

GENDER, VULNERABILITY AND THE POLITICS OF DECISION-MAKING IN GHANA: THE CASE OF THE UPPER EAST REGION

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Abstract

This paper examines the gender implications of vulnerability in relation to the politics of decision-making in Ghana with particular reference to the Upper East Region. Using concept analysis, it situates the question of vulnerability within the context of the Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy (GPRS), which defines it as extreme poverty and in relation to exclusion. Examining the characteristics set out in the GPRS, it argues that the people of the Upper East Region are vulnerable but women are more vulnerable. This is demonstrated by the fact that women are affected by all but also have care responsibility of seven out of the thirteen-point characteristics of vulnerable people set out in the GPRS. An analysis of the decision-making structures of the household, community and district/regional levels reveals a pattern of exclusion, which is attributable to their vulnerability. Indeed, women's low participation and representation in the formal structures of the district and regional administration is a carry over from the informal structures of the household/family and community. Hence, it is argued that change is imperative and that such change can occur only if structures are transformed to promote not just access to but also opportunities for influencing the decision-making process.

Key Words: Women, Decision-making, Poverty, Politics, Vulnerability and Gender

1.0 Introduction

The gendered implications of political participation in Ghana raise various questions regarding the vulnerable positions of women in society. Questions regarding deepening poverty among some

populations, attributable to vulnerability and exclusionism, and their implications for fostering democratic governance continue to raise serious concerns. The continued ruralization and feminization of poverty even in the era of seeming economic growth leaves questions on social justice and gender equity (Amoah 2004; Hesse 2000; Ghana Government 1996). Undoubtedly, blanket programming and even targeted initiatives have not succeeded in addressing the problems of the majority rural poor and women. Inarguably, Ghana's rural poor and women continue to live under conditions that perpetuate vulnerability. Ongoing development efforts that seek growth through poverty reduction are beginning to recognize the significance of addressing the question of vulnerability in general and it affects an women in particular (Ghana Government 2003; Rodenberg 2001).

In this paper, I situate discussions within the national framing of vulnerability as captured in the Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy (GPRS) to examine the question of vulnerability as it affects the peoples of the Upper East Region in general and women in particular. I then link the question of vulnerability to decision-making by examining household, community and district/regional level structures. In the process, the gendered underpinnings of the structures are unraveled and contested. Consequently, I argue that the vulnerable position in which women in the Region find themselves serves to restrict access to political participation. I conclude by inviting all well meaning Ghanaians, especially agents of change, to reconsider more seriously questions of women's vulnerability and work to reduce and eventually eliminate them for greater political participation in order to realize and sustain ongoing efforts at securing and sustaining democratic governance.

2.0 Identifying the vulnerable

The question of vulnerability has become topical in development parlance in recent time. Its use in reference to specific issues about development and underdevelopment has led gradually to its assumption of specific meanings. Although various authors define it

in diverse terms, one thing remains key and it is with reference to liability. Seers (1969/79) examines development in terms of its impact on unemployment, inequality and poverty. Sen (1999) views development in terms of the injustices that it unleashes on vulnerable groups. On his part, Chambers (1997/2003) configures development in terms of wellbeing. In all cases, the question of vulnerability motivates analysis. These authors suggest that the vulnerable are more likely to suffer the consequences of actions and inactions than the average person. Consequently, Chambers has often sought to put them first in all matters regarding development. Indeed, these are the people that should define and shape development. The questions that remain are: *Who are they? What spaces do they occupy? Where do they reside?* I examine these questions within the Ghanaian and Upper East Regional context.

In development contexts, where poverty and depravity are often at issue, vulnerability refers to the more than average negative effects of policies, programs and projects on certain groups and individuals. It refers to the extent to which some populations are more likely to experience poverty and depravity as a result of the policies, programs and projects. It looks at who are more likely to be hurt, denied and underprivileged by policies, programs and projects. In Ghana, they are the extreme poor.

