Working with Rural Women to Secure Resource Access

Akua O. Britwum speaks with Fati Abigail Abdulai

Akua Britwum spoke to Fati Abigail Abdulai from Ghana, in a virtual interview on Sunday the 2nd of May, 2021. Fati Abdulai is the Director of Widows and Orphans Movement (WOM) of Ghana. She has held her position since 2013, when Fati's mother, the founder of the WOM, retired. Fati had been supporting her mother in her work. The interview highlights the struggles for women's rights in the daily and institutionalised expressions of class exploitation and patriarchy. In this case, it concerns the struggle for access to resources, generated by women's economic dependence on their husbands in a predominantly subsistence production rural setting.

Akua Opokua Britwum: Tell us about the WOM – how it started and how you became its director.

Fati Abigail Abdulai: The WOM was started by Betty Ayagiba, my mother, after she lost her husband in 1988. My mother, a nurse then, was struck by the fact that the women who could not pay their hospital bills were mainly widows. As inpatients they hardly received visitors, and some were suicidal. She decided to bring such women into a group to meet occasionally to discuss their experiences and support each other. The first meeting, attended by over 100 widows, underscored the need to formalise the group. Their initial meetings, spent listening and counselling each other, led to the realisation that most of their challenges emerged from the widowhood rites they had had to perform during their husbands' funerals. Widows in some communities of the Upper East region (UER) of Ghana must take naked public baths and drink ritual brews to prove they were not complicit in their husbands' death. Most women, after

going through these rites, lose their self-esteem. Some self-isolate and others migrate to preserve their dignity. Some develop health complications like liver problems because of the unhygienic conditions under which the ritual brews are prepared.

The organisation has become better structured over the years, working in four major thematic areas. The first is advocacy on women's rights where our key priority is ensuring that the women we work with, live dignified lives. We target the dehumanising widowhood rites, sexual and gender-based violence, unpaid care work, and basic rights. We also work on women's economic empowerment because, over the years, our work has shown that women who are economically empowered can better resist some of the dehumanising widowhood rites. We offer women training to acquire new skills and support others to expand their existing businesses; we also provide microcredit support. We realised that the main livelihood of over forty per cent of the women we work with, was in agriculture so we do a lot of training on sustainable agricultural practices, assisting them to get the most out of their land. Our third thematic area is climate change, which has two components. In the special housing initiative, we support some to reconstruct their homes. Most of the women live in mud houses, which are easily destroyed by annual flooding that plagues communities in this part of the country. Women are forced to migrate and, on their return, find their buildings have collapsed. We also take up general climate adaptation issues like using energy-saving tools. Our fourth thematic area is education, where we support orphaned school dropouts to return to school and, for those who cannot, to acquire income-earning skills.

AOB: Well, you have covered the events leading to the formation of your organisation. How does WOM reach the widows who are potential members?

FAA: The very first meeting was by word-of-mouth invitations, no radio announcement. Over the years we have formed groups in the communities and usually the standard is that, once members of the group grow to more than 30 persons, then the group must split into two. These days, communities invite us. Sometimes the widows form a group and then invite us, and sometimes the

local assembly would form the groups and invite us; sometimes the chiefs form the groups and ask us to come over. So they have probably seen the work we have done in other communities, and they invite us to help them go through the processes of how they can stay together. When we respond to such invitations, we tell them what we do as an organisation, train them in group dynamics, help them select their leaders, and prioritise their economic activities. In addition, we support individual women who are experiencing violence. If a widow has a case and comes to report it, it does not matter whether she is part of a group or not, we help her seek redress.

AOB: So how many women do you cover in total?

FAA: Currently we work in 160 communities in the UER, and this translates into a little over 12,000 women.

AOB: How prevalent is this situation of widowhood and the attendant problems?

FAA: Just in 2019, the Ghana National Household Registry published data that put the number of widowed persons (both women and men) in the UER at around roughly 68,000, and out of this number, 92% are widows. So, what this means is that, in the UER, we have 92% of the widowed persons being women. Again, out of this number, seven out of ten of them are poor or extremely poor. Traditional norms prescribe the rites every woman must undergo when she is widowed. The first is a test to clear her of witchcraft and the second, [to ascertain] whether she had a hand in the death of her husband.

