

**EMPOWERING WOMEN IN LOCAL POLITICS AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: A
PATHWAY TO INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE IN GHANA**

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ABSTRACT

Women's participation in local politics and community engagement is crucial in ensuring a fair representation in local government administration. Studies have acknowledged the low representation of women, but there is limited research on the roles of the elected few in local government. The study recognises the efforts of assemblywomen's mentorship to empower other women in the local governance system in Ghana. It investigates assemblywomen's administrative responsibilities that involve other women in community engagement. This strategy politically empowered them and enhanced inclusive governance in five regions of Ghana: Eastern, Central, Bono, Greater Accra, and Western Regions. The study employed a qualitative research approach, used the exploratory design, and sampled 30 assemblywomen for face-to-face interviews on their lived experiences. Four key informants were also interviewed. Other key informants were 6 assemblymen who engaged in focused group discussions. This study is underpinned by substantive representation theory, where elected assemblywomen engaged other women and responded to the needs of the communities. The findings revealed that assemblywomen's responsibilities and community engagement empowered other women to address their needs. The study recommends the encouragement of assemblywomen to mentor other women to participate in local politics to improve inclusive governance.

Keywords: Community, empowerment, local government, participation, Ghana

INTRODUCTION

The District Assembly is the highest administrative authority under the decentralisation policy, where people are elected to local government and represent the constituents in local areas (Antwi-Boasiako, 2010). Other responsibilities include passing byelaws and participating in decision-making in the assembly (Fiankor & Akussah, 2012). Elected and appointed assemblywomen and assemblymen are officials who serve in the District Assemblies to be responsible for their constituents' needs (Tagoe & Abakah, 2015). This study explored assemblywomen's administrative responsibilities and community engagement to strategically empower other women in local politics to ensure inclusive governance.

Women often prioritise different policy areas such as education, healthcare, social welfare, and family issues, which can help address the needs of marginalised groups and promote social justice, especially saving people from abusing power and checking on corruption (Beall, 2005; Martin, 1990; Khan & Ara, 2006; Goetz, 2007). However, there has been little attention to the role that gender plays in their administrative responsibilities, including implementing social protection packages (Amuzu, Jones & Perezniето, 2010). Notwithstanding their few numbers in local government, women's representation can help address gender-specific issues such as gender-based violence, reproductive rights, pay equity, and childcare (Budlender, 2000; Duflo, 2012; Htun, 2003). The substantive representation theory underpins this study as seeking to satisfy the constituents' needs could be effective with inclusivity in governance through community engagement. Community engagement emphasises building institutional bridges between governmental leaders and citizenry (Vigoda 2002 and Lovan et al. 2004, cited in Brian, 2007). It is the ongoing and active relationship and public consultation in various constituency social, political, and program contexts (Brian, 2007).

While countries practising democracy crave gender equality to enhance popular participation and inclusive governance, developing countries that practice democracy unfairly represent women in decision-making processes and deny them to address their concerns (Boateng, 2017). There is poverty in Africa because the formal governance structures reach a smaller population, and many people are denied access to formal institutions. As a result, many people struggle to survive through actions not conforming to formal processes as governance in Africa reaches less than half of its people, denying them opportunities to survive (Lennan & Ngoma, 2004; Oni et al., 2015; Oni, Oni, Ibietan & Deinde-Adedeji, 2020). Studies (e.g., Andrew, 2018; Bauer, 2012; Enaifoghe, 2019; Oni et al., 2020) show a steady increase in the number of women in national politics in Sub-Saharan Africa. However, in local government, few women have access to decision-making processes to meet their needs in the communities. For instance, in Ghana, since 1994, the percentage of women representation has been low; in 2015, it was 4.65% against 95.35% representation of men (Boateng, 2017; Media Foundation for West Africa [MFWA], 2023). After the 2023 District Level Elections, the representation was even higher at 95.9% for elected men and 4.1% for elected women (Institute of Local Government Studies [ILGS] (2023). Research on local government administration concentrates on the barriers that hinder women's representation and neglects the enabling factors

that enhance their participation, duties, and contribution to local governance (Boateng, 2017). Hence, there remains a shortage of research from the perspective of the few assemblywomen's responsibilities to deduce that irrespective of their low representation, women are participating in local governance to provide for the needs of their communities. This study then contributes to expanding this research by exploring assemblywomen's administrative responsibilities in community engagement and inclusive governance and how this links to strategies that empower other women in five regions of Ghana.

The study is organised into five sections. The first two sections constitute the introduction and review of the extant literature under the substantive representation theory. Section three presents the methodology, and the fourth consists of the findings and discussions. The final section is the conclusion and recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study is underpinned by substantive representation theory, which concerns political representation's outcomes, and impacts, and raises queries about women's concerns and how representation addresses them (Pitkin, 1972). The substantive representation theory discusses the actions, policies, and decisions by elected officials on behalf of their constituents, regardless of whether the officials share the same demographic characteristics as their constituents (Pitkin, 2016). Also, the substantive representation theory focuses on how elected representatives advocate and address the needs of the represented. It involves the complication and shades of women's lived realities, providing a foundation for more comprehensive and inclusive representation (Wängnerud, 2009). Thus, the theory involves acts taken on behalf of women or men. In this case, the emphasis is on women's representatives in active participation and decision-making policy advocacy, which are vital in policy formulation. Assemblywomen advocate for their constituents' needs, including securing food and other necessities. Women bring exclusive perspectives, ideas, and life experiences to politics, local governance, and community engagement (McEwan, 2003).

