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Non-formal education and women's empowerment: an assessment of the contemporal relevance of Freire's concept of conscientisation in increasing district assemblywomen's participation in community development and governance in Northen Ghana

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ABSTRACT

The study examined the contemporary relevance of Freire's concept of conscientisation as a framework, as well as how organized non-formal education (NFE) programmes have increased women's participation in local-level governance as assembly members in Ghana's Northern sector. The study investigated women's abilities to contest assembly elections, effectively campaign for election, lobby for an appointment, raise funds for assembly election activities, and actively participate in assembly business. Using the simple random sampling technique, data was collected from all 276 assemblywomen (2015 cohort) in three randomly selected regions (Upper East, Upper West, and Brong Ahafo) of Northern Ghana using a cross-sectional survey. Percentages, frequency counts, and correlation coefficients were used to analyze the data. The study findings revealed that a significant correlation exists between NFE skills and knowledge acquired and the assemblywomen's participation. The NFE, based on Freire's ideas of conscientisation, was significant and necessary, but it was insufficient as a geo-socio-cultural setting for women's participation as assembly members. Recommendations include organizing similar education programmes for the custodians of socio-cultural and religious beliefs and practices alongside those for women to increase women's participation in assembly work, community development, and governance.

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Introduction

Following the global call in the late 1970s to address women's underrepresentation and participation in politics, decision-making positions, and leadership, the world's attention was drawn to enhancing women's participation by creating awareness and raising women's consciousness, interest, and capacity-building, among other things, through non-formal education (NFE) as a strategic education and training tool (López-Muñoz & Ingelaere, 2021). These calls, which prompted radical shifts in development thinking in the 1970s, necessitated radical changes to address and alleviate poverty and gross socioeconomic and political inequalities, which were largely blamed on the failure of formal school systems (Tshishonga, 2019). When the generally high spate of failures of developing countries' economies in the late 1970s was blamed on an alleged lack of engendered policies and participatory development paradigms (Alade, 2022; Kanyamuna & Zulu, 2022; Alagidede et al., 2013), the resolve and thinking to promote gender equality became even more prominent and critical.

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Statement of the problem

In response to the global call to address women's underrepresentation and participation in development discourses and leadership positions (Davies et al., 2020, Johnston, 2019), African countries, including Ghana, and international donor agencies began focusing more on raising women's awareness and capacity building through non-formal education (NFE) programmes and activities. These NFE programmes included, among other things, organized short courses, training workshops, conferences, seminars, advocacy, and public/civic education (Westphal, 2019; Poyntz et al., 2019; McGimpsey, 2018). The Federation of Ghanaian Women (FEGAWO), National Commission for Women and Development (NCWD), and 31st December Women Movement (31st DWM) (see footnote for other organizations).[1] Institute of Local. The World Bank, the United Nations (UNDP), USAID, OXFAM, World Vision International, Ghana, and Action Aid, Ghana were prominent among international agencies and organizations.

The thinking, philosophy, and value assumptions underlying the provision of these NFE programmes were that if women understood their conditions, knew their rights, and learned skills, they would be appropriately empowered to participate meaningfully and actively in critical decision-making processes and discourses of development, politics, and public governance of their communities and countries (Pizzamiglio & Kovacs, 2021; Sharaunga et al., 2019; Sen & Mukherjee, 2014). This was congruent with Paulo Freire's (1974) philosophical thinking and ideas, particularly the concept of conscientisation as a strategic empowerment education tool, which holds that the oppressed are their own experts on how to solve their situations and problems and must be empowered to do so (Freire, 1974, 2000).

With the implementation of increased NFE programmes and activities over the years, Ghanaian women's participation in national-level politics as members of parliament, as assembly members, and even as candidates in district assembly elections began to see a steady increase in percentages and absolute numbers (Electoral Commission of Ghana, 2015). See Tables 1 and 2. Data in Table 1 shows that Ghanaian women's participation in national politics as members of parliament has steadily increased from 0.7% in 1969 to 14.5% in 2021. Similarly, data in Table 2 show that the participation of Ghanaian women at the local level in local governance as elected assembly members and contestants in district assembly elections has increased dramatically between 1994 and 2015. See Table 2 for more information.

Table 1. Increasing trend of Ghanaian women's participation as members of parliament (1969–2017).

Year	Total Members of Parliaments (MPs)	Total Female MPs	% of Female MPs
1969	140	1	0.7
1979	140	5	3.6
1992	200	16	8.0
1996	200	18	9.0
2000	200	19	9.5
2004	230	25	10.9
2008	230	20	8.7
2013	275	30	10.9
2017	275	35	12,7
2021	275	40	14.5

Source: Electoral Commission of Ghana, Annual Report, 2015; www.tatista.com (accessed November 27, 2022).

Table 2. Increasing trend of participation of ghanaian women as contestants and elected assembly members (1994–2015).

	Contestants			Elected				
Year	Female	Male	Total	Female	%	Male	%	Total
2019	909	17,601	18510	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
2015	1182	17,756	18938	282	4.65	5779	95.35	6061
2010	1376	15939	17315	412	7.95	5681	92.05	6093
2006	1772	13084	14856	478	10.1	4254	89.9	4732
2002	965	12625	13590	341	7.4	4241	92.6	4582
1998	547	14696	15243	196	4.1	4624	95.9	4820
1994	N/A	N/A	N/A	122	2.9	4082	97.1	4204

Source: ABANTU for Development, 2009; EC (2010, 2015. 2019) DA Elections report; Boateng (2017).

Table 3 shows a steadily increasing trend in the regional distribution of women's participation as elected and appointed assembly members in Ghana's traditional northern sectors (the Upper East, Upper West, Northern, and Brong Ahafo Regions).

Clearly, women's participation as members of parliament and assembly members in local level governance (at the District Assembly level) has been steadily increasing over the years, but to what extent is this associated with the contributions of organized NFE activities and interventions of government and/or international donor agencies and organizations that the women have had over the years? The study seeks to answer this research question: What extent can the 2015 cohort of assemblywomen's participation in local-level governance as assembly members be attributed to the organized non-formal education programmes that they had?

