes her experiences as "unfortunate", but she is motivated to stay on in order that her presence and success in this male dominated field will make a statement to others about what women can do. She indicated thus:

> *there are 25 men and I'm the only woman in this department. Most of the time, people think that the only thing you can do is to be a teacher in a primary or secondary school, so unfortunately for me, I get all sorts of attitudes. But I thought of it and decided that I will stay on to encourage other women to also think they can do it; they can also get into any field they want, and that is what has kept me here all this while.*

Some of the participants, however, choose to stand up to their male colleagues and put them in their places when they cross the line, while others resiliently assert themselves at the workplace. Thus if, for example, they are the only females at a meeting, they will not be intimidated, but rather make their voices heard, notwithstanding any attempts by their male counterparts to shut them up. Others also resort to planning and working hard so that when it matters their work will "speak for them". Naa, a head of department in the Arts, shared her experiences as follows:

> *You come across males who try to disregard your achievements. I am relatively young so there are two things that work against me [being a woman and being young] … so you find yourself constantly having to fight, but you learn to choose your battles, it's not everything that you have to face up to and spend time on…*

Boatemaa, a head of department in Pharmacy indicated that she asserts herself at meetings and makes sure she is not intimidated even if she happens to be the only woman in a meeting. She says:

> *Sometimes we go for meetings and I'm the only woman there, but I don't keep quiet because of that. I believe that the man was invited to be there because he is qualified to be there, and so was I, so if I have something to say, I would say it and not feel intimidated by anybody.*

In the same vein, Akosua, a head of department in the sciences indicated:

> *I was the 2nd woman to join this faculty, and our status quo and culture do not favour women, so it is not easy for me to get in and rise to become head of department, but hard work, planning, and commitment have brought me this far.*

Interestingly, these participants are heads of their departments, and yet, their colleagues, superiors and sometimes subordinates make them feel that they do not belong in the environment where they find themselves. This notwithstanding, the study participants have not cowered in silence but have relied on their own strengths to create comfortable spaces for themselves in the gendered settings to attain successes.

Tackling sexual harassment
Closely related to the issue of gender stereotyping is sexual harassment. Some participants in this study reported being covertly sexually harassed by their peers and superiors but declared that they often found ways of foiling those "advances" before they became problematic. When faced with sexual harassment, some participants out-rightly condemned the behaviour which they did not like and ensured that it stopped. Kuukuwaa, a dean in the social sciences, is one such participant, and this is what she had to say:

> *Sometimes, my male colleagues would come to me and say "oh, you're wearing a nice dress today" and I'll have to straighten them out by saying, "would you like it if I commented on what you're wearing?" …you know, such simple, basic things usually put an end to those things.*

Linda, who is a director of a centre, indicated that she does not give room for her male colleagues to take liberties with her. She intimated:

> These men, if you give them an inch, they would take a yard. Like if someone "accidentally" brushed a hand against your breast and you keep quiet, the next time they will touch your bum and it will keep going on. And oh, the jokes they share…but, trust me, they do so to test how far they can go with you.

There were also some participants who did not spell out exactly what they did to curb sexual harassment but talked about drawing on an inner drive to resist any challenges they faced. When Wendy, a head of unit in the social sciences was asked how she was able to overcome the challenge of sexual harassment, she had this to say:

> Oh, I had a strong will and that has helped me a lot. In any situation I find myself, I strive to ensure that at the end of the day, I would have my reputation intact and my head held high, and it's the same attitude I had when I was faced with sexual harassment.

It is instructive to note that until 2011, there was no official policy on sexual harassment in any of the public universities in Ghana. Bortei-Doku Aryeetey (2004:25) in her seminal paper on sexual harassment in Ghana has also noted that "unwanted sexual advances" and "making (un)complimentary remarks" were identified as components of sexual harassment by her study participants from the university of Ghana. This indicates that people within academic circles have a good knowledge of what sexual harassment entails, though that did not deter males from taking advantage of the lack of a policy to sexually harass their peers and subordinates. In spite of the current passage of an anti-sexual harassment policy at the University of Ghana, there continue to be reports of such actions on a regular basis.

Balancing work and family life

To meet the demands of being a mother and a career woman, participants had to find ways of ensuring that their career responsibilities do not disturb their homes and families. This meant that the women would employ different strategies, so that their absence from the home would not become too conspicuous. For some of the study participants, this meant working when their husbands and children were asleep, so that they would have the time and space to concentrate on the work. Cathy, a head of department in the social sciences shared her strategy:

> …so, you plan. When baby is asleep, you don't sleep. You work. For those of us who take work home, you work when baby is asleep. So, you have to plan your day. Time management is very important. You have to always plan your day ahead of time.

Akosua, a head of department in the sciences also talked about working late at night when everyone goes to bed or early in the morning before everybody wakes up. She indicated:

> You know, you can't do all the work in the office. Sometimes you take exam scripts home to grade, and sometimes you read your students' dissertations at home. But then, you also can't ignore your husband and the children because of work, so what I do is that I devote my time and attention to them when I get home, until everybody goes to sleep, then I sit up and do the work that I have to do.