Studies (e.g., Chhatoi, Sahoo & Dash, 2022; Uyuni, 2018) have established that women understand their needs and concerns and would be ready to respond and address gender-specific issues, including practical and strategic gender needs to facilitate socio-economic change and improve life for social empowerment. Women's inclusion in local government can lead to more innovative and effective solutions to societal issues as they work harder (Lowndes, 2004).

Article 240 [2e] of the Local Government Act 1993, Act 462 of Ghana emphasises the principles of participation in local government and accountability to the locals under the decentralisation policy in Ghana (Ayee, 2003). Women's engagement in communities and representation in local government brings diverse perspectives, being accountable to the constituent, addressing gender-specific issues, inspiring future leaders, enhancing governance, and building political trust, a purpose of assessing government performance and perception of corruption of officials (Wang,

2016). Their presence in decision-making processes significantly satisfies the fair representation of the world's population, where they make up more than half of it, which is essential to ensure inclusive governance (Roser et al., 2013). Seeing women in positions of power can break down barriers and encourage others to actively engage in politics and public service, fostering a more diverse and representative democracy (Barnes & Burchard, 2013; Dolan et al., 2021). Their presence in governance challenges traditional gender roles and stereotypes, a critical step to creating a more inclusive and democratic process in local governance (Pant, 2014). Practically, women's voices deserve to be represented as policies and initiatives crafted with a more comprehensive understanding of the needs and experiences of all community members.

It has been established that role models and inspiration have been part of women's community responsibilities (Lovenduski & Norris, 2003; Wolbrecht & Campbell, 2007). In leadership positions, they serve as role models for young girls and women, inspiring them to pursue their ambitions and contribute to their communities (Archard, 2012; Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006). The substantive representation theory is reflected in governance, where the policies and programs designed by women leaders are more likely to consider the leaders' concerns and work toward the resolution, resulting in more equitable and inclusive communities (Manjoo, 2005).

Women tend to bring a collaborative and inclusive leadership style, emphasising cooperation, consensus, and relationship-building (Sugiyama et al., 2016). This can lead to more effective problem-solving and improved governance that benefits the entire community (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2010). When women are involved, people are more likely to have confidence in government institutions and feel their voices heard and represented (Cornwall, 2003); hence, there is increased trust and legitimacy. Thus, when local government considers the diversity of its community, it fosters trust and legitimacy, leading to increased civic engagement, stronger community cohesion, and improved public satisfaction with local government services (Levac, 2013).

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative approach and adopted an exploratory research design to explore assemblywomen's administrative responsibilities and strategies that could empower more women and enhance inclusive governance. The study purposively sampled thirty (30) assemblywomen to answer semi-structured questions in an in-depth interview. Those participants were conveniently sampled based on their availability for the face-to-face interview. The study solicited data on their lived experiences within the districts in five regions of Ghana: Eastern, Central, Bono, Greater Accra, and Western. In each region, two districts were purposefully sampled: a Metropolitan area, a Municipality, or a District level. Six (6) assemblywomen were selected from each region for the face-to-face interview in the capital towns of the district, as indicated in brackets. In Eastern, the selected districts were Kwahu East Municipality (Abetifi) and Birem North District (New Abirem). Komenda-Edina-Eguafo-Abirem Municipality (Elmina) and Cape Coast

Metropolis (Cape Coast) are in the Central Region. The Greater Accra sampled districts were Accra Metropolitan (Accra) and Ga West Municipality (Amasaman). In the Western Region, they were Aowin Municipality (Enchi), and Prestea Huni Valley Municipality (Bogoso). In the Bono Region, Sunyani Municipal (Sunyani) and Dormaa West District (Nkran Nkwanta) were sampled for the study. The region's abbreviations and the interview month were referenced in the direct quotations during the analysis.

The research team had face-to-face interviews with 30 assemblywomen, four key informants from NGOs, and Women's Group leaders or opinion leaders. Thus, 2 NGO leaders were selected through snowballing within the five regions. The two opinion leaders or Women's Group leaders were randomly sampled from the capital towns of the districts and interviewed. The other six key informants were assemblymen, who were made up of 1 group for focused group discussions. The data was analysed using qualitative analysis software, Nvivo, version 11, to tease out themes from the field data. The participants were given pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. For the individual assemblywomen, numeric prefixes and regions were attached to their abbreviated names to ensure anonymity. Such names include 1BECH, 4ESTH, 5ABAYE, 8HAMS, etc. When referenced, they were followed by the interview date, with the region prefixing it—BR1BECH, February 2022. The key informants have been identified by their regions, followed by their corresponding organisations, regarded as NGO, WGL (Women's Group Leader), or OPL (Opinion Leader), along with the interview month. For example, "ERWGL, March 2022" implies women's group leader from the Eastern Region. "GARNGO, April 2022" refers to a key informant who is an NGO leader in the Greater Accra Region. For the focus group discussions, the code "FGMSUNW" is used for reference, followed by the district and month of discussion— thus, "FGMSUNW, March 2022. Each face-to-face interview ended within 90 minutes, and the focus group discussion took 120 minutes. The field data collection began on February 28 and was completed on May 1, 2022, thus within four months.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study revealed three thematic areas: (i) Women's administrative responsibilities to communities, (ii) Women's unique leadership characteristics, and (iii) Strategies for empowering more women into local politics for inclusive governance.