Main objective

The study aimed to evaluate the impact of organized NFE programmes on 2015 women assembly members' participation in local governance in Ghana's Northern sector. It aimed to improve their ability to contest elections, campaign effectively, mobilize funds, and participate in policy decisions. The findings will provide recommendations for improved NFE programme planning and management to promote increased and active participation in local-level governance.

Specific objectives

The following specific objectives were advanced in pursuit of the study's main goal.

1. To identify the relevant forms of non-formal education that have significantly contributed to women's participation in local-level governance as assembly members.
2. To learn about the knowledge and skills that assemblywomen gained from NFE programmes that improved their personal, interpersonal, and political abilities to participate in local governance as assemblywomen.
3. To assess the extent to which the NFE programmes have increased assemblywomen's participation in local governance in terms of their ability: (i) to contest assembly elections; (ii) to campaign effectively during assembly elections; (iii) to raise funds for assembly elections activities; and iv. to participate actively in policy decisions in the assembly.

Freire's concept of conscientisation

Through the idea of conscientization, Freire made fundamental contributions to education and development. In the Northeast of Brazil, where most of the population was poor, illiterate, and vulnerable, Freire (1974) developed an adult education method based on the philosophy of conscientization (coming to awareness) to help people overcome their beliefs and feelings of helplessness and indifference. This method was inspired by Freire's own harrowing experiences and research. To know what needed changing and to start challenging the status quo, Freire believed that people needed to develop a critical awareness or critical perception of their reality (Shih, 2018; Diemer et al., 2016; Rugut & Osman, 2013).

Table 3. Women's participation as elected and appointed assembly members in the Northern Sector of Ghana (1998–2015).

	Elected		Appointed	
Region	1998	2015	1998	2015
Upper East	8	24	36	49
Upper West	5	14	28	57
Northern	8	19	68	75
Brong Ahafo	35	49	87	92

Source: ABANTU for Development, 2009; Electoral Commission of Ghana, 2015.

This would cause them to lose or replace their vulnerable and naive view of their social and context reality as given and immutable.

Freire saw consciousness-raising education as having the potential to liberate and empower voiceless, powerless, and oppressed people to participate in discussions and matters that directly concern and affect their lives; and that education must focus on raising people's critical consciousness about their social realities and contests (Freire, 1974). This is due to the tendency and power of consciousness-raising education (CRE) to create critical awareness and consciousness among people, particularly the voiceless majority and the oppressed in society (Freire, 2000). According to Freire, conscientization is the result of awareness creation and consciousness-raising education (CRE) (Bohonos & James-Gallaway, 2022; Jemal, 2017; Freire, 2000). CRE is therefore conceptualized as the process of educating people on issues related to the awakening of their critical consciousness about their social reality and the various actions that can be taken to address the associated challenges. As it were, a CRE is therefore deemed more appropriate and critical for the empowerment of the powerless and oppressed in society. This is because the nature of people's response to a situation they face is heavily dependent on their critical understanding of the root causes and possibilities of actions to their solutions (Bohonos & James-Gallaway, 2022; Freire, 2000). This corroborates with Freire's assertion that CRE is an education programme or activity that has the tendency and capacity to move individuals from the semi-intransitive and naïve consciousness stages to a critical transitive consciousness stage, where the individual begins to question and challenge the status quo (Jemal, 2017; Torres, 2014; Freire, 2000). To achieve this, as Paulo Freire contends, the CRE programme must adhere to some fundamental value assumptions or principles.

The CRE programme should focus on conscientization and dialogue, involving oppressed and powerless individuals in problem-solving, analysis, and critical reflection. Assemblywomen in Northern Ghana can participate in empowering education by addressing socio-cultural, religious, economic, and political barriers, and exploring strategies to overcome these barriers. By analyzing and discussing these factors, they can develop effective solutions and actions to improve their situation. Participants in this approach are involved in the selection and preparation of what to learn from the start of the empowerment education process or programme. This is critical in the empowerment process because the oppressed and powerless are the experts on their own situations (Videmšek, 2016; Mandal, 2013; Freire, 2000).

By enhancing their abilities, knowledge, and attitudes, CRE processes and programmes tend to have a real and positive impact on the lives of the individual beneficiaries, their communities and society at large. Buttressing this, Nyirenda (1996), who evaluated the relevance and applicability of Freire's concept of conscientization, concluded that the concept has significant implications for widespread participation and rapid social transformation through the restructuring of society based on its value assumptions of everyone being equal and having the freedom to express criticism and act in response to their circumstances. Ghanaian government and foreign organizations have been using non-formal education (NFE) to empower women and to increase an awareness of their social situation. NFE, as a strategic tool, aims at overcoming obstacles like poverty, illiteracy, ignorance, and discrimination by educating beneficiaries on tactics and solutions for active engagement in politics, public life, and governance.

Non-formal education (NFE)

Non-formal education (NFE) is defined as any organized, systematic educational process or activity carried out outside the framework of the formal education system (Shirima, 2021; Sharma & Choudhary, 2015). On-the-job training, refresher classes, training workshops, seminars, conferences, and public/civic education are other names for NFE. In addition, highly trained professionals such as physicians, scientists, engineers, top government and business leaders, and others may undergo accelerated training to meet an immediate need for learning or work and/or to discover a speedy solution. (Preston, 2017). The formal educational system has been supplemented by NFE, which addresses its flaws and shortcomings. It emphasizes crucial aspects of education like agriculture, computer literacy, human rights, women's rights, community education, sports, and drama to fulfill the constantly changing demands of learning and employment. The school system typically neglects or underserves these communities.