2.1 *The vulnerable are the extreme poor:*

In the Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy 2003 (GPRS) vulnerability is linked closely to exclusionism. Hence, programs for the vulnerable are also meant to address exclusionism. The vulnerable and excluded are perceived to comprise people living in extreme poverty. They are identified to include:

- **Rural agricultural producers**, particularly migrant farm hands, settlers and traditional fishermen and food crop farmers.
- **Children living under difficult circumstances**, including the quarter of children under five who are malnourished, victims of child labour, street children, school aged children who are not in

school, a fifth of boys and a third of girls of school drop outs, children living in institutions and children orphaned by HIV/AIDS.

- **People living with HIV/AIDS**, including infected persons and families of people living with HIV/AIDS
- **Displaced communities**, particularly those subjected to periodic flooding/drought, negative effects of mining and tourism and ethnic conflicts
- **Disadvantaged women**, particularly single mothers, malnourished rural pregnant and nursing mothers, teenage mothers, "kayayee" (i.e., female head porters) and commercial sex workers
- **Residents of urban slums** including retrenched workers, unemployed youth and areas affected by decline in economic activities and low-income neighborhoods
- **The elderly** who have no access to family care and pension
- **Physically challenged persons**, particularly those with no employable skills
- **People suffering from chronic diseases** including victims of debilitating diseases such as tuberculosis, buruli ulcer, guinea worm, trachoma, bilharzia and breast cancer
- **Drug addicts**
- **Victims of abuse**, particularly children and women suffering from sexual abuse and battery
- **Victims of harmful traditional practices** especially victims of harmful widowhood rites, early marriage, servitude, fosterage and perceived witchcraft
- **Unemployed**, especially unskilled and retrenched workers and the unemployed youth. (Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy 2003: 114-115)

This national picture, for me, captures the plight of the peoples of the Upper East Region and also of women.

2.2. The peoples of the Upper East Region are the vulnerable:

Women and men as well as girls and boys live in very deplorable conditions in and outside the Upper East Region. Population pressures on very limited and degraded lands have compelled the migration of peoples of the Region to farming areas, especially in Bono Ahafo and Asante Regions, where they suffer in the hands of landlords. Such conditions also push the youth; male and female, to migrate to cities and towns where they live in shanty and squatter areas trying to scap a living. Due to their low levels of education and skills, people of the Upper East Region often dominate the core of the migrant working class labour in households, institutions, industries and commercial farms where they often work.

Due to the migration of largely the youth, communities back home are left with the elderly, women and children. More and more women and children are forced to take on, entirely, the roles and responsibilities of household maintenance. Women and children are pushed into all forms of activities in order to support the household and family. Female-headed households and child labor have become the norm rather than the exception.

Many children of the Region live under very difficult conditions especially in their growing years due to the yearly famines resulting from poor yields and food insecurity. These have deep implications for the nourishment, intellectual development and academic performance of children and youth. The lack of basic necessities such as food, shelter and clothing create more than difficult conditions for the majority of the children of the Region (EPA-UER 1998; IRME-GNCC/SCF (UK)/UNICEF 1997). The persistent problems of non-school attendance and high disengagement rates have deep implications for the low levels of enrolments. More importantly, the poor performance of students at the basic level can be attributed to the difficult conditions by which they live. These conditions push children more and more from their homes and out of school, full or part time, where they engage in all kinds of child labour and various hazards.

The very difficult socio-economic and geographical conditions make the Region less attractive to industrialists. Schools are turning out young people who cannot find jobs and as such join the teeming numbers of the unemployed. Many of them are compelled to work in nightclubs and drinking bars in Accra, Kumasi and Tema selling *khebab* to earn some living. Communities have to depend solely on agricultural lands that have more rocks than soil and which have been over-cultivated over the years. Combined with the vagaries of the weather, people's ability to even feed themselves thins out by the year. Food crop and livestock farming remains predominant occupations.