Women's Administrative Responsibilities to Communities

The study found that many assemblywomen were members of the welfare committees in the District Assemblies. Community members' welfare concerns include basic needs such as water, sanitation, healthcare, and shelter. Accordingly, women's administrative and service responsibilities to communities included sources of water, sanitation, electricity, food security, daycare and nursery centres, and road and bridge construction. As mentioned, a major basic need was water, which has been a major responsibility of assembly members.

Water, Sanitation and Electricity

The study found that the assemblywomen were concerned about utilities such as water resource supply, sanitation and energy systems. For example, an opinion leader, a retired assembly member, said, "...water and electricity have been extended to places where the people lacked these social amenities" (CROPL, February 2022). Also, 2DOR said, "...before I finish with my work in the Assembly, I will leave a legacy that people will always remember me for solving the problems of lack of drinking water, classroom blocks, and even lack of streets in the community" (CR2DOR, February 2022). Also, 3ELIZ said,

We have four boreholes; however, the water from two looks oily, making it difficult for us to use it for anything, not even washing. It does not lather, so we only fetch from those boreholes when we have no option and need water. With this problem, we have negotiated with the assembly and NGOs to help us with one borehole (WR3ELIZ, March 2022).

Water and energy have been the concerns of many and this study trumpeted the claim. Awuah et. al (2009) revealed that 60% of the population does not have potable water (the women's population is larger, and about 70% do not have access to household latrines, which require that water to be present always (Crawford, 2008). Providing water to the people in an electoral area typically falls under the authority of local government administration, where the assemblywomen perform their roles. While assemblywomen may not directly provide water to a village, they can shape policy and utility supply decisions during assembly debates. Although females are given equal voices and opportunities during discussions in the assembly, priority is given to men to secure the needs of their constituents. This study reveals that assemblywomen could prioritise funding initiatives such as maintaining water supply systems, drilling wells, installing water purification systems, and improving sanitation facilities. This is because water is a basic need, which most women prioritise. However, because only a few women are represented in the District Assemblies in Ghana, many do not participate in making decisions on the District Assembly Common Fund (DACF) that could provide for the needs of the communities (Jackson, 2021).

A key informant admitted, "My organisation makes efforts to dig boreholes for some communities whose opinion leaders' approach for support. Most importantly, these leaders appear with assembly members to solicit for such assistance" (GARNGO, April 2022). Coincidentally, some of the opinion leaders were retired assemblywomen. One said, "The women in my community are very hardworking, and I have been sponsoring them to contest district-level elections in this electoral area. I retired in 2015, and I ensured that a woman replaced me in the district assembly." (CROPL, February 2022). When the number of women increases in local politics with the strategies for inclusive governance, many women will be elected to decision-making positions. As they facilitate projects such as boreholes and pipe-born water in their electoral areas, those assemblywomen normally recruit other women to manage them. 6AFI said,

Honourable AMO recruited to sell buckets of water from the borehole she constructed to community members at reasonable prices. As I continued

working with her and the community, I became popular and became interested in local politics. Today, I am a proud assemblywoman thanks to the mentorship of the honourable (GAR6AFI, April 2022).

Rhinehart (2020) suggested that public officials' roles can close the candidate gender gap and decide to aid political aspirants. Once GAR6Afi decided to contest the district-level elections, honourable AMO campaigned concurrently alongside her, and they won their seats. The combined efforts of the assemblywomen would support in providing community needs. As 4ESTH admitted, her community lacked electricity. She said, "This school lacked electricity, school feeding, and access to water, and since I came, I have done my best to provide the basic needs for the school" (ER4ESTH, March 2022). 2DOR said, "We have also provided streetlights everywhere, which has helped in reducing theft in the community" (CR2DOR, February 2022). Aside from security, food has been a major basic need for humankind; hence, food security.

Food security

Food has been a major basic need of people, and the assembly members, being the development agents, find it their responsibility to provide avenues for food security. Apart from supporting the electorate growing their foods, advocacy and sensitisation about hygienic food consumption have been the responsibilities of many of the assembly women. A participant revealed:

Because of my background as a nurse, I have been going around advising food vendors concerning the cholera outbreak. I urge community members close to drains and around fitting shops on how to dispose of debris. I advise covering food with lids to avoid the flies that carry the cholera virus on the legs. They are happy after advising and visiting them to check, which results in positive outcomes (GARAMO, April 2022).

Assemblywomen advocate for their constituent concerns and use their positions to raise awareness about growing food in their backyards. They appeal to agricultural officers so that the communities can benefit from the necessary resources to address related challenges regarding food insecurity. A participant said, "In 2015, I supported the distribution of fertilisers to farmers and assisted the Agricultural Extension Officers to sensitise the farmers within my electoral areas" (ER7GRAZ, March 2022).