The importance of NFE is therefore seen in its ability to provide skills, knowledge, and attitudes for its beneficiaries and participants to meet their educational, work or employment demands and needs as emphasized by Knowles (1980). This is particularly so because of the inherent nature of NFE – adaptability and complexity, which enables it to meet the various needs and demands of participants through its varied and comprehensive programming (Duke, 1990; Bhola, 1994). NFE programmes are therefore employed to raise awareness among women in Ghana's Northern sector to overcome marginalization and discrimination. They promote self-awareness, critical thinking, and active engagement in social, economic, and political discourses. NFE, as it were, is essential for educating beneficiaries and influencing their attitudes, perceptions, and performances. Students receive knowledge and skills through NFE, which impacts their perception, outlook, and performance.

Women's empowerment

Empowerment entails improving an individual's spiritual, political, social, educational, and economic standing (Mandal, 2013). Women's empowerment is concerned with raising their personal, interpersonal, and political awareness to improve their situations (Turner & Maschi, 2015). Gender scholars also see the importance of women's empowerment to be in improving the conditions and situations of women to overcome barriers limiting their participation and influence in politics and decision-making positions (Goetz & Jenkins, 2018; Dahlerup, 2013; Debusscher & Ansoms, 2013). The first step towards understanding challenges, personal consciousness, and liberation is to recognize oneself as a victim of oppression and subordination (Freire, 2000). To that end, the efficacy of a women's empowerment education process should be evaluated and measured in terms of its ability to develop women's personal, interpersonal, and culturally changing thoughts and actions, as well as their political consciousness and power (Goetz & Jenkins, 2018). Empowerment is a process that allows women who have been denied the power to gain access to resources, make strategic life choices, and improve their ability to make the best of their lives. Women's empowerment education teaches them to think and collaborate with others, to question the social and political environment, and to recognize the need for change (Cornwall, 2016). Empowerment education aims to make women's lives more satisfying and inclusive.

Participation

Participation is the act of participating in an activity or event, and encompassing various levels of involvement, such as decision-making, planning, execution, and evaluation. Adult educators often ask questions to assess programme participation, ensuring appropriate individuals are present, actively involved, and in control of programme processes. These questions aim to evaluate participants' involvement and control over the intended programme (Nielsen & Randall, 2013). Participation in development discourses and programmes is becoming increasingly important to development partners and agencies (Kanyamuna & Zulu, 2022; Nielsen & Randall, 2013). Women increased decision-making power has an impact on their ability to control other aspects of their lives (Osamor & Grady, 2016). Participation of the public in development processes has the potential to empower previously marginalised and disadvantaged individuals (Hashimy & Ibrahimy, 2023). Direct access to resources and active participation in decision-making are required for meaningful development participation. This entails positively influencing the course of events, allowing people to be involved and in control of the decisions and issues that affect their lives (Kanyamuna & Zulu, 2022; Osamor & Grady, 2016).

Women's participation and governance in Ghana

Ghanaian women, particularly in the northern regions, are largely controlled by men, including fathers and husbands. Due to geo-socio-cultural, and ecological disparities, the extent of influence varies regionally. Generalizing gender relations and their impact on women's access to resources, decision-making, and status is challenging without considering these disparities (Adoo-Adeku, 2012). These regional disparities and distortions have been exacerbated by past and biased regional development policies (Bawa

& Sanyare, 2013). Northern Ghanaian women face agro-climatic conditions, antiquated beliefs, patriarchal family structures, and lack of decision-making power. Traditional political structures discourage women from participating in politics, negatively impacting their well-being; nevertheless, women often participate in parallel structures, indirectly influencing men's opinions and authority (Boateng et al., 2021; Bawa & Sanyare, 2013).

Except for queen mothers among the Gonja, women have no defined political roles in Northern Ghana's traditional system. These female chiefs oversee leading and representing women, as well as collecting contributions and mobilizing resources. As a result, women's participation in public decision-making is especially limited in northern communities. Women face under-representation in modern politics at all levels. Prior to 1957, voting was restricted to those with property or qualifications, whereas public office was open to anyone over the age of 21 (Adoo-Adeku, 2012). This marginalized women, particularly those in Northern Ghana, where education was delayed and there was a preference for men or children. The financial obligations and deposits required for women to run for office are a significant impediment to their participation in politics or public governance. Special provisions were made during the First Republic for women to be elected to the National Assembly, but no single woman was elected, despite their significant contributions to Ghana's independence in 1957 (Adoo-Adeku, 2012).

Clearly, the social, cultural, and traditional structures and their arrangements explain how they have contributed to the marginalization, subordination, and discrimination of women in northern Ghana, particularly when it comes to political and public governance participation (Gyan & Mfoafo-M'Carthy, 2022; Amoah-Boampong, 2018; Adatuu, 2017). Despite this, women held political positions at the national and local levels, as members of parliament, and as women assembly members in Ghana during the first, second, third, and fourth republics. According to available data, women's participation as parliamentarians increased over time, rising from 0.7% (2 women members) in the 1979 parliament to 10.5% (30 women members) in 2013 and 14.5% (40 members) in the 2021 parliament. Women have made up less than 20% of Ghana's parliament since independence, despite constituting more than 51% of the country's population. Local-level under-representation is just as severe as at the national level, with only a maximum of 10.5% representation since the inception of district assembly elections in Ghana in 1992 (Report of the Ghana Electoral Commission, December 18, 2019). Women's marginalization, subordination, and poor representation in public governance, particularly local governance, are attributed to individual, systemic, and institutional barriers (Tagoe & Abakah, 2015; Bawa & Sanyare, 2013).

Assembly system of local governance in Ghana

Ghana's district assemblies are policy-making bodies within the national policy framework. Established in 1988, they serve as key administrative and developmental decision-making authorities, including legislative, executive, budgeting, planning, and rating authorities. District assemblies, led by the presiding member, perform deliberative, legislative, and executive functions through the Executive Committee and subsidiary committees. These assemblies, including development planning, social services, works, finance, administration, justice, and security, are governed by the Local Government Act (1993) (Knowles 1980) and the National Development Planning Law. The district assembly comprises a District Chief Executive or Mayor, two-thirds of the members, one elected member, a parliament member, and appointed individuals (30% of the total membership) (Electoral Commission of Ghana, 2015). They serve as the people's representatives in local government, informing voters about government policies, projects, and programmes (Local Government Act, 1993). They provide community information, mobilize community members, and advocate for development projects and programmes on behalf of their communities.

