

## **The Contribution of Women's Organizations to the Changing Roles of Women: The Case of Selected Women's Organizations in the Ashanti Region of Ghana.**

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### **Abstract**

Closing the gender gap and enhancing women's participation in development have been on the heart of many governments. Women actors, as individuals normally face a diversity of problems, challenges and hindrances, which considerably limit their performance and contribution to national development. Looking at their underprivileged position, a number of women in Ghana are mobilizing themselves in women's organizations to improve their social, political and economic circumstances. How efficient these organizations are as instruments for enhancing women's status and contributing to changing roles of women in society was the focus of this research.

Data was collected from both primary and secondary sources. Semi-structured interviews and individually administered questionnaire were used to seek information on the objectives, activities, and mode of operations and challenges of the various women's organizations. A combination of purposive, proportional stratification and convenience sampling techniques were used for this research. In all, twenty-one women's organizations were selected, fifteen from the Kumasi Metropolis and all the six registered in the Ejisu-Juabeng district.

The research revealed that, the activities of some women's organizations have altered some of the factors that determined the inferior positions of women and hence their roles. Some women's organizations exist only as social groups that have not made much impact on the roles of women. It further revealed that, differences exist between women's organizations in rural and urban areas in terms of their activities and operations and the level of impact they have made towards the changing roles of women.

For women's organizations to be efficient and effective in order to really impact on the roles of women, they should make female education, sensitization, advocacy and lobbying a priority in their activities. It is education that empowers women to challenge oppressive rules

and regulation, broaden their outlook and worldview, offers them the possibility of choice beyond their traditional gender roles and gives them a sense of control over their own affairs.

## **1.1 Introduction**

The roles of women in general are significant with respect to economic development. In spite of this, women have suffered severely due to certain unfair customs and traditional stipulation since pre-colonial and colonial, as well as the first two decades of the postcolonial era.

Women are not only tied up with day-to-day responsibilities for children and domestic services but are also restricted in their access to essential and strategic resources. They are denied equal access compared to that of men particularly with respect to productive resources such as land, labour, credit, education and extension services. This clearly undermined the type, level and extent of their participation in economic production and national development. Like their counterparts in many countries of the world, most women in Ghana have lower education, training, and skills, as compared to men.

Various reasons have been given for women's relatively poor access to resources and the dormant role they play in nation building. These include the traditional patriarchal system, the poor educational enrolment and attainment, and heavy time burdens and positions in the family and the household. In the last few decades however, Ghana has made some progress towards achieving gender equality. Ghana's commitment and aspiration to mainstream gender equality across public policy and in the planning and delivery of service, has significantly been promoted for some time now (Akpalu, and Aboagye-Offei).

A Ministry of Children and Women's Affairs has been established and a Minister has been appointed to oversee the implementation of the Affirmative Action policy, in liaison with the National Council on Women and Development. In spite of all these efforts, gender inequalities continue to limit women's capabilities, and constrain their abilities to participate fully in the development move and to contribute to the economy (Tsikata, 1989).

Women in most developing countries have therefore organized themselves into self-help groups. These women's groups have been championed as a mechanism through which women can become an important part of the equation in development (Wamalwa, 1991).

Professional women's groups like the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA), the Ghana Registered Midwives Association, and the Women Doctors Association have been doing much within the specific areas of competence and in accordance with their resources to help women and to sensitize them on their rights and responsibilities, and to create a general awareness of the importance of gender issues in national development (Nikoi, 1993).

Women's organizations have been and are still influential in creating better social, economic, political and religious circumstances specifically adapted to women. The focus of this study was therefore to find out the extent to which these women's organizations have contributed to the changing roles of women in Ghana as well as their development problems and challenges.

