

Film Review

When Women Speak © 2022 Aseye Tamakloe (Director), Akosua Adomako Ampofo, University of Ghana and Kate Skinner, University of Birmingham (Producers) 100 minutes

Nana Ama Agyemang Asante

In 2019, Ghana's President, Nana Akufo Addo, told feminists and gender activists who had gathered for the *Women Deliver Conference* in Vancouver that the Ghanaian women's movement was partly to blame for the low number of women in his government. In response to a question about plans to increase the number of women in his government (a measly 17 percent), President Akufo-Addo told the audience: "Not enough movement has been made by the 52 percent of the population who are women to be able to be in these positions and make these decisions. We're not seeing enough dynamism and activism from the part of those who are seeking these things" (Akufo-Addo, 2019). In response to condemnation of the president's comments, leading women within his party justified his comments, arguing that Ghanaian women had not achieved enough to merit equal representation in the parliament (Teiko Larnyoh, 2019). It is this kind of erasure of Ghanaian women's participation in making history that the documentary, *When Women Speak*, attempts to address.

Using archival material as well as the stories of sixteen women who lived through various governments and regimes since independence — military, single-party and multi-party — the documentary chronicles Ghanaian women's contributions to national development and women's liberation. It opens with a discussion of the role women played in Ghana's independence and early post-colonial period. We see and hear how Hannah Cudjoe, Evelyn Amarteifio, and others were directly involved in the fund-raising and mobilization that contributed to shaping the independence movement and politics in Ghana. However, it is the first-hand accounts of the diverse cast of women interviewed in this documentary that provide the most memorable moments. We learn from their experiences as citizens, lawyers, teachers, traders, students, and activists about how these women contributed to shaping public policy, opposing military regimes, and securing greater rights for Ghanaian women.

Some of the stories they shared may have been previously heard in fragments. I had heard, for example, that Ghanaian women once required the signatures of their husbands and fathers to apply for a passport. I have watched

the campaign against Trokosi¹ unfold on television and in the newspapers, and I have also read about the violence perpetrated by the military against market women. Nevertheless, *When Women Speak* succeeds in putting layers of flesh on the bones and in doing so, these women from all over Ghana bring to light hidden (erased) histories. Perhaps this is the reason why the producers of the documentary, Professor Akosua Adomako Ampofo from the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana and Dr. Kate Skinner, an Associate Professor of history at the University of Birmingham, selected the title “When Women Speak”.

Until Professor Akua Kuenehyia and Mrs Dorcas Coker Appiah explained how a group of former women law students organized to establish a legal clinic to address the concerns of women in Ghana, I was unaware of the role of women in the establishment of the Legal Aid Center, or how the establishment of the center inspired the campaign against harmful cultural practices such as Trokosi and widowhood rites. I was surprised to learn that in opposition to the General Kutu–Acheampong–led and other military governments, Hannah Owusu–Koranteng of WACAM, Takyiwaa Manuh, and their peers from the University of Ghana set up a socialist study group to strategize how to change the status quo.

Women’s roles in resisting military governments are often overlooked, but this documentary provides evidence that market women held the military accountable for the violence they suffered during those years by focusing on the effects of military dictatorship on the economy through the effects on non–formal sectors. One of the stories that has remained with me is that of the activist who developed an identification system that taught the traders to identify soldiers who had violated rights during the Rawlings era through the colours of the stripes on their uniforms.

Though the women interviewed were from diverse backgrounds, their stories about their work illustrate the collaborative effort that was required to achieve their goals under changing socio–political conditions in Ghana. For example, professional women worked with women in churches and markets to pass the Intestate Succession and Domestic Violence bills into law. Also of importance is the role that older and more experienced women played in helping the younger activists achieve their goals. It is possible to suggest that

1 A form of servitude penance paid to a shrine for the sins of a family (member) by the service of another family member, typically a young girl, though sometimes boys are also selected.

When Women Speak was edited to convey a coherent narrative about the women's movement. There is, however, a sense of unity and truth in the sixteen women's accounts of their peak moments in their struggles for freedom and equality. I observed that while the women come from different backgrounds and work in different fields, they provide evidence for their claims and back each other up.

One woman and her narrative stood out from the rest: Nana Konadu Agyeman–Rawlings'. Her inclusion in the documentary sparked outrage on social media when the trailer was released. In truth, the women's movement story could not have been told without Nana Konadu owing to her work with the pseudo-NGO she led, The 31st December Women's Movement with her husband at the helm of government. Unlike the other women in the documentary, however, the content of her account was filled with stories describing what she claimed she had done as an individual to advance Ghanaian women's rights, and without the support of her husband's government.

In almost all the instances captured in the film, she invokes the late Justice Annie Jigge, the first Chairperson of the National Council for Women and Development, a renowned judge and a respected women's rights leader in support of her claims. For example, madam Agyemang–Rawlings invokes Justice Annie Jigge to support her claim that she was the one who got the Intestate Succession law passed as a result of documents the judge passed on to her. Nana Konadu Agyemang–Rawlings then claims that she received no financial or material support from her husband's P/NDC government for her work to advance women's rights in Ghana. Although the interviewer is absent from the film and the viewer cannot tell what questions were asked, even when it appears the interviewer may have asked her about support from the state, she vehemently states that her organisation did not receive "even one cedi" from the government of her husband. Many would watch the film and wish Annie–Jigge were alive to confirm some of Nana Konadu Agyemang–Rawlings' claims.