Schematic links between NFE, empowerment and women's participation

From the literature, it is revealed that NFE has the potential to empower women by increasing their personal, interpersonal, and political consciousness and power (skills and knowledge) for increased women's political participation and activism, particularly in local-level governance such as women assembly members and in political activism in general as women in Ghana. See Figure 1.

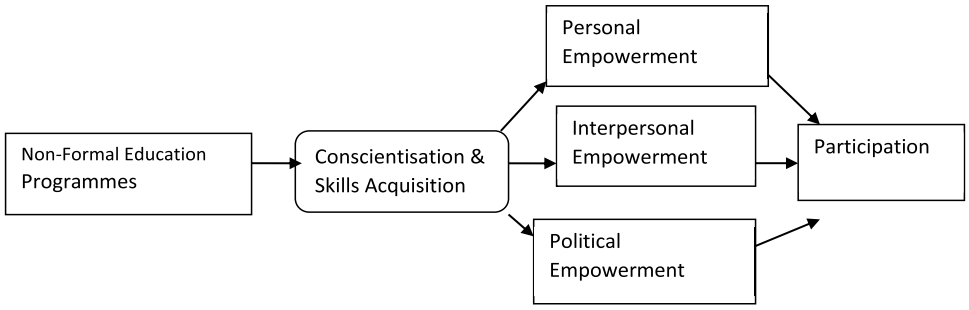

Figure 1. Schematic Link of NFE, Empowerment and Participation.
Source: Authors' construct.

Research methodology

The study employed a cross-sectional survey research design to gather the primary data from all the 276 assemblywomen respondents of the 2015 cohort of assembly members in the three randomly selected regions (Upper East, Upper West and Brong Ahafo Regions) from the study area.

Sampling techniques and sampled population (target group)

Three regions were randomly selected for the investigation using a random sampling method. This method reduced, if not eliminated, personal prejudice and subjectivity by ensuring that each of the regions in Northern Ghana had an equal opportunity or chance to be picked (Patton, 1990; Atindanbila, 2013). The study comprised a complete count (census) of all the 285 women assembly members from the three sampled regions who were elected and appointed in 2015 (87 elected and 198 appointed). However, the study examined information from 276 completed instruments or respondents (from 190 appointed and 86 elected assemblywomen). The response rate was 96.8% as a result. The entire enumeration was driven by the study's goal to reflect the population through the results of the sampled region (Ary et al., 2006).

Instrument

Using a questionnaire and structured interview, the primary data was gathered. While the structured interviews were responded to by the non-literate/semi-literate assemblywomen respondents because they could not read well enough to comprehend the questions on the questionnaire, the literate women respondents were given questionnaires. Additionally, the reliability of the instruments, which contained the same form of questions, was ensured by Cronbach Alpa reliability value of .79 (Atindanbila, 2013)

Data collection and ethical issues

The researchers and research assistants identified and administered the questionnaires for the study, with assistance from the Presiding Members (PMs) of the respective districts. Permission was sought and obtained from the coordinating directors and presiding members of the respective District Assemblies via the Regional Coordinators of the respective Regional Coordinating Councils. The confidentiality of the requested information was guaranteed. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 24 was used to analyze the data with the aid of correlation coefficients, percentages, and frequency counts.

Results

Assemblywomen's experiences of NFE programmes

The responses revealed that every assemblywoman has taken part in non-formal educational programmes such as conferences, seminars, workshops, civic/public education, and/or refresher courses. All the

assemblywomen respondents in this study were presumably beneficiaries of the NFE programme, which makes them qualified to reply to questions on how NFE programming affected their involvement in local governance as assembly members and to provide insightful commentary. They were frequently referred to as (a) Women's Associations, Organisations, and Movements, and (b) Government Organizations, Agencies, and Institutions. The institutions and agencies that provided them with the NFE and training programmes were (c) international donors, agencies, and NGOs.

Data in Table 4. show that a majority of over 70% of the assemblywomen were found to have received their non-formal education and training via platforms such as workshops (100%), advocacy (77%) and public/civic education (71%). Similarly, less than 25% utilized seminars (22%), conferences (20.1%) and refresher courses (17%) for their education and training. It thus suggests that all the women assembly members had experience of being educated and or trained by workshops (100%).

The correlation analysis results at 0.05 level of significance in Table 5 revealed a positive and significant correlation between all the respective forms of the NFE programmes and the participation of the assemblywomen in local governance as assembly members. However, except for that of workshops, the degree or strength of the correlations or relationships between the women's participation as assembly members and all the other forms of the NFE programmes are largely low or moderate ($.3 < r < .7$).

On the extent of influence, the respective computed coefficients of determination ($r^2\%$) showed that apart from workshops ($r^2\% = 100\%$), the extent to which all the other respective NFE forms are associated to the participation of the women in local governance as assembly members is less than 20%. Thus, suggesting that except for workshops, over 80% of the women's participation as assembly members is unexplained by all the other forms of NFE that they had. This implies that over 80% of the women's participation could be associated with workshops and other extraneous factors instead.

Relevance of the NFE programmes

Responses gathered from the assemblywomen respondents on the relevance of the areas covered by the NFE and training programmes they had showed that over 71% indicated they were relevant largely for their participation as assembly members in local governance.

Data in Table 6 showed over 63% of the assemblywomen have acknowledged acquiring some personal empowerment skills and knowledge from the NFE programmes for their participation in local governance. According to the data in Table 6, all the assemblywomen have gained new skills and knowledge relating to self-awareness of women's subordination conditions, women's rights, increased self-confidence, and the development of feelings that women can improve their own conditions and situations.