The World Bank (2018) cited in Pauw (2021) revealed that the food production index for sub-Saharan Africa increased to 24% between 2005 and 2014, but the import value increased to 185% in US Dollars within the same year interval. This indicates that countries in sub-Saharan Africa, including Ghana, have to secure themselves with high food production.

In the wake of food prices and global economic crises, assemblywomen in Ghana take it upon themselves to secure food produce for their community members. Women comprise more than 70% of food crop farmers and 90% in the internal agricultural distribution, marketing, and processing, but many have limited access to land in Ghana (Ofei-Aboagye, 2000). Despite their food production involvement,

most women, particularly the widows, aged, childless, and disabled, have suffered food insecurity (Ofei-Aboagye, 2000). Khanna, Kumar, Vaghela and Puliye's (2003) study in the New Delhi poor neighbourhoods indicated that girls were more than twice as likely to die of diarrhoea. In Ghana, a similar situation happens as women are nurtured to serve their husbands and boys with much protein, including meat and fish. Gadegbeku, Wayo, Ackah-Badu, Nukpe and Okai (2013) affirm that meat is well-thought-out to be a delicacy for men only and a taboo for women and children, which makes men have the monopoly of meat. The cause of the marginalisation could include excess mortality and progressive deterioration in the nutritional status of girls compared to boys, even if girls eat as much as boys. More complex is that many communities rely on women as wives, sisters, and mothers, but they have little education, poorer health, and greater food insecurity. An advocacy to increase their numbers in local government will assist in getting their needs addressed. Getting many women in the local government system would probably accelerate the construction of strategic needs for nursing mothers to function well. One such need is a nursery that would protect the infants of working mothers in their communities.

Daycare and Nursery Centres

The study found that one of the concerns of women in the local communities in Ghana is their inability to secure care centres for their children when they go to work. Women are seen as nurturers because of their biological makeup and the added societal reproductive responsibilities. Many assemblywomen were concerned about their young ones and cared for other nursing mothers. 9NAAkua said, "In such a case, where does the nursing mother leave her child before attending Assembly duties and who takes care of the other woman's child" (BR9NAAkua, March 2022). A key informant, a former Assemblywoman and a Women's leader, revealed that childbearing was one of the reproductive responsibilities that took much time and confirmed that many women could participate in politics only with a carer's support. She said, "I am a pioneer elected to the Assembly in the 1990s. One thing that helped me during that time was, any time I was not home, I left my children in the care of my mother" (ER5KOF, March 2022). 4ESTH also said, "We care for our children, husbands, and community" (ER4ESTH, March 2022). Assemblywomen recognised the strategic gender needs, such as nursing facilities, and collaborated with communities to provide them. A participant named 3ELIZ indicated that she did her best to help the community, especially the nursing mothers, who could not go to work with their babies trapped in their backs. She said, "This made me start a crèche to help teachers and fire service personnel" (WR3ELIZ, February 2022). A male key informant indicated that

The women manage the home, including caring for the children. When you come to my house, you will find that as early as 6 a.m., people are heard knocking at my door, and as I have discussions with them, my wife will be bathing the children and preparing them for school. (FGMSUNW, March 2022).

According to 6BEA, "Ghanaian women are nursing mothers who care and love every person and should love and bring unity in the country for development" (ER6BEA, March 2022). Women in the informal sectors require quality childcare services to enable them to work and earn enough money to support their households (Moussié,

2017). The assemblywomen have braced the odds and engaged in the community to cater to those strategic gender needs. Normally, the management of daycare centres was done by other women who desired to be public officials. A participant said, 'I served in that daycare centre and my support for the children earned me the parent's love. When I decided to step in the shoes of our hardworking assemblywoman, I gained support from my parents. Honourable also assisted in the campaign (WR4CHR, February 2022). On the one hand, in local politics in Ghana, governance is non-partisan; hence, an apolitical recruitment benefits the popular person in the community.

On the other hand, in partisan politics, political parties facilitate the recruitment of candidates through the legislative recruitment process (Matland, 2005). Regarding 4CHER's position as an assembly member, having served the community well with their needs naturally allowed her to excel in politics. Under the substantive representative theory, the incumbent assemblywoman's engagement with 4CHER and their response to the provision of the daycare centres manifested in her winning the subsequent district-level elections. 4CHER used her status as a career in the daycare to further address maternal and infant health needs when she coordinated with community health personnel to use the centre to administer immunisation vaccines. Such needs provision enhanced her chance as she hinted at contesting for re-election in the 2023 District Level elections. Imagine nursing mothers with their babies trapped at their journey on a deplorable route or road. 4CHER promised to also support other assemblywomen whose major agenda was to reconstruct deplorable wood bridges.

Road and Bridge Construction

The findings show that community members were very concerned about the deplorable roads and the collapsed bridges as District Assemblies failed to respond to their needs. Female aspirants campaigned to win the electorate's support by promising to construct roads and bridges for them. 13ROS said,

I told them that if they voted for me, I would construct a bridge that needed to be in better shape because the predecessors overlooked their needs (CR13ROS, February 2022).