The conditions under which peoples of the Region live in urban slums also make them vulnerable to chronic diseases, alcoholism and drug addiction. These people live in the *Nimas*, *Sukulas*, *Abaabos* and *Zongos* and not in the residential areas of Accra and Kumasi. The poor sanitary conditions, rickety transport, degrading shelter, low access to potable water and poor drainage of shanty living expose them to many health hazards.

In the largely rural communities of the Region and elsewhere in Ghana, alcoholism and drunkenness have reached alarming proportions as both men and women seek solace in "*akpeteshie*", a locally brewed gin. The smoking of Indian Hemp is common place and young people demand them when invited to work on farms and/or render services.

HIV/AIDS, which is fast becoming a disease of the poor, is taking roots in the Region with Bawku and Navrongo counting among the top quartile in the country. Lamenting on the growing incidence of HIV/AIDS in the Region, Anyogyedem (2003) pointed out that the situation was worsening resulting in a cumulative total of 3944 cases from 1989 to June 2003. He put the mean HIV prevalence rate at 3.9%. Sentinel survey for the Region from 2002 shows increasing growth rates from 1.6%, 3.6% and 2.4% in 2001 to 2.8%, 3.8% and 5.1% in 2002 for Bolgatanga, Bawku East and Navrongo Districts,

respectively. Chronic and debilitating diseases such as elephantiasis, hydrocele and goiter are prevalent.

That nine out of ten people in the Region are poor is evident of the fact that over 80% of our people live in rural areas (Ghana Government 2003; 1995). In Ghana, poverty is a rural phenomenon. In these largely rural communities, there is the lack of modernizing agents like good roads, housing, water and sanitation, electricity, schools and hospitals. Apart from the main road connecting the East to West, all other roads in the Region remain untarred. Bongo District has not got even a meter of tarred road yet. There are still entire communities that are not accessible by automobiles. Entire communities live in houses that are very prone to the yearly strong winds and heavy rains. These storms and rains rip off roofs and collapse houses each year putting additional burdens on already poor peoples. While the water situation has improved, relatively, sanitation facilities remain non-existent in most communities. This situation poses great danger to water sources with serious negative implications for healthy living.

Although the educational situation has improved dramatically during the last decade, qualitatively and quantitatively, there are still many challenges regarding rural enrolments, female education, staffing and facilities (REPT-UER 2003; GES-UER 2003). There are still entire communities in the Region that have no form of school at all. Young children have to travel out of their communities to attend beginner and primary schools. That school enrolment rates remain low can be attributed to poverty but also the low level of facilities and resources. Children still sit under trees and/or lie on their stomachs to write in class. Qualified teachers are a luxury for such schools. Teaching resources are hardly adequate in many rural schools. These render teaching and learning very arduous.

The rural electrification program is expanding. Some rural communities are being wired to the national grid others remain in darkness. Even in communities where electrification is available many house-

holds are not able to afford the cost of wiring or the payment of bills resulting in the loss of access. People are being disconnected and meters taken away due to inability to pay the high tariffs. How could they then access the Presidential Special Initiative on Distance Learning under the circumstance?

In spite of improved health delivery, the people continue to suffer exclusions in access to services. Apart from the inability to pay for available services the quality of the services remains low due to inadequate staff levels, extent of coverage and lack of equipment and skilled personnel to address complex cases. EPA-UER (1998) reports that the Region:

... has a comparatively poor health care delivery system as against the national average. The Region still has a relatively high infant mortality rate. About 38% of the rural areas in the Region is covered by health services as compared to the national average of 60%. ... Health facilities in the Upper East Region have the poorest in the country. The Region's 1.14 million population is served by four government hospitals, two private hospitals, twelve health centers and twenty-six clinics (Upper East Regional Profile: 14)

In addition to delivery-related challenges, access and affordability to the ever-increasing health costs are excluding many people. Also, lack of knowledge on the part of many non-literate populations and greed on the part of some health personnel denies access to even free services to pregnant women, children under five and the aged (above 60 years).