All widowed women have to be inherited by a male relation of their husbands. Due to our work, some women can resist, but those who do face different forms of abuse. Those who refuse to forcefully marry a male relative of their deceased husband are considered difficult women. They are denied land to farm or are abandoned by the families; some are even beaten, and some have their properties destroyed. They sometimes face verbal and emotional abuse because it is understood now that, if you beat somebody physically, the law will get you, but emotional or verbal abuse is somehow very difficult to prove and get witnesses for. Widowhood rites are still prevalent. Even last year, part

of a festival celebrated in Talensi district had some widows dancing naked. It was a big issue, but they cover it in the name of culture and tradition.

AOB: What are some of the laws that you have used to protect these women?

FAA: We use the Intestate Succession Law, which determines how property is shared when someone dies without a will. Most of these women themselves are considered property for somebody to inherit. The Intestate Succession Law helps people to understand that the woman and the children are entitled to part of the deceased man's properties. Another law we use is the Domestic Violence [DV] Act and its Legislative Instrument (LI), which we use a lot because most of the abuses meted out to the widows are usually done by family members. Another is the Marriage Act, because we have had cases where our use of the Intestate Succession Law has been contested by family members who claim that the woman was not the legal wife of the man. So, we use the Marriage Act, even to educate married persons and those yet to be married about the kind of choices they make, and to seek redress when needed. We have not yet used the Land Act that has been passed recently; we are doing more of sensitisation about it, but it will equally help going forward.

AOB: How will this recent Land Act help?

FAA: The [Act provides] that property acquired by any of the spouses is considered joint property until proven otherwise. Most of the cases we have, the families will usually claim it as family property, aware that the court cannot grant ownership of family property to the women. Once the land is registered in the name of either of the spouses, the Land Act removes this ambiguity. Again, this means that we have a lot of work to do sensitising people on the need to register their lands. There is another provision that makes it wrong to deny somebody's inheritance based on the person's gender or sex. We have a lot of the women being denied the property just because they are women.

AOB: Why?

FAA: They just say that as a woman, you belong to your husband's house and your husband's house does not count you as part of the family. So hopefully the law helps, but there is a gap in terms of what the law says and how to seek redress.

AOB: What are some of these gaps?

FAA: One is ignorance; some people do not know about the law at all. For those who do, the cost, in terms of the time and resources for seeking redress, is a disincentive. In the UER, for instance, most of our courts are in the municipalities, so seeking redress means commuting from the village to the town, which is quite expensive for most of these women. The other is legal representation; though we have legal aid, the system is overwhelmed and cases pile up, leading to hearings getting postponed. There is a woman who has been pursuing a case – she lost her husband, and the family rejected her child as his biological child. It took two years to prove that the child was the biological child of the dead man. This is the fifth year, and they are still struggling in court contesting her legal status as a wife; they claim that the man failed to complete the marital rites for her before he died. In the five-year period, she has changed lawyers thrice. The judges also keep changing and they have to start all over anytime there is a change. The last time we met, she told me she wanted to withdraw the case. Just in November 2020, we had to help one widow with about GHS 700 to file her case because her land was being taken away by the family members. The courts consider land as a huge resource, so they must pay money. She cannot afford the amount of money she must pay, and this is after one year of trying to seek redress at a lower court. Then the court finally ruled to move the case to a different court due to the size of the land. At the community level, once you try to seek redress, you are seen as an evil woman, trying to destroy the family, and people shun your company; nobody wants to associate with you. In some instances, the widows just migrate or, even if they stay, they stay in isolation. So those are some of the challenges with seeking legal redress, that discourage people who know about the law to seek redress.

AOB: What personal challenges have you faced? What about your mother and all the things she has been trying to do?