Table 4. Forms of NFE and participation as assembly women.

	Membership status				Total responses f	
	Elected responses		Appointed responses			
Forms of NFE	f	%	F	%	F	%
Workshop	86	31.1	190	68.8	276	100
Seminar	35	12.7	28	10.1	63	23
Conference	40	14.5	18	6.5	58	21
Refresher Course	32	11.6	14	5.1	46	17
Advocacy	86	31.1	126	45.6	212	77
Public / Civic Education	86	31.1	110	40	196	71

Source: Field Survey by authors, 2017. $N = 276$ across all cases.

Table 5. Correlation on NFE forms and the assembly women's participation.

Forms of NFE Programmes	N	R	r^2	r^2 %	Sig. @ 0.05
Workshop	276	1.000	1.00	100	–
Seminar	276	0.286	0.08	8	0.000
Conference	276	0.421	0.18	18	0.000
Refresher Course	276	0.371	0.14	14	0.000
Advocacy	276	0.370	0.14	14	0.000
Public / Civic Education	276	0.430	0.19	19	0.000

Source: Field Survey by authors, 2017. $r^2\%$ = coefficient of determination: r^2 = Variance.

Other similar personal empowerment skills and attributes realized by the assemblywomen beneficiaries included improved income generation skills, self-esteem and respect, and time management abilities. This result was consistent with what Gutierrez (1998) referred to as personal empowerment constructs.

The data in Table 7 clearly show that more than half of the assemblywomen agreed that they gained some interpersonal empowerment knowledge and skills relating to the ability to gain spousal support, family support, community support, the ability to work effectively with others, and the abilities to tackle and solve problems as women in politics. However, the least recognised abilities and skills acquired were in gaining peer support (37%) from their colleague assemblywomen. These lent support to what Gutierrez (1998) referred to as women's interpersonal empowerment constructs. According to the analysis in Table 7, a significant percentage of the women assembly members (over 50%) have acquired various levels of interpersonal abilities from the NFE and training programmes for their enhanced participation in local governance as assembly members.

According to Table 8, over 70% of the assemblywomen have acquired the organization and mobilization techniques and skills, feelings for social transformation and change, some leadership abilities, and public speaking techniques from the NFE and training workshops and programmes. Other new and improved political empowerment knowledge and skills acquired were lobbying techniques and abilities (67.4%), conflict management skills and techniques (50.4%), and political campaign techniques and skills (67.4%). Legal literacy and awareness were the least acquired (32.6%). These included what Gutierrez (1998) referred to as political empowerment constructs. According to the findings in Tables 6, 7, and 8, NFE programmes have increased a significant percentage of assemblywomen's personal, interpersonal,

Table 6. Personal empowerment knowledge and skills acquired by the women.

Personal empowerment constructs (Skills and knowledge acquired)	*f*	%
Self-awareness of women's condition of subordination	276	100
New knowledge about women's rights	276	100
Development of feelings that women can improve their own conditions	276	100
Self-confidence	275	99.6
Self-esteem/ respect	190	68.8
Self-efficiency	178	64.5
Income generation (economic empowerment) skills.	174	63
Time management skills	128	46.4

Source: Field Survey by authors, 2017. $N = 276$ across all cases.

Table 7. Interpersonal empowerment knowledge and skills acquired by the women.

Interpersonal empowerment constructs (Skills and knowledge acquired)	*f*	%
Ability to gain peer support	104	37.7
Ability to gain spousal support	145	52.5
Ability to gain family support	167	60.5
Ability to gain community support	203	73.6
Ability to work with others effectively	191	69.2
Ability to tackle and solve problems	138	50

Source: Field Survey by authors, 2017. $N = 276$ across all cases.

Table 8. Political empowerment knowledge and skills acquired by the women.

Political empowerment constructs	*F*	%
Organization and mobilization skills	276	100
Development of abilities and feelings for social transformation/ change	275	99.6
Political campaign techniques and skills	186	67.4
Development of public speaking skills and techniques	196	71
Development of lobbying skills and abilities	186	67.4
Conflict management skills	139	50.4
Leadership skills	196	71
Legal literacy	86	31.1

Source: Field Survey, 2017. $N = 276$ across all cases.

Table 9. Correlation on NFE and Assembly women's abilities to participate in local governance.

Local governance processes	*N*	*r*	r^2	r^2 %	Sig @ 0.05
Ability to contest the assembly elections	276	0.091	0.008	0.8	0.130
Ability to mobilize funds	276	0.208	0.04	4	0.001
Ability to campaign effectively	276	0.918	0.84	84	0.000
Ability to participate in policy decisions in the assembly	276	0.109	0.01	1	0.072

Source: Field Survey by authors, 2017. Significant at 0.05 levels (2 tailed).

and political consciousness and power, resulting in increased political participation and activism in local-level governance (Table 9).

Table 6 shows that at the 0.05 level of significance, the skills and knowledge acquired through NFE programmes had a positive relationship with the ability of assemblywomen to participate in all four processes of local governance – the ability to contest assembly elections, mobilise funds to support their assembly elections activities, campaign effectively, and actively participate in policy decisions and discussions in the assembly. However, the relationship between the influence of NFE programmes and women's abilities to mobilize funds ($r = 0.208$; $p = 0.001$) and campaign effectively ($r = 0.918$; $p = 0.000$) was positive and significant, whereas the relationship between the influence of NFE programmes and women's abilities to contest assembly elections ($r = 0.091$; $p = 0.130$) and participate in policy decisions and discussions in the assembly ($r = 0.109$; $p = 0.072$) was positive but insignificant.