3ELIZ had on her mind the construction of their deplorable roads before continuing to engage the community. She indicated that even though her predecessor did what he could, she saw a lot to be done, like road construction, drains, and sanitation (WR3ELIZ, February 2022). 8HAMS revealed a similar predicament when she visited her would-be electoral area for the first time. She, therefore, planned to make that place better for the community members. She said, "When I came to this community, I saw that our roads were deplorable, and so, I took a tour before deciding to contest for the position" (BR8HAMS, March 2022). An Assemblyman lamented that when the assembly went around to collect taxes, they failed to provide for the needs of the communities. He said,

Assembly can convince the people to pay taxes. However, when it rains, their houses get flooded, taxis are unable to go through the collected pool of water, people become victims of snake bites as they walk in darkness to their homes,

bridges are collapsing; do you think when you ask such people to pay taxes, they are going to pay again (FGMSUN, March 2022).

11CHOPB said, “With this kind of problem, I wrote letters to the Assembly requesting some logs to construct a bridge on the stream to save the people, but up till today, nothing has been heard from them” (BR11CHOPB, February 2022). The Assemblywomen take it upon themselves to provide such facilities to support community members. 10JUSTIN said,

There is a footbridge made of a log. This has been part of my agenda, and I have spoken to a contractor who asked for logs to construct it. There is a reconstructed collapsed staircase, and some people had given the community iron rods, cement, and other materials to reconstruct the staircase (CR10JUSTIN, February 2022).

When 14ELIZA became an Assemblywoman, she saw only five tarred roads out of 23 in her electoral areas, leaving them with 18 untarred roads, and she managed to tar 14. She said,

In my term of office, I have tarred most roads, leaving with only 3. Also, some drains have been expanded as they used to be very narrow so the place could flood when it rained (GAR14ELIZA, March 2022).

These assemblywomen have been improving the lives of community members. 2DOR said, “There was a drainage with a coconut log as a bridge for crossing, and anytime it rained and overflowed, no one could move from either end. I have been able to construct a concrete bridge over it” (CR 2DOR, February 2022). The assemblywomen collaborated with many NGOs and organisations to support their community members, which prompted other women to work towards community development. A key informant indicated that

Training aspiring assemblywomen to solicit funds at the local level requires meticulous planning of fulfilling programmes. We do not have many offices in the regions, but we travel to the districts and spend close to three days just to organise speech training for female aspirants. The assemblywomen most often organise the training and make the necessary arrangements for our stay (GARNGO, March 2022).

It was revealed that some assemblywomen became public speakers, exhibiting their leadership skills during training workshops.

Women’s Unique Leadership Characteristics

The study found that women's unique features enabled them to carry out administrative responsibilities. These features included leadership skills, confidence, political knowledge, and the ability to solicit support from local government and other groups.

Leadership skills

The study found that women have unique leadership features when administering their duties. Many assemblywomen admitted that they had been trained in quality

leadership, which was key to their success. 16YAO indicated that leadership was key to her success, saying,

I promised the people to organise the ladies and talk to them about teenage pregnancy so they could go to school and become leaders. If I had furthered my education, I would have gone past where I am today (ER16YAO, March 2022).

4ESTH revealed that “if a woman wants to get involved in the local government, she needs to show some leadership qualities such as humility, better public speaking, nice dressing and carries herself well” (ER4ESTH, March 2022). 7GRAZ believed their way of dressing could sometimes appeal to their audience, especially when they were dressed in simple attire and looked smart. A key informant in the Women’s Group said,

We usually listen to what the women say when we organise workshops for them. They mention individual women who take full sponsorship of their expenses, to the extent of leading them to see and talk to top personalities in society; that individuals in their hometown were the ones who gave them money (ERWGL, March 2022).

One assemblywoman boasted about her leadership skills and said,

Once I am invited to an assembly meeting, I inform my husband about it in a week or two. Sometimes, I arrive here about a week before the meeting, visit the community, and ask how things have been to keep me updated. If there is any problem, I take it to the Assembly for it to be addressed, and if there is no problem, whatever transpires there, I discuss it with my people (BR8Hams, February 2022).

14ELIZA acknowledges that “the District Assembly is the local authority. Therefore, the people at the grassroots need to consult officials through the Assembly representatives. There are some reasons why I am so passionate about leading and serving people” (GAR14ELIZA, March 2022). Acknowledging leadership roles as the assemblywomen’s responsibility in the community boosts community engagement for development.

Confidence in political knowledge

This study found that a confident woman knew much about the political situations in her local areas. Hence, she exhibits confidence in dealing with political personnel. A key informant indicated the significance of women exhibiting such confidence. He said,

In most cases, the women who believe in themselves that they can do it are normally few because of the idea that a woman should not take leadership duties when men are around. This has made women’s participation in local governance in Ghana low because they lack self-belief and confidence in how the men react towards the women. This makes the women cautious about such things (FGMSUNW, March 2022).

2DOR revealed the strategy that, through political lenses, her constituents believed and trusted her leadership responsibilities. She said,

It all depended on how I lived with the constituents, which gave them confidence that I would not disappoint them if they voted for me. It was based on the community's trust in me because when I mounted the platform, the way I talked to them and the kind of life I lived in this community made them accept me right there to be their representative in the assembly (CR2DOR, February 2022).