FAA: We are seen as people inciting families against one another and they say this is their family issue and we should not interfere. Some traditional leaders see our work as a threat, and some openly warn us to stay out of their communities because they do not have any problem. We have had issues with the legal system. DOVVSU [Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit] is unhappy with us because they think we are overstepping our boundaries. I remember there was one boy who kept beating two old ladies who were his stepmothers. The case had been in DOVVSU for over a year but it was not going to the court and was not being solved. The women came to report to us, and we wrote to DOVVSU. They did not respond; they said it was none of our business. So, we wrote to a higher authority, the police commander, who gave them three days to process the case for court. They were forced to send the case to court. At that time, we were seen in a bad light. It looked like we had reported them to their bosses. During that period, [with] other cases that went to them, if they found out that it had come to us first before getting to them, they were a little sceptical in handling it.

So, we ourselves are targets, and we are seen as inciting the women against their families. In fact, some people even tell us that we are encouraging women to kill their husbands to come and join the movement. The death rates among the men are higher and over here too, because of polygamy, when one man dies, you have maybe four widows, so it [elevates] the number of women that are widowed. People somehow believe that there is no natural death! Even when people ride their motorcycle carelessly and get accidents, it is still assumed that it is the woman that caused the death of her husband. We get attacked. But we continue because we know the focus and I always say that we will fight along the way. That is normal. The struggle makes us understand better that we want the best for the women. Sometimes it is ignorance, because most of the officials charged to handle such cases are mostly not trained so their own biases come in the way of handling the cases. Over the years, we have also offered training for some of these departments to understand their role and to be able to offer the best service to the women they are working with.

AOB: Have you been involved in any legislative reforms, or in the passing

of legislative instruments like the DV Act, the Land Act, and, recently, the Affirmative Action Bill?

FAA: Yes, we actively participated in the passage of the Land Act. We did it together with NETRIGHT [Network for Women's Rights in Ghana]. We also participated in the Affirmative Action Bill in the past. But the recent ones, I would say we have not actively participated in them. We equally participated actively in the LI of the DV Act. There are others we participated in, but I think we have not yet had any positive results, like the DV Fund. This is something we actively participated in, but we still have not had a positive result.

AOB: So, you are talking about the women's ability to benefit from the various laws that are set in place. Do you think that additional legislation will help?

FAA: Though I think additional legislation will help, I strongly believe that, if we are able to work to ensure that the existing laws are implemented as they ought to be, we will make more headway. So, for instance the Affirmative Action Bill, we need it urgently. But even as we work on that, we also need to ensure that a lot of people are using the existing ones and testing them to serve as a deterrent to people that have made up their minds that they will never change, in terms of abusing others. For me, when we do that, it will really be helpful.

AOB: Regarding the political environment, I mean here, one person has a strong lead and is starting something with people who are already vulnerable. What were some of the initial challenges? What was the turning point for you?

FAA: For the initial challenges, I remember that when the WOM was becoming more formalised, it was published in the newspapers and it said that "widows too are meeting", as if widows were not a group of people that were allowed to have their own meeting. It became a laughingstock, that "… they have killed their husbands and now they want to have an association." It is difficult to say that the political environment has been unsupportive, but there have been challenges. We had instances where chiefs have been perpetrators and then there are political interferences. Even in instances where an influential political

member is involved in a case, political divisions come in as persons on each side of the divide seek to make political capital out of the case. Some people see the movement as a state organisation, and they invite us to their communities as a way of getting political points. Assembly members or a member of parliament would invite us to their community to help them start a women's group, and because of our work on economic empowerment, they would use that in their political campaign and say, "Oh you see, we even brought this NGO here to help you." I would say that the political environment has been tricky, one that my mother struggled daily to navigate. Sometimes these parties try to use the movement to win political points. Sometimes it takes a lot of extra effort and communication to place ourselves in an environment where we are not seen as favouring one political party or another, or being used to settle political scores.

AOB: I want to know the high point in this work for you, something that happened and turned everything around for you.

FAA: For me, the high point is when the women come back with success stories. That is the high point, because this work we do is full of negatives so when we get the few successes, then it gives us a reason to continue.

AOB: What is the lowest point for you – something that happened and made you sort of want to give up?

FAA: Yes, just the other day, I was telling my colleagues that some of the women we have worked with over the years, we see their children going through the same difficulties, and we wonder whether we are really making any headway. Because one would have expected that, as we progress, this thing does not become a generational cycle. That can be very depressing.