## **1.2 Problem Definition**

The role of women in national development is considerably significant considering the fact that they constitute more than half of the nation's population. Thus when policy and planning fail to appreciate the significance of women and hence their needs and concerns, the ultimate goal of development can hardly be attained. Hitherto, the roles of women have been regarded as a low key developmental one. By low key development activities, reference is made to the manifold activities carried out by women, especially in the third world, that is, petty trading, food processing and marketing food crops. They tend to be home based, using simple labour intensive technologies. Due to their low levels of literacy and skills, they are not in any position to improve their opportunities. Consequently, they remain in low skilled, low status and low paid jobs (Lloyd, 1968). The consequence of this is the fact that, a lot of them are poor.

Looking at the underprivileged position of women, a number of them in Ghana are mobilizing themselves in women's organizations to improve their social, political and economic circumstances. Women's organizations are organizations that are dedicated to strengthening the position of women in their societies through income generation, women's rights and legal change, and access to health education, agric improvement, and other activities. How is the management capacity of these women's organizations as well as their goals, focus and strategies? How efficient are these organizations as instruments for enhancing women status in society. In recent times however, some women are playing certain roles that are outside the traditional ones. It is thus important to investigate the activities of women's organizations to know the extent to which they have contributed to these changing roles.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

1. To what extent have the socio-economic and political roles of women changed in Ghana?
2. What role have women's organizations played in the changing roles of women?
3. What strategies do these women's organizations use in bringing about this change?
4. What challenges do these organizations face and how can these challenges be dealt with?

### **1.4 Objectives of the Study**

The goal of the research is to study the activities of women's organizations and the contributions they have made to the changing roles of women in Ghana.

The specific objectives of the study were to:

1. identify the changing socio economic and political roles of women,
2. analyze the activities of the selected women's organizations,
3. analyze the effect of their activities on the roles of women,
4. identify the challenges of these organizations, and
5. make recommendations to inform policy review on gender mainstreaming.

### **1.5 Research Methodology**

For in-depth analyses, the research adopted the cross-sectional approach. Data was collected from both primary and secondary sources. Secondary sources entailed the review of relevant literature on the topic from books, journals, periodicals, newspapers, magazines and the Internet as well as reports of some institutions concerned with gender issues. Semi-structured interviews and individually administered questionnaire were used. Some personnel at the offices of the National Council for Women and Development (NCWD), Center for the Development of People, Department of Community Development, The Kumasi Metropolitan Assembly and the Ejisu-Juabeng District Assembly were also interviewed for their inputs into the study.

In selecting the organizations to be studied, the total number of organizations in the two districts was identified from a sampling frame listing of women's organizations that were still functioning. In all, twenty-one women's organizations were selected and stratified proportionally, fifteen from the Kumasi Metropolis and all the six registered in the Ejisu-Juabeng district. Convenience sampling technique was used to select 175 members as respondents.

## **1.6 Conceptual Framework for Analysing the Contribution of Women's Organisations to the Changing Roles of Women.**

Generally, there are many factors that have influenced the roles of women. These are among others, traditional values and beliefs, education and religion. Traditional values and beliefs system especially in Africa plays a vital role in the upbringing of every individual. These values and beliefs are transmitted to both boys and girls, through the process of socialization. This determines their identities to a large extent. This has therefore contributed in no small way to the inferior status and for that matter, the roles of men and women. Religion also plays a vital role so far as the roles of women are concerned. Perceptions of women and the ground rules defining their roles and relationship as crystallized and imposed by certain cultural layers in specific societies are reinforced by reference to holy books. Gender relations obviously have repercussions on the lives of all women. It is often pointed out that, while membership of a higher class may improve the material aspect of women's lives and raise their overall status in society, they continue nonetheless to suffer from gender subordination. This shows that gender subordination frequently transcends class barriers and that no matter the social class in a society, a woman's status in society is less than that of a man.

**Social roles:** Every individual plays a particular role within a social organization, but the social roles of women are inferior compared to that of men. "The adult primitive woman is above all, a wife, whose life is centred in the home and family. A woman passes at marriage from under the authority of her father to that of her husband – the husband's authority is as such not challenged. Neither the wife nor anyone else disputes those important decisions with regard to the home. The upbringing of children, the betrothing of daughters and sons and so forth, rest with him and him alone" (Evans-Prichard, 1965).