Community engagement reinforces attachment among people, and when it comes time to select leaders, there is a focus on choosing the hardworking ones. Local politics is competitive for women, and those with unique leadership skills could engage their communities to perform their administrative responsibilities as they can seek support from the local government authority.

Ability to solicit support from local government and other groups

The assemblywomen liaise with the District Assemblies to carry out their duties and responsibilities and their ability to win their support engineers their success in politics. 7GRAZ said,

Due to the high poverty rate in my area, I have been able to lobby for some projects like the construction of a National Community Health Planning and Services (CHPS Compound), which is also about 95% complete, so that maternal health care will be improved in the area. So, I went to the Assembly to help improve the indigenes' lives (ER7GRAZ, March 2022).

14ELIZA was innovative and planned her community for the District Assembly to reward her. She said,

So, I went into my documents, searched and brought out my road map within my community, which was something outstanding that the Assembly had never considered. With this innovation, they needed to applaud me. I was adjudged the Best Assembly Member for 2015 (GAR14ELIZA, March 2022).

Some assembly members also sought support from NGOs and other organisations. The goal of 9CATH was to organise the widows in her community and bring on board NGOs for support. She said, "I aimed to bring together the widows in the community and call on some NGOs to come to their aid. This was the message I took around during the campaigning, and it touched the hearts of women to support my bidding to become an assembly member" (2 March 2023). Apart from helping widows, 9CATH supported children. She liaised with the Campaign for Female Education (CAMFED), a pan-African movement supporting girls to attend school, thrive, and become influential leaders and changemakers in their communities.

9CATH said,

As an Assembly member and seeing some children who had passed their exams without help, I sent my proposal to a Non-Governmental Organisation called CAMFED, which oversees girl child education. It helped me assist four girls in their education, and they are taking care of them free of charge. This is a good achievement for me (BR9CATH, February 2022).

Other assemblywomen contacted financial institutions that lend financial support to women. 2DOR said, “I have been able to organise the women and access loans to help them in their trade” (CR2DOR, February 2022). 10JUSTIN was concerned about getting potable water. She said,

The community had a well that needed cement to fix. I have spoken to some people about this one, and they have promised that if I could get them about five bags of cement, that project would also be completed. I got help from elsewhere to finance those bags of cement (CR10JUSTIN, February 2022).

Assembly members are representatives of the people in their electoral areas and liaise with the District Assemblies to develop their communities. Studies have shown that decentralisation has helped a lot when interacting with the people at the grassroots as they are closer to the daily activities in the community (Ofei-Aboagye, 2000). 14ELIZA said, “We are like the intermediaries between the government and the electorate; whatever the government wants to do in our various communities, they are being channelled through us, and whatever the communities want the government to know are also channelled through Assembly Members” (GAR14ELIZA, March 2022).

Strategies for Empowering Women in Politics

Strategies for empowering women in politics include stakeholder engagement, encouraged networking with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and political parties, capacity-building and suggested training programs, guidance, and mentorship programs.

Stakeholder Engagement

It has been observed that inadequate stakeholder engagement could result from unclear stakeholder management objectives, ineffective communication, and stakeholder management issues (Amoatey & Hayibor, 2017). The study found that assemblywomen reached out for assistance to support community development. For instance, 1BECH said,

The support from other stakeholders of the District Assembly made me engage in the 2002 District Assembly Elections. In 2006, I ran for the second term, and I last contested in 2011. I have been able to do many things in my community (BR1BECH, March 2022).

2CICI said,

I sometimes go to the law courts to withdraw cases involving community members or a woman, and if it is possible, I talk to other parties and take the matter home for settlement. This has made everyone rally behind me and support my bid as an assembly aspirant (WR2CICI, February 2022).

Whenever assembly members wanted to engage the community, they consulted the opinion leaders and predecessors to support community development. 14ELIZA said, “I always get the traditional leaders involved” (GAR14ELIZA, March 2022). 14ELIZA had not been working in isolation and collaborated with individuals and businesses.

She said, “My relationship with stakeholders, Residents and Landlords Associations was because they are the custodians of the land; when you leave them out, you have no business. I will continue to have that cordial relationship to move forward (GAR14ELIZA, March 2022). 10JUSTIN said, “We have meetings with elders in the community to inform them about communal labour on Tuesdays and make the town crier call for people’s presence (CR10JUSTIN, March 2022). Stakeholder engagement facilitates the involvement of community members with the support of elected officials for inclusive governance. A key informant admitted that

The assemblywomen duties and responsibilities draw other women closer to engaging in community development under the authority of the local government administration. Engaging experts and communicating their needs with the belief of attracting support reinforces the need for more women to engage in local government administration (ERNGO2 March 2022).

Vitálišová, Murray-Svidroňová and Jakuš-Muthová (2021) assert that local government cannot work in isolation to attain sustainable development as accommodating and adapting to the multi-faceted and complex challenges from the perspective of a more technologically advanced understanding, educated and politically aware population will be great.