The many cases and areas of exclusion discussed above raise questions of social injustice with deep gender equity implications. While the injustices that the peoples of the Region face are general even from the discussions there are suggestions of their gendered implications. I will narrow subsequent discussions to women as the most vulnerable and excluded.

2.3 The women of our Region are even more vulnerable:

Women's vulnerability in the Region is not far-fetched. The highly patriarchal societies of the Region subjugate women into positions that intensify their vulnerability. As traditional caregivers, women have the added responsibility of taking care of children, the sick and the elderly.

As such in addition to their own unique vulnerability they also have to care for persons living with HIV/AIDS, alcoholics and drug addicts, the physically challenged and those living with chronic diseases as well as children and the unemployed. The burden of taking care of seven out of the thirteen identified groups rests squarely on women. As well, women are victims of abuse and harmful cultural practices. Times past, migration was a male phenomenon. In recent time, women and girls of the Region litter the streets of cities and towns seeking jobs as "kayayee." These largely young females are subject to all kinds of abuse including rape and battery. Some of them are forced into prostitution and/or pimped by so-called male protectors. Apart from the psychological trauma suffered, these young females become vulnerable to STIs including HIV/AIDS. No wonder more women than men are reporting and dying of AIDS (Agangmikre 2003; Anyogyegdem 2003). They are also getting pregnant very young and having babies without the necessary skills for earning a living and/or the support of fathers and/or husbands.

Cultural systems place certain restrictions on women that intensify their vulnerability (Apusigah 2004; Batuolkuu-Obeng-Ofori n.a.). Women are subject to various forms of harmful cultural practices that do not only make them vulnerable but also capitalize on their already vulnerable positioning in society. Due to this, women who are likely to be held liable for the death of a husband submit themselves to widowhood rites to prove their innocence. Young girls have to submit themselves to dangerous genital mutilation in order to prove maturity even as they advertise themselves. What an interesting way to commodify womanhood!

Cultural practices that allow girls to serve older females such as aunts, sisters and cousins in their marital homes force young females into marriages without choice and very early. Such arrangements also put the service of the girls ahead of their education resulting often in their denial of access to formal education with implications for female literacy, income and employment levels. Some girls are compelled into early and/or forced marriage very early in their lives as relatives give them out in return for some material gains.

Equally disturbing is the cultural practice of "yiwien'zaba" or "ta'zaba" that is taking some females out of school because they become pregnant. Gurunsi and Nankani females are particularly vulnerable. This is resulting in generations of single mothers and fatherless children who know not what it means to live in homes where the love and care of both father and mother are shared. Also, the burden of raising, educating, feeding, clothing and sheltering the children rests often on mothers many of whom have very limited means of livelihood. The growing numbers of out-of-school children, increasing incidence of streetism in our town centers, high female school drop out rates, high infant and maternal mortality rates compound vulnerability and exclusionism.

Also, the changing cultural systems are contributing to the intensification of women's vulnerability (Apusigah 2004; Batuolkuu-Obeng-Ofori n.a.). The breakdown of communal life, where children and women were taken care of, has contributed to creating a category of people who cannot own resources and yet are being denied use rights. As family lands and other property become individualized greed rather than goodwill seizes the better part of rationality. There also are cases when women's self-acquired possessions have been usurped or misapplied by their husbands because, culturally, women and what properties they acquire are subject to the husband's control. Indeed, traditional inheritance systems do not favor females. Daughters and wives are not heirs in their natal or marital homes. Females have use, not ownership, rights to even property to which they have contributed in amassing. The list is endless.

The implications of these for the education, health and rights of women are obvious. Illiteracy rates are as high as 80% in some Districts and communities (REPT-UER 2003; CENSUDI 2001). Female educational enrolment rates fall as low as 30% of the national average. Over 60% of women do not have or can not afford access to formal health delivery. The maternal mortality rate (MMR) is very high at 600 per 1000 (Agangmikre 2003). These extreme poor conditions and the demands of cultural systems pose several human rights challenges.