One gathers from this quotation that the primitive woman is merely a passive breeder under the jurisdiction of her husband. Women in pre-modern Ghanaian society were seen as bearers of children, retailers of fish, and farmers. (Opong and Abu, 1987). To add to this, Sarpong (1974) makes bare some qualities of a good wife, and notes, that a good wife is obedient to her husband, faithful, hardworking, helpful and not quarrelsome. Curtis (1986) in an article also outlined the roles of women. According to her, the woman is almost the beast of burden

in some areas, carrying goods on her head or on her back, she is the family's support, she grows the food that is to be used in the home by and large in the rural areas.

Women are often set apart as a social category judged "incompetent or inferior" on the basis of presumed differences. For example, they are denied certain opportunities on the grounds that, they are too emotional. It is obvious therefore that, the social structure does not give much power to the woman to even control her own life.

**Political role:** In the public domain, women have limited decision-making roles, in spite of the great contribution they make towards the development of their nations. Although women constitute at least half of the electorate in almost all countries, only a few of them hold public offices and are part of decision-making bodies. Women are also absent from decision making processes which are related to issues on environmental management, protection and conservation even though they are the critical actors at the grass root level. This has resulted in low proportion of women among economic and political decision makers at the community, regional and national levels. Politics has long been regarded as a man's world (Epstein, 1998). Prevailing stereotypes have held that, women lack the driving ambition, the lust for power that is required for politics and that they are too nice to dirty their hands in struggles for power. Consequently, women's exclusion from the mainstream politics has compelled them to devise alternative political strategies such as gossip, persuasion and consensus building among community kinship groups as their means of political support.

**Economic roles:** In the economic sphere, women's access to resources appears to be inferior to men in one-way or the other (Jean-Hay and Stichter, 1984). Chaney (1980), writing of the labour market in Latin America emphasized that, "not only are more women found in the lowest-paid, lowest-status jobs in the traditional sector (while men dominate the modern sector with its better salaries, greater job security, pension and union protection), but they are more likely to remain there." The great majority of African women are farmers, who in most days must work for greater hours in the fields aided only by a simple hoe, in order to provide their family's basic needs. This tends to affect their level of productivity and for that matter their income. When women work in the modern sector, it tends to be in a small number of female stereotyped jobs such as clerks, sales women, typist, domestic servants, clothing and textile workers, nurses or teachers.

In industry and trade, women have been confined to small-scale operations in the informal sector; however vibrant these operations are and despite the trading empires built up by the most successful female entrepreneurs; women's average incomes are relatively low. Women are also handicapped in access to formal sector jobs by their lower educational attainments, and those who succeed are placed in lower grade, lower paid jobs. Occupational segregation operates within as well as among occupations. Fewer and fewer women occupy ascending rung of the job ladder. In the educational sector for instance, Women may predominate among elementary schoolteachers but not among university professors. Even in occupations in which women make the majority, administrative and supervisory roles tend to be held by men. (Newland, 1979).

Others like Vina Mzumhare Somjee, (1989) attribute the low status and thus the roles of women to their economic dependence on the men-folk. In that connection, she quoted a passage from the Indian council of social science research advisory committee, that, “unless the economic and social utility of women are enhanced in the eyes of their family and the nation, by giving them the opportunity to take part in socially and economically productive roles, the national neglect of women will continue” .

Change is however occurring but at a piecemeal. Change is a fundamental normal feature of every human society. The roles of women are changing gradually. The changing roles of women means the primitive economic, social and political status of women and its associated roles is been altered over time.

Ardeyfo-Schandorf (1990), notes that, several changes have taken place within the structure of the Ghanaian household at different levels, in its composition and its social and economic organization. As to how this change is brought about, Neubeck and Glassberg (1996) have said that, in most cases, powerful groups (not necessarily a majority) deliberately and consciously, organise a movement for change.