Guidance and Mentorship Programs

7GRAZ indicated that she was part of the group that organised programmes in the area to sensitise people on government policies. Sometimes, the distribution of agrochemicals to other female farmers was her responsibility, and she conscientised them to be aware that women could engage in activities such as politics, a perceived occupation for men (ER7GRAZ, March 2022). As an educationist in her constituency, 7GRAZ wanted more women to head the schools and had to embark on many sensitisations. She said, “We must educate the women as getting females to head primary schools is difficult.” When she became an assembly member, she wanted more women to be interested in local politics. Accordingly, there was a need for assembly members to educate other women. Guidance was needed to encourage other women to engage in local politics, which was part of the assemblywomen’s responsibilities. Once elected to the District Assembly, 7GRAZ served as a Role Model and embarked on sensitisation to empower women and girls. She said,

Since becoming a District Assembly member, I have mentored more than four women to the headship position. My involvement in the district can motivate women to reach greater heights. With my level of education and position as the District Education Officer for Girls, I will help them emulate certain behaviours to improve their careers and lives (ER7GRAZ, March 2022).

To 7GRAZ, those rural communities in the constituency were well known for teenage pregnancy, and she thought it wise to involve other women in the District Assembly to support her fight against the menace. 4ESTH believed that when many women get involved in the Assembly, it will help support others in engaging in local government administration.

She said,

It might be that women do not understand the assembly system. It one woman can fight her way to power, she can come down to educate others on certain issues in local governance. Therefore, women must participate in politics and be elected to the District Assembly (ER4ESTH, March 2022).

17DIPLO reiterated the essence of performing well as an assembly member for someone to emulate. She said, "Perhaps the work you do as an Assembly member will interest someone else to get involved. Someone can say that when woman A exhibits great performance, I can also do the same" (BR17DIPLO, March 2022). A male key informant believes that women should be involved in politics and that men are responsible for motivating them. He said,

The world needs women before anything can be successful, and their involvement in politics is key to development. I have realised that the ideas women politicians bring often help improve so many things, but I feel some of us (the men) should encourage women to engage in politics at the local level. Men should encourage and advise others to encourage more women (FGMSUN, March 2022).

For a woman to be a role model and mentor others to engage in politics requires commitment and dedication.

Encouraged networking with Civil Society Organisations and political parties

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), including Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), express their interest in empowering women in the communities; hence, they support aspirants to win political power to empower many women, assemblywomen liaise with the CSOs and NGOs for training and support. 4ESTH said,

Some NGOs help support women and talk to them about their civic responsibilities, as their duties in the home alone are not enough. Again, the NGOs should make us know that as women, there are some things we can do to help us become active in public spaces, as we cannot always stay at home and say, "We cannot do it." We should educate the women to get involved in the District Assemblies; even though I admit that we cannot do as the men do, we are unique (ER4ESTH, March 2022).

As the NGOs continue to encourage women, they support female politicians in excelling in their responsibilities, precipitating the interest of others. 11CHOPB indicated that some NGOs asked if she could sacrifice all her time to engage in politics, and they would help.

11CHOPB said,

I agreed with the NGOs to put away all my unprofitable work and allow myself to engage in local politics. They came to help us with a toilet facility and took pictures of me. They came to build a school and a football field and shared some bicycles and school bags, and I was involved in each of them (BR11CHOPB, February 2022).

Male key informants in the Western Region have also noted the work and support from the NGOs. An assemblyman said,

Suppose the District Assemblies recognise the NGOs' support for women's participation in politics. In that case, they will commit to giving any woman who wins an election in any of the electoral areas priority support in her developmental agenda and projects (FGMSUNW, February 2022).

2DOR observed support from the NGO. She said, "As the Electoral Commission prepares for another election, the NGOs will come and support us" (CR2DOR, February 2022). Some assemblywomen operate NGOs and support community members. For instance, 14ELIZA said, "We have an NGO that supports people and assists the vulnerable" (GAR14ELIZA, March 2022). She started a school with her husband in 1997 and gave the people free education. These assemblywomen have already been exposed to the public, and political parties yearn to be associated with them. Encouraging women into politics requires that they also avail themselves of being part of the political atmosphere, which may attract political parties to recruit them into their association. It happened that many of the assembly women were already affiliated with political parties and would want to encourage other women into it. For instance, 2DOR contested an election for the position of Deputy Women's Organiser of her political party in her constituency, which she won.

12DOCAS believed that political parties were responsible for encouraging many women to get involved in politics. She said, "I think political parties should encourage women to get involved in the Assembly because we need many women" (WR12DOCAS, February 2022). 7GRAZ said, "The way women interact with people if adopted by all, will improve politics" (ER7GRAZ, March 2022). Although the local government system in Ghana is non-partisan, political parties tend to sponsor aspiring assembly members with the perceived idea that those members would serve as campaign personnel in their constituencies.