With regards the relative degree or strength of the relationships, it was only that of the abilities to campaign effectively ($r = 0.918$) that was strong ($r > 0.7$). However, that of the abilities to contest the assembly elections, to mobilize funds to support their assembly election activities, and to participate in policy decisions were weak ($r < 0.3$). Similarly, the computed respective coefficients of determination (r^2%) in Table 6 also showed that over 80% of the women's ability to campaign effectively (r^2% =84%) could be explained or associated with the influence of the skills and knowledge they acquired from the NFE programmes they had been part of. However, less than 5% of the other abilities – the abilities to contest the assembly elections (r^2% = 0.8%), to mobilize funds to support their assembly election activities (r^2% =4%), and to participate in policy decisions in the assembly (r^2% =1.2%) was associated with the influence of the NFE programmes. In other words, while 84% of the ability of the women to campaign effectively can be associated with their acquisition of skills and knowledge from the NFE programmes, over 95% can be attributed to or explained by extraneous or other factors rather than that of the NFE programmes. The study leads to the conclusion that despite the NFE programmes' overall beneficial effects on women's capacities to participate in local governance, the degree or strength of the corresponding relationships, aside from that of the capacity to effectively campaign, were minimal. This implies that while the capacity for effective campaigning is strongly related to or explained by the NFE programmes, a greater proportion of the capacity for contest, fund-raising, and participation in policy decisions in the assembly is related to other factors or left unaccounted for by the NFE programmes.

Factors that enhanced the NFE's influence on the women's participation as assembly members

Data showed that approximately 73% (202 out of 276) of the assemblywomen respondents agreed that indeed the influence of their acquired NFE abilities on their participation in local governance as assembly members was enhanced by other factors, while about a quarter (24.6% or 68 out of 276) disagreed. A few (2.2% or 6) of them, however, were undecided or did not respond. This implies that the majority (over 70%) of them saw the influence of their acquired abilities (skills and knowledge) from the NFE programmes on their participation as assembly members as being enhanced and aided by other factors.

Nature of the other enhancing factors

Assemblywomen's diverse comments reveal their personal interest in advancing community welfare, particularly women and children, and their willingness to give of themselves. These factors enhance the

influence of NFE programmes on their participation as assembly members, highlighting the importance of fostering a sense of community and giving back. The women's economic and social status, standing in society, and community recognition greatly impact their professional services, charitable efforts, and acceptance. They also benefit from advanced age, formal education, and well-educated individuals. Some women receive support and benefits from religious organizations, politicians, and families with good social, economic, and political status. Political party executives, party gurus, or community opinion leaders were mentioned as factors that enhanced and aided the influence of their acquired abilities from the NFE on their election or appointment as assembly members. They also mentioned having ties to a paramount chief or paramount seat of their communities.

Discussion of the research results

The results of the survey on the pertinent NFE forms and their contribution to the involvement of assemblywomen in local governance showed that there were positive and significant relationships, and thus influences, of the relevant NFE forms (workshops, seminars, conferences, advocacy, and public/civic education programmes) on the involvement of assemblywomen in local governance as elected and appointed members. This suggests that the platforms employed were pertinent in terms of the beneficial contributions they made to assembly's efforts to increase the engagement of women in local governance, both as assembly members and in the processes of local governance.

A correlation analysis of NFE platforms and women's participation in assemblies revealed a positive influence on women's participation in local governance. However, the coefficient of determination revealed that apart from workshops, extraneous factors accounted for more than 80% of the explanation for women's participation as assemblywomen. Workshops are popular because they adhere to adult learning principles and take a democratic stance. Participants are free to discuss their experiences and learning needs, participate in planning, and actively participate in the process, ensuring that adult learning principles are followed. However, the survey's findings made it abundantly clear that the women's experiences and involvement in the platforms for learning through which they acquired their skills and knowledge varied – workshops (100%), advocacy (77%), public/civic education (71%), seminars (23%), conferences (21%), and refresher courses (17%). All assemblywomen are likely to prefer workshops because they are more adaptable, democratic, and participant-centered. It might also be because the workshops gave the organizers the freedom to mix and match different teaching and learning modalities as wanted and required to finish the challenging mission of empowering women.

The results of the poll show that NFE projects address a variety of existential needs and issues for women, addressing personal, social, economic, and political limitations. These initiatives improved women's political, social, and personal knowledge and abilities (Shirima, 2021). As a result, gender activists and writers have pinpointed the essential elements of women's empowerment or constructions that make up the three dimensions of women's empowerment—political, interpersonal, and personal (see Winarnita et al., 2022; Badran, 2019; Johnston, 2017).

All the assemblywomen concur that they have improved their personal empowerment abilities and knowledge, including their awareness of women's subjugation, knowledge of women's rights, and emotions of empowerment. Additionally, 60% of the women on average stated that the curriculum had improved their time management, revenue-generating, self-esteem, and confidence. As Stromquist (2002) notes, the first important step towards recognizing and understanding the difficulties and circumstances, as well as improving one's consciousness and power for liberation, is acknowledging oneself as a victim of tyranny and subordination. This is in line with Freire's (2000) assertion that critical analysis of a situation results in critical responses to the problem at hand. Although Stromquist (2002) argues that because many women in Africa rely financially on their families and men, an empowerment strategy for women's empowerment must combine and concurrently run consciousness-raising or emancipatory gender knowledge programmes with productive and management skills training. As a result, while awareness-raising campaigns can give women the impression that they are independent and capable of making their own decisions, they fall short of enabling personal empowerment without providing opportunities to develop useful economic skills.

The study results are congruent with the goal and function of non-formal education (NFE) as empowerment education, according to Nyerere (1976), referenced in Amedzro (2000). The purpose of non-formal education is to increase participants' awareness and critical thinking skills so that, as educated and empowered individuals, they can more effectively analyze issues, including politics, assert their rights, and participate in their communities' social, economic, and political discourses. According to the survey, more than 58% of assemblywomen had acquired the knowledge and skills necessary to collaborate well, deal with issues head-on, and win the support of their peers, husbands, families, communities, and other pertinent groups for their political activism and participation. This is crucial for most women in Northern Ghana, who are restricted from pursuing their goals by their husbands, families, or the community because of the unfavourable socio-cultural and religious practices, as well as the local economic and political climate.