This situation constitutes a denial of rights provided in legislation such as the 1992 Constitution, The African Charter on Rights and the United Nations Charter on Rights. I am forced to suggest that if the over half of our populations continue to live under such deplorable conditions there will be no guarantee of the progress promised through community and national development initiatives. I attribute this situation to the gendered nature of our decision-making mechanism that largely denies women their rights to self-determination.

3.0 A gendered decision-making mechanism

In her background paper, Tsikata (n.a) explained that including women in decision-making requires more than access creation. It entails as well making it possible for women to participate and negotiate the political process in ways that enable them to influence decisions. I add that paper guarantees of access only as enshrined in various legislation and the establishment of quotas as in the various affirmative action initiatives will amount to nothing if women are unable to influence decisions. It should be possible for gender concerns to be centered in all manner of decision-making.

Due to the history of female exclusion from our political processes it becomes imperative for gender concerns to stay in focus of all political processes. Above all, the agenda of females should become central to initiatives that seek to enhance democratic governance whether propelled by males and/or females. Indeed, the decision-making mechanism whether at the household, community, district

and regional level is very skewed with women in disadvantaged positions. Gender inequities in access and control of decision-making serve to deny women the right to political participation.

3.1 Household level:

The household as the basic social unit has deep implications for actions and inactions within and out of its sphere. The teachings and learning that occur at that level shape the character and behavior of the members of the household, a number of which form the community. That decision-making at the household is gendered is common knowledge. The very structures of the household make it possible and/or impossible for men and women to take and play roles that result in the subjugation of the latter. If the definition of gender as a social construction has any credibility then it is the household that is the main determinant.

At the household level, women can make **decisions that pertain** to their roles as care givers in the home. By role definition, **they** control affairs in the culinary area and home maintenance. **These are** not key players in the decision-making structure. Women, however, have restricted access when it comes to making important family decisions. The heads of clan, family and/or household hold this prerogative. Apart from representing the entire clan, family, or household at the community level, the head defines and shapes decisions within the family. Within a typical Frafra household, the head apportions foodstuff and even cooked meat, grants permission for the movement of household member and determines who can go and stay in school and for how long. Even in these days that female-headed households are on the rise, the female head still has to defer to a male head.

Often time, women find themselves as recipients and implementors. Among many ethnic groups, it is customary not to seek the views of women when important decisions are made (Apusigah 2004). In fact, women may only listen and not contribute. They might only be permitted in some cases. Culturally, women's involvement in

decision-making is by default. However, they might be able to affect decisions by influencing their husbands. Women are noted for using this avenue most often and perfectly too.

Women's confinement to the inner perimeters of the compound naturally limits their involvement. Decisions are often made in front of the compound where men met men to talk. Women who are found to be moving out of the inner perimeter are looked on with scorn and as gossips. Men noted for relating family discussions to their wives are not considered men enough.

Furthermore, very important decisions regarding access to critical cultural resources such as education, employment, political representation and land, among others, originate from the households. Households and families decide which children can attend school. The result is that boys, rather than girls, are given better access. The denial of more girls than boys to education gives boys a general edge in employment, political participation and access to critical status symbols over girls.

The power of the household is also transferred to the community, district and regional levels. The social constructions of females and males influence the politics of decision-making at these levels. These are translated in the dismal representation of women in the structures and the systemic discrimination that females face in these structures.

3.2. Community level:

Indigenous communities are often perceived as communalistic. They are perceived to cater to the needs of all members. However, more and more, research is showing that these communities are not intrinsically democratic (Amanor 2004; Guijt & Shah 1999). In what can be described as a contestation of the blind return to traditionalism, Amanor (2004) argues that our traditional systems do not represent all views. He suggests that attempts to return to traditions and indigenous ways must be guided by the notion that traditional

structures are not innately democratic. Indeed, the politics of decision-making at the community is deeply steeped in patriarchal structures that often subjugate women's experience and deny them effective social participation.