Because the work of an academic also entails traveling to conferences, some participants take their families along when they can afford it, and "squeeze" a family vacation into a business trip. Other participants had to fall on female kin (their mothers, sisters and in-laws) to stand in for them, especially when they had to travel on business. They would cook food in advance and store it, so that even when they were away, their families could still eat meals prepared by them. Naa, a head of department in the Arts shared her strategies:

> There are times when I have to attend a conference somewhere so I would plan and squeeze a family vacation into it if we can afford it. I would attend with my children and sometimes with my husband too if he has the time from work. I mean, it's not easy, financially and all, but it affords us the opportunity to spend some time together.

Indeed, one of the strategies successful women adopt is to hire house-helps to do the domestic duties of keeping the home and caring for children while they focus on the professional demands. This was true for most of the women interviewed. Women in academia, like their male counterparts, are evaluated and promoted based on the number of research publications within the period of evaluation. In addition to doing the research, teaching and rendering services to their institutions and communities, they are also required to prepare lesson notes for their

lectures, supervise students' research works and do other administrative work like serving on boards and committees within the University system.

Some participants interviewed also indicated that they faced constraints in managing or resolving some time-based conflicts. Wendy, a head of unit in the social sciences reported facing time-based conflicts at several points in her life when she had to combine the demands of motherhood with those of her career. She asserted:

> *I can say that it is more difficult for a female academic to make the time to be an academic than it is for a male academic; and particularly for our kind of business where you really have to devote a lot of time to publish, publish, and publish. How you strategize to ensure that you give your family your adequate attention and yet at the same time leave enough space for your work is a major issue.*

Kuukuwa, a dean in the social sciences also talks about facing time-based conflict in her work, lamenting that she felt very constrained and overwhelmed sometimes because there were days when she needed to stay in the office to work on one thing or the other, but at the same time, she had to go home to take care of her child. In fact, there were a number of times when she just could not meet the deadline for submission because the child had been sick and she needed to nurse him back to health first. Kuukuwa's experiences are not only related to time-based conflicts, but also reflect strain-based conflicts as well. This is what she shared:

> *I have to confess that I have felt very, very constrained, when it comes to time. Maybe, I should say I felt more constrained than others, perhaps due to the fact that I was a single mother. Sometimes I want to stay in the office and work on a particular interesting paper, but I look at the time and have to shut everything down and go home. Meanwhile, I'm not able to do much work at home, because my child needs me.*

From the narratives, it is obvious that the research participants needed to have succeeded in crafting a work-life balance, to be able to establish their careers, get the peace of mind to focus on work and to attain success in their careers.

Mentors and social networks

Many of the research participants underscored the need to have mentors and social networks within the academe. While many men find it easy to initiate and join associations, the same cannot be said for female academics. Due to the general lack of support systems in many universities, participants in this study relied on any support system that they found useful. These either came from their primary relationships such as parents, siblings, husbands or their own children; colleagues and/or superiors at work; and other networks, like mentors who may not necessarily be at the workplace. Linda, a director of a centre indicated:

> *Over the years, I've learnt to build networks and support systems that have proven quite helpful. There are people you can call when you have challenges in your work and they will give you all the mentoring and support you need. I think women do not make much use of networks in their careers, but when you learn to do that, you go places*

Like Linda, Betty a senior lecturer in the biological sciences, underscores the importance of having mentors in one's career. She asserted thus:

> *The social networks the men have on campus, we [the women] don't have even a quarter of it. They meet to play tennis, share a few drinks, discuss issues at a more informal level and look out for each other. But we the women, we only go to work, close and go home, so sometimes things are a bit tough for us, but if you have a friend, a mentor or someone you can always go to, it helps a great deal.*

Mentors are also known to greatly influence the progression of a career for women. However, due to the limited number of women in top positions, women have not benefitted much from mentorship in their careers. The sentiments of Boatemaa as she reflected on the need for senior academics to mentor junior ones is quite poignant.

> *It's about time we women learned to be our sisters' keepers. Too many times we hear that women are their own enemies, but I think we can turn that around and help each other out. We the seniors need to mentor the junior ones. If we had mentors when we started our careers, we wouldn't have suffered some of the things we suffered.*

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Workspaces in organizations which are expected to be gender-neutral are in fact so gendered that it is believed that being a woman is a handicap to pursuing a career in many fields, including academia (Czarniawska, 2006; Korvajärvi, 2002). Gender stereotypes are often used as forms of social control to maintain the status quo in patriarchal societies and male dominated workspaces (Prentice and Carranza, 2012). The experiences of this study's participants with regards to gender stereotyping reflect the pervasiveness of the canker in many universities in Africa. In Ghana, the conceptualization of sexual harassment is a recent phenomenon. Until recently, there was no policy on sexual harassment, mainly "due to the difficulty in conceptualizing the topic and the lack of hard data on the nature of harassment in Ghana" (Bortei-Doku Aryeetey, 2004:8). Many of the actions that are currently conceptualized as sexual harassment were hitherto seen as an "affirmation of masculine authority in both private and public domains of gender relations" (Bortei-Doku Aryeetey, 2004:7). In spite of this, the study participants withstood sexual harassment and gender stereotypes through perseverant efforts to develop resilience and gain a sense of empowerment.