The study also lends credence to the claim that NFE programmes increased assemblywomen's political consciousness and power by fostering their capacity for organization and mobilization, as well as their feelings for social change and desire to take part in discussions and decision-making in their communities. Improved lobbying talents, public speaking skills, conflict management, and leadership abilities, as well as greater legal literacy and awareness, are additional advantages. What Stromquist (2003) refers to as the cognitive, psychological, economic, and political components of women's empowerment can be claimed to have been considerably improved by the NFE activities (see also Addae, 2021). Real-world applications of these learned abilities include addressing the requirements of women's emancipation, notably in terms of their useful involvement in local government in Northern Ghana.

Participation, especially grassroots participation, is the foundation of Ghana's local governance system, notably the assembly system. As a result, the success or failure of the NFE programmes on women's participation in local governance can only be evaluated by the degree to which the gained skills and knowledge have made it possible for them to participate in local governance processes. The results showed a positive correlation or influence between the NFE knowledge and skills of assemblywomen and their capacities to run for office in the assembly, run successful campaigns, raise money for their election-related activities, and actively participate in policymaking.

A quarter of assemblywomen stated they used what they learned to raise money for their political activities and organizations. Over 90% of these women claimed the NFE programmes motivated them to run for office, run effective campaigns, and actively participate in policy discussions in the assembly. According to Coombs (1985), Nyerere (1976), and Freire (1979), as cited by Amedzro (2000), non-formal education, when offered, has the potential and power to liberate and empower the individual to become assertive and critical, to start questioning and challenging the status quo, and to take appropriate and informed actions to change his or her situation. The study's observations of women's performances tend to support this assertion. It is also probable that the socio-cultural, economic, and cultural structures of the political parties in Northern Ghana contributed to the negative effects of NFE activities on women's capacity to participate in various areas of local governance processes. In Northern Ghana, for instance, male chauvinism and widespread poverty may work in concert to adversely affect women's acquired abilities to successfully raise or mobilize funds, present themselves to run in district assembly elections, or be assertive and bold enough to speak up to influence policy decisions in the assembly as women, even if they have been appropriately educated, trained, and equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge. The influence of women's gained abilities from NFE programmes on political outcomes may be undermined by political parties' preference for male candidates.

However, more needs to be done in terms of refocusing and re-engineering the planning and management of NFE goals and objectives, as well as training programmes, to achieve effective participation of women at various levels of local governance, even though the programmes have had a positive impact on women's participation in local governance processes (Kanyamuna & Zulu, 2022). From the foregoing observations, it is interesting but not surprising that despite the women's improved personal, interpersonal, economic, and political abilities and empowerment because of the NFE interventions, other factors such as their personal interest and passion, community and people recognition and appreciation of the women's humanitarian, meritorious and professional services to the communities, and the influence of the social and political environment had to be considered.

This finding implies that NFE efforts did not provide women in Ghana's northern region with the necessary and pertinent skills and knowledge to participate in local governance as assembly members. Because the

people of Northern Ghana have unfavourable geo-socio-cultural and religious beliefs and practices that constantly aim to marginalize and discriminate against women (see Takyi & Lamptey, 2020). Young women are perceived as inexperienced and missing the requisite wisdom, while single or divorced women are portrayed as irresponsible by a negative social viewpoint and perception of women. They are therefore commonly and mistakenly thought of by society as being unfit and unable to represent them in positions of trust in public life or decision-making (Gyan & Mfoafo-M'Carthy, 2022; Amoah-Boampong, 2018). This emphasizes how important it is for adult educators and adult education institutions to create parallel programmes that teach the public—especially those who oversee maintaining socio-cultural and religious beliefs and practices—to accept and see women as equal partners in development with equal rights and capabilities.

Conclusion and recommendations

For women to have a favourable view of their society, our study demonstrates how engagement and female empowerment are two essential elements. The study also demonstrates that women's empowerment occurs when they actively engage in and participate in activities that give them a sense of community and foster an atmosphere of respect for one another. The research emphasizes how Northern Ghanaian women, who face structural, institutional, and individual impediments as well as repressive situations that keep them from engaging in politics, might benefit from Freire's ideas. The study claims that because it offers a framework for women to develop personal, interpersonal, and cultural changing thoughts, and political consciousness and empowerment for active participation in politics and local governance, Freire's conscientisation or consciousness-raising education method is more relevant today (Kanyamuna & Zulu, 2022; Bohonos & James-Gallaway, 2022).

According to the above-discussed findings, the use of organized NFE as a strategic tool and the adoption of Freire's concept of conscientisation as a framework were both found to be largely significant and positive, extremely necessary, and relevant, but not sufficient to explain the women's participation in local governance as assembly members in the Northern sector of Ghana. The theoretical implication of this work is that Freire's notion of conscientisation is found to be an essential and pertinent framework for the empowerment of women's engagement in local politics, notably as women assembly members in Northern Ghana. This calls for changing or expanding the scope beyond its default emphasis on empowering only the 'oppressed' to the exclusion of the 'oppressors', to include educating and mobilizing the 'oppressors' – the custodians and guardians of the socio-cultural and religious beliefs and practices (e.g. chiefs/traditional leaders, opinion leaders, religious leaders, etc.) who often undermine the impact of women empowerment education interventions like NFE programmes on their participation. Given the realities of modern African societies, especially in rural areas, the ideas of Freire's concept of conscientisation seems more relevant and important than ever in terms of delivering education that can result in radical social transformation, personal liberation, self-determination, political mobilization, and action.

Note

1. National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE). Federation of Ghanaian Female Lawyers (FIDA). Non-Formal Education Division (NFED) of the Ministry of Education.

Disclosure statement

The present article is based on Moses Yinkorah Namoog's completed doctoral dissertation, 'non-formal education and district assemblywomen's participation in local governance in the northern sector of Ghana'.