Capacity-building and suggested training programs

Ghana's Decentralisation Policy Framework and Action Plan (2010-2014) and its implementation have identified the need to build adequate capacity at the district level to guarantee quality and sustainable service delivery (Amoatey & Hayibor, 2017). 4ELIZA believed in capacity building and in-service training to equip the assembly members. She said, "Elected personnel are occasionally given capacity building by the local government. As I said earlier, you can never be an effective leader without training, so there is the need to get it" (GAR4ELIZA, March 2022). NGOs also train aspiring women politicians to navigate through the political system. 4ESTH said,

Some NGOs took us for some course workshops and trained us in how we can go about campaigning. They again educated us on the concept of the local government system and what it entails; I can say that they were the ones who helped us before we got into the Assembly (ER4ESTH, March 2022).

The assemblywomen acknowledged capacity building and responded to any chance of training workshops. The Women's Group Leaders acknowledged the training aspect of building the capacity of speech delivery and sometimes organised training

for the female aspirants. One of the female key informants with a women's group said,

We do not only concentrate on the Group's activities but sometimes invite other women to join us in the workshops. The last time we organised the workshop, we trained many women who were not group members but wanted to contest for the Assembly positions (ERWGL, March 2022).

An assemblywoman also affirmed the significance of capacity building and said,

We were once invited to the Eastern Region for a seminar, and they advised us on how women should talk. Uncultured talking to our fellow humans is very bad and does not help matters. The trainers taught us that we need humility to be female leaders, as some women are overconfident in their responsibilities (WR3ELIZ, February 2022).

9CATH also said,

What made me get this position is that as members of the Catholic Christian Mothers Association, we were sent for some training, and the Electoral Commission in Cape Coast also trained us. The latter was announced on the radio, so someone came to interview me, informed me, and invited me to the training programme. These also helped and encouraged me to contest for the position of Assembly Member (BR9CATH, February 2022).

2DOR suggested that there were some plans before she contested as their representative in the assembly. She said, "The assembly organised some training for us, and I think after that, they should organise seminars for us from time to time so that we can develop the courage to speak to the crowd" (CR2DOR, February 2022). Antwi and Analoui (2008) reiterated the assertion of former President of the World Bank, Robert McNamara that there is significance in "building local African capacities as the cutting edge of Africa's strategic development agenda" (p. 505). In Robert McNamara's view, the necessary skills for the long term ensure sustainable growth, as capacity building and skill training should be a significant schedule in every development activity in Africa because of its implications for improved development management and good governance" (cited in Wood, 2000, p. 88). Notably, some participants confirmed their mentor's ability to encourage other women to speak during town hall meetings. A participant said, "For the past two terms, two electoral areas have had two elected assemblywomen and their works to support community members have been outstanding" (CREVE, February 2022). In the regions, while assemblywomen were engaging the communities for local development, they also liaised with other women to solicit support from philanthropists, NGOs and Women's Groups. These CSOs become part of training programmes, which ABANTU organises for development to educate incumbent and aspiring assemblywomen. For instance, a participant revealed her chance in many capacity training programmes that the incumbent assemblywomen had facilitated. 1OLD revealed that "ABANTU For Development, in collaboration with a foreign establishment, organised a training workshop for several assemblywomen who were invited to Accra, which I attended with CHRISTI, my mentor" (GAR1OLD, April 2022). When interviewed, CHRISTI

confirmed attending some workshops with other women aspirants. She indicated that

I attended the 66th New Year School organised by the Department of Adult Education and Human Resource Studies in 2015 in Legon because it concerned the local government system and E-Government. As an assembly member, I was invited along with other assemblywomen. We learned a lot and listened to local government experts (GARCHRISTI, April 2022).

Ofei-Aboagye (2004) acknowledges capacity training workshops for female members of the assemblies as the author revealed the agenda of the Government Accountability Improves Trust (GAIT) Programme implemented by the US NGO Cooperatives League of the United States of America (CLUSA) in collaboration with 20 districts selected from all the regions in Ghana. Thus, GAIT organised programmes to build women's leadership capacity as civic union representatives and female assembly members. These capacity training workshops signify the essence of having many women in the District Assemblies, hence, more strategies to enhance their numbers. The analysis revealed women who could win elections under the guidance and support of incumbent assemblywomen, where they won some seats that male contenders occupied.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study explored how women's administrative responsibilities and community engagement under the local government system empowered other women to engage in local politics. Through their unique leadership skills, the findings revealed women's administrative responsibilities in basic services, including water and sanitation, food security, and road and bridge construction. The study showed women's unique leadership characteristics and attended workshops with female mentees, aspiring to be members of the assembly. This study revealed that the women were exposed to skill training, including how to campaign and give speeches in public, how to live their way of life, how to dress, and how to get support to create a more inclusive governance that better serves the diverse needs of the communities. The study also highlights strategies that could politically empower women to ensure inclusive governance in five regions of Ghana. The implications are that community engagement significantly satisfies a fair representation in decision-making and enhances inclusive governance as the assemblywomen embrace it and have many more women to work with them in the community. Stakeholders were engaged, including Civil Society Organisations and political parties. The gender inequality in politics seemed to be addressed as the assembly women encouraged inclusive governance when many women were encouraged through women politicians who were their mentors.

Once the affirmative action bill of Ghana has been passed and assented into law, the NGOs should continue to drum up the need to have many women in decision-making positions in governance at the local level. The study recommends encouraging assemblywomen to mentor other women in local politics to improve inclusive governance. The society should also be sensitised to acknowledge the inclusivity of the genders.

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