AOB: How do you think you can work around this problem? It does seem you are getting successes in terms of individuals but then the system remains.

FAA: We think about this every day, how to ensure that we have systemic change. Increasingly, personally, what I think is that we need to make our leaders see how this is a developmental issue. Because most of these cases need

different support systems to be able to overcome, and with the different support systems, we need more hands on deck than just our office.

AOB: Any examples?

FAA: For instance, there is this widow who lost her husband when she was very young. She has three girls. The last time we met, she was talking about how her first daughter became pregnant when she was a teenager and two years down the line, the second one is also pregnant as a teenager, and she is thinking about her third. I look back at all the help we granted her to have access to her property and protect her from abuse. But her children need reproductive health information, which should have been provided either by the school or the state. So now she has more mouths to feed. The last time I spoke to her, even the room they live in had collapsed and they needed to find a new place to live. So, the state must provide some special housing initiatives for vulnerable groups of this sort. That is why I say that it needs a whole lot of systemic reforms. Everybody must play their role to ensure that the same people get the most services. I think that one of the best ways to stop this cyclical experience is to get more people to talk about the issue, how these abuses happening in the name of widowhood rites are impacting the development of the people in general.

AOB: You were talking about how some chiefs have invited you to their communities – what has accounted for this success? Whereas others warn you to stay out of their communities?

FAA: There are several reasons for the successes with some communities. What we have done as an organisation over the last ten years is to institute an award scheme for chiefs that support our cause and publish it. People get to know that we are appreciating or honouring this chief because of what he has done. This award scheme pushed some of the chiefs to show interest in our work. Some of the chiefs genuinely see that some of these things are wrong and they want to address it and so bring us to help them because they have come to understand the work we do. But being alone makes it difficult because they work with a Traditional Council. They rely on us to convince their Traditional Council as

to why there is a need to change. If it is a chief that has influence over other chiefs, then it helps. I remember that the former president of the Regional House of Chiefs here really supported our work. His people said one of the things he did was ask community members to give the farmlands around the homes to women to farm and give those that are far off to the men, because women always grapple with the challenges of care work and are constrained for time. Since he was the president of the Regional House of Chiefs, it meant that he had a lot of influence, so when he instituted something, people quickly accepted it and used it. He also challenged the prevailing belief within his own family, which barred widows and their children from eating all the food items belonging to the deceased man, claiming that if they did, they would die. He interpreted it as one of the ways of preventing widows from having access to these things. So, he asked his people to allow widows to eat the remaining food items and hold him personally accountable for any deaths that would occur. People ate the food, and nothing happened to them, so that made people aware that that belief had no basis.

AOB: What in your life would you want to share with young persons working in this area or those who would like to work on what you are involved in? Which category is your age bracket?

FAA: I am 34 years old. For young people, if they decide to go into this area of work, they should know that they would need support, and when I say support, I mean friends or family that can always encourage them. Because, sometimes, it is really depressing, and you would ask yourself, "Ah, why don't I join my other colleagues who are having fun, why should I stay here?" They should know that it is doable, but they would have to build some safety nets to cushion themselves. I would like to also say that we need more young people supporting, to bring different perspectives, to bring new ideas about how we can be more impactful.

AOB: What is your wish? What is your vision for ten years from now?

FAA: Ten years from now, I am hoping that there will be a lot of combined efforts to address issues of gender-based violence holistically, where people are not seen as evil for seeking justice. I would like to see a funding regime that has some flexibility in allowing women's rights organisations the actual support that most of these women need. I would like to see more young people taking action.

AOB: Any last words to us?

FAA: Just to say, thank you for listening to me and I hope that this encourages more people to continue the good work they are doing.

AOB: Thank you very much Fati, I am really very grateful to you for giving your time.

Endnotes

1. Intestate Succession Act, 1985 (PNDC Law 111)
2. Domestic Violence Act, 2007 (Act 732)
3. Domestic Violence Regulations, 2016 (L. I. 2237)
4. Marriages Act 1884-1985, Cap 127
5. Land Act, 2020 (Act 1036)