Decision-making at the community level rests with male members. At this level, the chief and his elders wield political power. They make and unmake laws. They determine and mete out justice and/or injustices. There is also the "tendaana", who is the spiritual head. The "tendaana" is the custodian of the land and all its contents: water, trees, grooves, rocks and hills. All the spirits that reside on the land are within this custodianship. The tendaana mediates between the spirits and the living.

At the community level, where traditionally decisions are made by representation, family/household/clan heads have the privilege of making them on behalf of all. These heads, often male, are culturally empowered to think and act on behalf of everybody. Indeed, it is the case that even in female headed households, clan heads or some other male act on behalf of the woman. During community meetings these heads are the ones who represent the views of all. Discussions from such meetings are normally shared with the male members of the family. Female members might only be informed if the discussions affect them directly. They might be aware of any such happening only because the heads are leaving the house.

In this era of the drive toward better democratic participation, communities are encouraged to involve women in the decision-making structures. Women and men may attend community meetings but one thing easily becomes obvious. Most women take positions behind the men and might never talk at all. At best what they do is nod to decisions taken by men. Even when invited to share their views, in many cases they concur or say they have nothing to say or add. A facilitator will need extra skills to get the first woman talking, then others might join.

Women who are outgoing and speak their minds freely and openly during such meetings are branded not by only men but also fellow women. Hence, most women will rather hold their tongues when found in the company of men. The very same women who will be very vocal during women's meetings or in their homes are tongue-tied during such community meetings. This situation stems from the fact that decision making, traditionally, is the preserve of men. Men talk while women listen. A similar picture is easily observed in formal politics.

3.3. District/Regional level:

In formal political structures women are poorly represented. The rate of physical representation has and continues to remain low compared to that of males. Women's issues hardly make it to the top agenda of decision-making as gender issues remain largely outside the mainstream. The situation is compounded by the fact that the few women who get access to formal structures of decision-making lack influencing abilities. These few women remain largely on the floor and serve on welfare related committees. They hardly make it to executive committees and other powerhouses of political processes and structures.

A visit to District Assemblies (DA) and the Regional Coordinating Council (RCC) fora reveal a woeful lack of female representation. The top hierarchy of DA and RCC comprising ministers, directors and chief executives is all made up of males. The situation is not different in the departments and agencies. With the exception of the Environmental Protection Agency and the Tourist Board, females are represented mainly in the "usual" places, within "their" establishments," such as the National Commission on Children, National Council on Women and Development, Department of Nursing and in recent times as Gender Desk Officers. During important meetings, one might be lucky to have a brief discussion on women's issues. It might become easily obvious the lack of depth during such rare discussions due to the rapidity with which they are passed or even dismissed.

Representation in the Assemblies is not different. None of the six District Assemblies has a third female representation (CENSUDI 2004; EC 2003). The closest is Bolgatanga Municipal Assembly with 24% of female representation of total membership. The worst is Bawku East with 8% female representation of the total membership. See Table 1 below:

Table 1: By Gender distribution of Assemblypersons in MDAs

DISTRICT	TOTAL	MEN	WOMEN	% WOMEN
Bolgatanga	71	54	17	24
Bongo	47	39	8	17
Builsa	55	46	9	16
Bawku West	39	34	5	13
Kassena-Nankana	71	63	8	11
Bawku East	71	65	6	8
TOTAL	354	301	53	15

Source: Electoral Commission, Upper East Region 2003.

The picture here shows that the younger DAs are doing much better, compared to older ones, in terms of women's representation. Although Bawku East shares commonalties such as the size of the Assembly and the history of dismembering Bolgatanga maintains a lead in women's representation. Even its splinter District, Bawku West is doing much better in both rate and raw score. For the entire Region, out of a total of 354 assemblypersons, only 53 representing 15% are female. Out of the 53 female representatives only 15 were elected, the rest, 38 were appointed. See Table 2.