**The New Economic Roles of Women:** There are now new ranges of positive changes for women in all fields of employment. Across the job spectrum, women are asking for and getting better pay, their job benefits are now equal to those of their male colleagues and more avenues of employment are opened to them. The increased earning capacity and economic independence of women has also had an impact on their roles as wives. In a similar way, with

their new-found economic independence, women now have a greater stake in influencing decisions that affect them. They no longer need to depend solely on their husbands, and now as equal partners are able to take a more active role in the economic affairs of their households.

Beasley (1994), also notes that, despite the obstacles hindering the progress of women, they continue to move into different professions, including those traditionally seen as male jobs, such as engineering and architecture.

**The new social roles of women:** Ardeyio-Schandorf (1999) further points out that, women are now featuring prominently not only within the family but in national development issues. This advancement in the status of women is reflected worldwide. A demographic finding from the United Nations Decade for Women shows that, women not only constitute half the world's population but also perform two thirds of the world's work and one third of households around the world are now headed by women (Ballet 1996).

Furthermore, increased awareness of women's right among men and women has led to decreased rates of spousal abuse, and women are no longer as reluctant to speak out against violence in the homes. Mothers are now more educated, more literate, informed and aware than ever before, and they are able to use these skills in caring for and raising their children. These women may be in the minority now, but things are changing all over Africa.

**The new political roles of women:** The development of political consciousness through political education has played a vital role in women's roles in politics. The political status of women is on the verge of a major and lasting change. Newland, (1979) notes that, there are now more women in local office, more women as party officials, more women in national elective offices and more high-level female civil servants and executive appointees. She even goes further to say that, eventually the political map of the world will be more heavily dotted with countries where women are heads of states

From the discussion so far, it is obvious that the roles of women are changing. The traditional role of women as breeder-feeder is no more the same. Bare necessities and aspiration for higher standards of living has moved them from the home and have motivated them to work and earn incomes to meet their own basic needs and those of their families. Women are now



into all kinds of jobs, even those that were initially termed as male jobs. They do not only produce but they now have full control over what they produce. In the political arena, women have risen up with equal strength, function and power as their male counterparts in addressing issues that affect them.

It has been argued that if gender issues are to be mainstreamed into development planning and financial priorities in a relevant and sustained manner, women have to be active and important agents in promoting this (Dolphyne and Nikoi, 1993). Women on their own as a way of contributing to gender mainstreaming and dealing with the challenges that they face as individuals have organized themselves into working groups, co-operatives, associations and other forms of organizations with the purpose of facing their challenges collectively. Women in most developing countries organise themselves into self help groups and for some time now women's groups have been championed as a mechanism through which women can become an important part of the equation in development (Wamalwa, 1991). Another impetus for the growth of women's organisations in the developing world is the realization that such organisations have the ability to steer clear of the common cultural problems associated with the mixing of unrelated men and women (Monsen, 1991).

According to Huto (1989), women's organisations are not homogeneous: they vary in size, objectives, spatial coverage and modes of operation. It is therefore obvious that there are various forms of women's organisations, mainly, religious bodies, market women associations, community-based women organisations, formal workplace ladies clubs and associations. All together, they work to enhance the social, political and economic status of women in societies. Despite the diversity in their nature, they share some common underlying assumptions.

Both formal and informal women organisations have contributed immensely to womanhood all over the world. They have contributed immensely towards the changing roles of women in all three areas of influence. They have empowered women socially, economically and politically. Economically, from the early 1970's, women's movements in a number of countries identified credit as a major constraint on women's ability to earn income and the degree to which poverty-focused credit programmes, as well as credit co-operatives were being used by women. Thus globally, women's organizations have included credit and

savings in their activities, both as a way of increasing women's income and bringing them together to address wider issues.