So long as socio-cultural norms continue to subordinate women to men, gender inequality will continue to persist in African Universities (Tamàle and Oloka-Onyango, 1997), but there can be a turnaround when female academics learn to negotiate instead of contesting for spaces within the academy. Nnaemeka (2004) recommends that nego-feminism – the feminism of negotiation; no-ego feminism is the way to go. African feminists, and by extension female academics must learn to negotiate, give and take and compromise in order to get the spaces within which they will thrive in their careers. In this study, it was obvious that female academics at the University of Ghana have consciously and unconsciously, through overt and covert means, negotiated for workspaces where they are now considered valuable members within academia. According to the strengths perspective, membership in a viable community brings about the harnessing of individual and communal assets to bring about success in one's endeavours.

When women are seen to be strong-willed, assertive and resilient, as has been evidenced in this paper, they are able to withstand unwanted advances from their male colleagues and superiors and tackle the problem of sexual harassment head-on. Collective activism – women's groups coming together to fight for a common cause – has been known to work in the past to achieve desirable results in Ghana (Adomako-Ampofo, 2008). Female academics could come together, form alliances with Non-Governmental Organizations, Queen mothers and other activists to draw attention to sexual harassment within the academe and bring government's attention to the pervasive nature of the canker.

Work-life balance has been defined as the satisfaction and good functioning at work and at home (Sturges 2012). One is said to have achieved a work-life balance if one is able to combine one's paid and non-paid work in ways that are comfortable and acceptable for one. Ghanaian women, generally, and the research participants specifically, see mothering as a source of joy and pride, and did not consider forgoing or postponing childbirth in order to focus on their careers. As shown in this study, participants were as committed to keeping their homes as they were to pursue their careers. In this study, many participants alluded to making their work invisible; adopting different methods to ensure that their homes remain undisturbed as they pursue their careers. This is a form of negotiation in the home, where the women identified areas in their domestic settings where they required help and sought to fill those roles through means that were satisfactory to themselves and other members of their families. Identifying areas where help is needed and filling out the need is a strength in itself, as one is able to focus time and energy on developing skills for success in one's career.

Participants in this study made use of their support networks and mentors and found it very useful. They recommended that many more women make use of such a resource if they are to succeed. Regrettably, women face greater challenges initiating or developing informal mentoring than men (Ragins and Cotton, 1999). This is due to the relatively little or no representation of women in higher echelons of organizations who can identify protégés in lower levels for mentoring. In addition, there are very few role models in the sciences for young female students and academics (Blickenstaff, 2005). Adusah-Karikari (2008:165) argues that "one cannot live in isolation in academia and expect to thrive. Through collaboration and team work, some faculty members have had the opportunity to conduct research, publish articles, and have secured publication contracts, thereby facilitating their progression in academia". Anecdotal evidence suggests that female academics are increasingly identifying this strength and are currently formalizing mentoring and collaborative research between older and younger faculty members.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

The experiences of these research participants from three public universities is a reflection of endemic systemic and cultural values that place women in a subordinate position to men. Although the study participants attributed their success to personal empowerment and characteristics which included resilience, determination, taking responsibility, embodying strength and demonstrating self-confidence, the challenges and negative experiences

they went through in the course of their careers could be crippling for other women. Key among such career threatening experiences are sexual harassment, sex-based and gender discriminations, and constraints in balancing work and family life. These experiences point to the prevalence of biases that confront many women and girls on the basis of their gender.

While participants in this study were able to draw on their strengths to surmount those negative experiences, going forward, it is critical to do away with such biases within families, workplaces and society as a whole. To achieve this feat, there is the need to mobilize and bring awareness and knowledge of the structures, inequalities, and oppression that combine to marginalize women in modern-day academe in Ghana. This can be done in a number of ways: through education and consciousness-raising; forming and keeping social networks among women; and galvanizing support for broad-based organizing around female-friendly policies within universities.

Throughout history, universities have been recognized as male institutions into which females have been admitted (Currie, Thiele and Harris, 2002). This admission started with female students and graduated into the hiring of female academics. This has resulted in some unspoken turf war, where men constantly struggle to keep the status quo. The Ghanaian woman of today, in spite of her struggles, has also arrived at the point where she will not let gender and her reproductive roles keep her from pursuing a career and rising to the very top. As evidenced by findings of this study, Ghanaian women in academia embody strengths and resilience, which they use to develop their self-efficacy, and this has resulted in the success they enjoy in their careers.

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