DISTRICT	ELECTED	APPOINTED
Bolgatanga	7	10
Bongo	3	5
Builsa	4	5

Bawku West	0	5
Kassena-Nankana	1	7
Bawku East	0	6
TOTAL	15	38

Source: Adapted from Electoral Commission, Upper East Region, 2003

The poor picture depicted above persists in spite of Government directive that 30% of appointees to DAs should be women (Abantu for Development 2003). Indeed, this is only a directive not law and local authorities are left with many loopholes to exercise discretion. Yet, the fact remains that the national government could have done more if it insisted on the meeting of such quotas before nominations are approved.

This shows that the electorate is not electing as many women as men or that women unlike men are not offering themselves for elections. Data from the 2001 elections show, however, that the latter rather than the former, is the case. The picture can be attributed to the lobbying, canvassing and support that the women got during that period. Data from the Electoral Commission (EC) (2003) indicate that in 2001 forty (40) women representing 6% of the regional total, stood for elections to DAs, however, only fifteen (15) representing 38% were elected. This poor showing was in spite of the support given to female contestants by various women's advocacy groups such as the Center for Sustainable Development Initiative (CENSUDI) and Abantu for Development. Like the case of the informal structure of the household/family and community level, women remain very excluded from the formal decision-making structures.

Whichever way it is looked at the fact remains that in the Upper East Region and within the Districts, women remain largely outside the decision-making structures and processes. It is the case that both formal and informal decision-making structures remain gender discriminatory. In spite of the fact that females outnumber males (i.e.,

92.6 males to 100 females), males rather than females dominate the decision-making mechanism (Ghana Statistical Service, 2002). This is attributable to the double whammy that women suffer from carrying the larger burden of extreme poverty and of cultural systems that work to intensify such vulnerability. If change is going to be effected then not only should the decision-making structures and processes be sensitive to gender issues but also that work needs to be intensified to minimize and eventually eliminate their gendered practices. This will require not just access to but also the empowerment of women to influence and demand accountability.

4.0 Making a change

I conclude by saying that the situation is not getting any better. It is worsening as culture gets misconstrued and manipulated to serve the interest of the powerful within the social system. It is worsening as both national and local policies fail to address the specific questions of the vulnerable. The situation is not getting better as the conditions of the extreme poor intensify. It is not getting better as women and girls continue to suffer various forms of political exclusion that result from gender-based discrimination, overtly and covertly, that deny access to political decision-making in both formal (i.e., at the household/family and community levels) and informal (DA and RCC) structures. This is the more reason why vulnerability issues must become critical to any political process. The lack of control and in some cases access to cultural and capital resources by our people and especially so for women and girls create conditions of voicelessness and powerlessness. What then can be done to change this situation? Work is ongoing toward improving access to basic needs. But more work is needed in the area of decision-making. If women's conditions and status in our societies are going to change then they should become more active participants in the change process. This requires that females become more politically active and are able to influence decision-making both in the formal and informal structures.

Making a change will require that we return to traditional structures to explore traditional power structures for amendments. In recent time, *magazia* (an informal female leadership position) are being brought to the traditional making structure. This initiative can be expanded to include the *daig-daana* (i.e., head of females of the household and family) as counterpart of the head of household. Land reforms must look beyond the native/migrant, royalty/ordinary and landlords/tenant divides. The gender implications of resources need to underpin such initiatives. Education for girls to increase their social participation during adulthood needs to be fast-tracked as ongoing efforts have only performed dismally. Adult women could be provided training to enhance their skill development for political participation. Above all, the entire society needs the kind of transformation that can lead to the acceptance of females as equal and capable members of society who deserve the same rights as their male counterpart for political decision making. There is the need to change attitudes, build capacities and re/distribute resources. Above all, gender equally must underlie all mainstream politics of decision-making.

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