According to Kaijage, (1989) in addition to obtaining credit for their members, women organizations have also been involved in solving other problems concerning the economic activities of women, such as; acquisition of production technology, inputs, technical advice and marketing of products. Differences have often been identified between women operating individually, and those operating together in one kind of organization or another. For instance, with regard to marketing, Kaijage (1989) has found out that, lack of organized marketing co-operatives reduced women's bargaining power, thus leading to their exploitation by middlemen who purchased their produce at prices favourable to them. By coming together, they now have a bigger voice to bargain, thus increasing their incomes. Socially, women's organizations also serve as mechanisms for self-expressions and the advancement of member's interests. They have empowered women such that, they are not only homemakers, burdened with much of the responsibility for the family's subsistence and solely dependent on males for their basic needs, but are now independent and have taken charge of their own lives. They provide protection for members giving them a sense of identity and belonging. In this sense, women's organizations support members when in need and enjoy with them in their happy moments (Newland 1979).

In some Moslem countries such as Iraq, Sudan and Iran, where women were oppressed and subordinated, women's organizations stood up to fight for their rights.

From all the above it can be said that, women's organizations if well organized, managed and supported can play a crucial role in enhancing the roles of women in society. From the discussion so far, it has been established that, the traditional roles of women are different from that of men. Changes are however occurring at all spheres of life and women are taking up new roles. It has also been established that, women have realised their low status in society, which in effect determines their roles, and have come up with mechanisms to raise their status, economically, socially and politically. One such mechanism is coming together in groups to solve common problems that affect them as women. Women's organizations have also been seen as an important agent that enhances the status of women. This work therefore looked at the extent to which these women's organizations have been able to change the status and for that matter the roles of women.

## 1.7 Results and Discussions

The information gathered shows that the women's organisations of the work place/social category are usually set up to spearhead and protect the interests of their members within the various organizations they work. They help members in times of need that is; contribute in cash and kind to group members during funerals, naming ceremonies, weddings, and other social functions. Some of them (58 percent) are also involved in the crusade against discrimination of women especially at the work place. The economic category is principally involved in the business activities of its members. These organizations serve as financial recourse to their members. They empower their members financially to either begin a business or to expand existing ones. Religious women's organisations are primarily involved in the use of the word of God to preach social virtues to their members. In addition to this however, they train members in the acquisition of vocational skills, educate members on how to take care of their families and resolve conflict in the home. The analysis also revealed that, the size and membership of all women's organizations ranged between 9 and 2000.

Table 1 depicts the type of Women's Organisations studied in Kumasi and the percentage that undertakes the various activities listed on the table.

**Table 1**

<b>Types of Organisation</b>	<b>Type of Activities</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Economic Organisations	• Female Education	39
	• Training Programmes	100
	• Networking	100
Social Organisations	• Female Education	100
	• Sensitisation	20
	• Training programmes	100
	• Advocacy and Lobbying	90
	• Networking	100
Religious Organisations	• Female Education	100
	• Sensitisation	60
	• Training Programmes	100
	• Networking	100

**Source: Authors' field data 2005**

Women's Organisations studied in Ejusi confirmed that the activities of women's organisations are similar. All (100) of the Organisations studied do networking, Eighty percent organise training programmes for members and Fifty percent (50%) also do some form of sensitisation.

All the women's organisations studied are non-partisan, non-profit making, and non-governmental in nature and their sources of finance are mainly from the contributions of members, donations from individuals, companies, NGO's or international benevolent bodies.

The Organisations in Kumasi have well defined aims and objectives with 45 percent who have had secondary education and only a few (15 percent), tertiary education. Contrary to the Women in Ejisu, only 15 percent have had secondary education but none tertiary. This confirms Date-Bah's (1985) assertion that, the Ghanaian women generally feel reluctant to pursue higher education.

The study established that, there is a gender gap with regard to the roles of men and women. It was also observed that, most women are aware of these differences in roles and are making strenuous efforts to bridge the gap. At the cutting edge of this crusade have been the women's organisations. Most of the women's organisations had the main aim of enhancing the status of women and hence their roles in society. Majority of women however, especially, those in the rural areas are still relegated to the background concerning dependency and decision-making.