To be sure, the documentary does not only focus on the women's achievements, but also on the obstacles they encountered and current challenges facing Ghanaian women. Catherine Bob–Miller described the difficulties the activists faced in their efforts to have marital rape recognized as a crime as follows: "when I am not ready, and you are ready, and you pounce on me, is that not rape? But they said we should not add marital rape to the law." Professor Akua Kuenyehia lamented the failure of successive governments to pass the Affirmative Action Bill noting that "we have an affirmative action bill in parliament, but even the women [MPs] oppose it."

The discussion turns to current challenges shortly before the documentary ends, and it becomes clear that older women are concerned about the state of the feminist movement and the gap between older and younger feminists. Rose Kutin–Mensah and Dzodzi Tsikata proposed a collaboration between the older and younger generation of women activists to bridge the gap and invigorate the women’s movement. I appreciate the call and invitation to collaborate because, as someone who participates and follows online feminist and activist discourse, I know that many younger feminists are unaware of the accomplishments of the older generation and feel isolated.

When my friend Nana Akosua Hanson, founder of Dramaqueens, saw *When Women Speak*, she tweeted: “We do stand on the shoulders of giants.” I watched the documentary in May 2022 in South Africa with a mixed audience of academics, students, Africans, and non–Africans. The applause and questions that followed confirmed Nana Akosua’s statement. In recent years, Ghanaian feminists have been accused by pastors, chiefs, and politicians of destroying Ghanaian culture for challenging patriarchal norms and systems. *When Women Speak* demonstrates that we are not doing anything novel or different — Ghanaian women have been making similar demands since the colonial period.

From the beginning, it was evident that director Aseye Tamakloe had to condense so much information in order to tell a meaningful and timely story. The fact that no angle seemed forced or rushed shows the enormous amount of skill it took, but I wish the documentary had gone beyond the 90 minutes duration. The (film) women might have explained why their once ferocious group has been reduced to near obscurity. Most of the women seen in the film are still actively involved in the public arena, agitating and fighting for human rights and good governance. There are a number of them who are involved in the opposition to the anti–gay bill sponsored by the Church and some members of Parliament.²

However, they are not making as many waves about the issues of women as they used to. It would have been interesting to learn what happened to the fight after the Women’s Manifesto³ was released. Moreover, at a time when there is tension between Ghanaian feminists at home and abroad over what I

2 See here for more on the so–called Proper Human Sexuality Bill placed before parliament GBC Ghana, “Sam George and Prof Takyiwaa Manuh Clash on Anti–Gay Bill,” YouTube (YouTube, October 14, 2021), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lsu-aatpVl4>

3 See here for more on The Women’s Manifesto, a document intended to address issues of critical concern to women in Ghana and demands on how to address them. <https://abantu-rowa.com/womens-manifesto/>

consider to be trivial matters, it would have been helpful to hear how they managed to focus on the greater goal despite their differences. How were disagreements within the organization and between individuals resolved? It was exciting to hear some of the women discuss methods, but I wanted more information. Considering how divisive the campaign for a law against domestic violence became, it would have been useful to hear how they managed to gain the support of some politicians as well as traditional and religious leaders.⁴

I recognize, however, that not every story can be told at once. For now, I am grateful for the examples of the women cast in the film, and the work they did, because, as a result, many battles will not be necessary. The thought of having to obtain the permission of a male relative to get a passport in addition to our current troubles fills me with rage and dread. I am glad we no longer have to do that.

I was struck by a question that was asked after the screening in Cape Town. A member of the audience asked why no men were portrayed in the film, and whether the producers sought to claim that women won their battles alone. One would have thought that the title of the documentary communicated the intended focus on the perspectives of Ghanaian women and their quest for equality. A member of the production team responded that this question is almost always asked at screenings, and it is almost invariably asked by men. However, this question emphasizes how normalized the erasure of women's work and voices has become in many societies. To be sure, the women do not suggest at any point that they succeeded without help. However, by telling their own side of the story, we learn how Ghanaian women overcame patriarchy, sexism, gender stereotypes, and other forms of discrimination in order to achieve more rights for women.

In spite of their efforts, the percentage of women in politics remains under 20 percent.⁵ There are only 40 women in the country's 275-seat Parliament. A recent study shows that male experts outnumber female experts by 11 to 1 on radio and television programs in Ghana (Nartey, 2021). Study after study shows that women are underrepresented at all levels in the decision-making process.⁶ Still, *When Women Speak* brims with examples of the "dynamism and activism"

4 For a detailed account by one of the film's producers, herself a member of the Ghanaian women's movement, see Adomako Ampofo (2008).

5 Philip Alston, "Statement on Visit to Ghana, by Professor Philip Alston, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights*," OHCHR, April 18, 2018, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2018/04/statement-visit-ghana-professor-philip-alston-united-nations-special-rapporteur>.

6 Laud Nartey, "Male Experts Outnumber Female Experts on Radio and Television Programmes in Ghana – Report," 3News.com, September 16, 2021, <https://3news.com/male-experts-outnumber-female-experts-on-radio-and-television-programmes-in-ghana-report/>

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of the women's movement throughout Ghana's history. Drawing upon their successes and failures, the current generation of feminists and activists can build on the work of the older generation.

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