There are also differences between the activities of women's organizations in the rural and urban areas. Women's organizations in the rural areas are more into income generating activities that aim at empowering women economically. Much is not done on female education, sensitization, and advocacy and lobbying. As observed from the study, none of the organizations is into female education as well as advocacy and lobbying. Sensitization, which actually creates awareness in women, and makes them realize their potentials and abilities, was also not prominent among their activities. The survey revealed that training of the members of the women's organizations was a regular feature. All women's organizations studied were into a kind of training programme.

The research also brought to the fore the various challenges that are faced by women's organizations that hinder their performance. Amongst them are inadequate materials and logistics, inadequate human resource, inadequate accommodation facilities and lack of interest on the part of women. In all inadequate finance stood taller among the other challenges and remained the greatest constraint to the progress of women's organizations as observed from the study.

This is due to the fact that their low level of education does not allow them into high wage employment. As a result, members are not able to pay their dues on regular basis. This problem is more pronounced with the organizations in the rural areas, which have no external support whatsoever and also lack the technical know-how and collateral to procure commercial loans.

## **1.8 Conclusion**

The study has revealed that, factors such as traditional beliefs and values, religion and education determine gender roles in society and that; there is a gender gap with regard to the roles of men and women. It has also shown that women's organisations in the region have contributed to the changing roles of women, in spite of the numerous challenges besetting them. Women's organisations in the Ashanti Region face many challenges not only in relation to the discharge of their duties but also to their very survival. Among other things, lack of adequate resources and finance as well as the rising cost of training qualified personnel imply that the women's organizations can provide services to only a few women in the society. Thus the positive impact of these women's organisations covers only a few women in the Ashanti region.

It is obvious that, if women's organizations are given the needed support they can be an impetus for the advancement of women

## **1.9 Recommendations**

For women's organizations to be efficient and effective in order to really impact on the roles of women, there is the need for the right and suitable interventions to be sought and implemented. For instance, women's organizations should make female education and sensitization and advocacy and lobbying a priority in their activities. It is education that

empowers women to challenge oppressive rules and regulations, broaden their outlook and worldview, offers them the possibility of choice beyond their traditional gender roles and gives them a sense of control over their own affairs. They should encourage their members to contest for decision-making positions. The rationale behind this is to enhance their participation in decision making so as to make their contribution at higher levels and also have some influence on development decisions that affects them, then, they can have their problems expressed and understood. If women's organizations are able to focus and become active in these areas, they will be able to address the indispensable strategic needs of women.

On the issue of financial resources which was the commonest and outstanding challenge of women's organizations, internal savings and credit arrangement should be made through member's own contributions. Women's organizations should make known to the public their achievements as well as their challenges. This can attract benevolent organizations, philanthropist, Non Governmental Organizations to support them financially.

The National Council on Women and Development (NCWD), on improving on its budgetary resources should coordinate most of the activities of the women's organizations. There should be some level of coordination and integration between the various women's organizations at the local, regional, and national levels to promote the exchange of ideas and human resources. Women's organizations at the grassroots levels should also be included in its programmes and activities.

In line with the existing decentralized political administration and institutional system currently in place, the district assembly and its executive arm are considered to be the major policy-making, planning and implementation representing the districts in all development matters. Based on this premise, it must play a central role in the planned intervention, aimed at enhancing the capacities of women's organization to enable them contribute effectively to the development of their communities. As already noted the assemblies have so far not given substantial assistance to women's organizations in their districts.

## **2.0 Policy Implication**

The policy implications on the basis of the study are that for the government to fully achieve one of the thematic areas of the Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy which is to ensure that the interest of girls and women are adequately taken care of at all times, there is the need to

recognize women's organizations since they represent the larger women populace to make their inputs before policies affecting women are formulated. In addition, the Ministry for Women and Children's Affairs should also continue to use its cabinet status to influence policies for the benefit of women and also advocate for sufficient budgetary resource to implement more training and educational programmes for women to improve their status and therefore their roles.

The government's policy on girl child education should be vigorously pursued in order to get more girls in school. The Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs should work with the relevant stakeholders to address the issues that prevent women from participating at higher levels of schooling. Non-formal educational programmes should be intensified to address high illiteracy rates among women in rural areas, especially training programmes for women in deprived areas

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