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Appendix 1. Non-formal education and district assembly women's participation in local governance in Northern sector of Ghana

Questionnaire

Tick the appropriate Data collection method used or applicable for the Assemblywomen:

Drop and pick Later ……. [1]

Structured Interview with the questionnaire ……. ……. [2]

Introduction: *The survey is intended to collect data or the opinions of the Assembly women members on the influence of non-formal education and training programmes that they have had on their participation in local governance as Assembly members. The study is purely academic, a PhD thesis, and participants are assured of confidentiality of the information given. Participants are volunteers and can withdraw as and when desired.*

NOTE: Non-Formal Education here refers to education and training activities such as workshops, seminars, conferences, advocacy, public and civic education programmes.

Please, do respond to the questions as objectively as possible by ticking () or writing in the space provided.

Name of District/Municipal/Metropolis …….

Section A. Socio –demographic characteristics

1. Membership Status; a) Elected [1] b) Appointed [2]
2. Educational Background

   a. Formal Educaton [1]
   b. Primary Education [2]
   c. JHS/Middle School Education [3]
   d. Secondary Education [4]
   e. Post-Secondary (Nurse, Teacher etc) [5]
   f. Tertiary (polytechnic, University) [6]

3. Age Range (years)

a. 20–30 [1]
b. 31–55 [2]
c. 56 + [3]

4. Marital Status

a. Married [1]
b. Single [2]
c. Divorced/Separated [3]
d. Widowed [4]

5. Religious Background

a. Christianity [1]
b. Islam [2]
c. African Tradition [3]
d. Others specify…… [4]

6. Occupational Status

a. Civil/Public service [1]
b. Farming [2]
c. Business,/Trading [3]
d. Nursing/Medical Practitioner [4]
e. Politician [5]

Others, specify……

Section B. The assemblywomen's experience of the non-formal education (NFE) Programmes

7. Have you ever participated in any Non-Formal Education and Training Programme on gender/women empowerment issues?

a. Yes [1]
b. No [2]

8. If yes to Question 7. Name the organizations, agencies and institutions that provided you with the NFE and training programme(s)?

i. ……..……
ii. ……..…
iii. …….
iv. …….

The Non-Formal Education Forms/Platforms (NFE) that enabled the women to participate in Local Governance as Assembly members.

Please indicate below the form (s) by which you acquired the NFE and training that enabled you to become an assembly member.

No	Form /Platform by which the woman acquired the NFE and training	Yes (1)	No (2)
9	Workshop		
10.	Seminar		
11.	Conference		
12.	Refresher Course		
13.	Advocacy		
14	Public/Civic Education		

15. Please, state the relevant areas to you that the NFE and training programmes you had covered in terms of your participation in local level governance as an assembly woman.

i. ……..…….
ii. ……..……
iii. ……
iv. ……
v. ……..…….

Section C. The empowerment skills and knowledge the women acquired from the non-formal education and training programmes

Please indicate in the Table below, the type of empowerment skills and knowledge you acquired from the Non-Formal Education and training programmes you had that enhanced your participation as a woman Assembly member.

No	EMPOWERMENT KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS ACQUIRED	Yes	No
A	PERSONAL EMPOWERMENT CONSTRUCTS	1	2
16	Self-Awareness of women's condition of subordination		
17	New knowledge about women's rights		
18	Development of feelings that women can improve their conditions		
19	Self-confidence		
20	Self-esteem/ respect		
21	Self-efficiency		
22	Income generation skills (economic empowerment)		
23	Time management		
B	INTERPERSONAL EMPOWERMENT CONSTRUCTS		
24	Ability to gain Peer support		
25	Ability to gain spousal support		
26	Ability to gain family support		
27	Ability to gain community support		
28	Ability to work with others effectively		
29	Ability to tackle and solve problems		
C	POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT CONSTRUCTS		
30	Organization and mobilization skills		
31	Development of abilities and feelings for social change		
32	Political campaign techniques and skills		
33	Development of public speaking skills and techniques		
34	Development of Lobbying skills and abilities		
35	Conflict management skills		
36	Leadership skills		
37	Development of the need for social change		
38	Legal literacy and awareness		

39. Do you think the skills and knowledge you have acquired from the NFE, and training programmes have contributed to your participation in the Assembly as a woman Assembly member? Yes [1] b) No [2]

If Yes to Question 39, please indicate in the Table below, which area or areas that your acquired knowledge and skills from the NFE programmes enabled you to do.

No	Identified NFE Enabled Areas of participation	Yes	No
40	Abilities to contest the assembly elections	1	2
41	Abilities to mobilise funds for the assembly elections activities		
42	Abilities to campaign effectively		
43	Abilities to participate actively in policy decisions in the assembly		

44. In which ways do you think the skills and knowledge you acquired from the NFE programmes have influenced/enabled you to do the following?

i. To contest the Assembly elections?

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ii. To campaign effectively as a woman during the assembly elections?

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iii. To mobilize funds for the assembly elections activities?

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iv. To participate actively in policy decisions in the Assembly?

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45. Do you think the influence of the NFE programmes (skills and knowledge acquired) on your participation in local level governance as an assembly member was also enhanced by other factors?

Yes [1] No [2]

46. If Yes to Question 45, please state in your opinion what constitute these factors that have enhanced the influence of your acquired abilities from the NFE programmes on your participation in local level governance as an assembly member?

i. ……
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ii. ……
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iii. ……
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Section D. Influence of NFE programmes on the women's level of participation in the assembly's business

47. In which of the following Sub-Committees do you serve currently as a NFE empowered Assembly member?

a. Social services [1]
b. Development planning [2]
c. Justice & security [3]
d. Finance & administration [4]
e. Works sub-committee [5]
f. Gender, children & social protection [6]
g. Executive committee [7]
h. Agriculture committee [8]
i. Health & Environment [9]
j. Education [10]
k. Water & Sanitation [11]

48. Are you playing any leadership role in the assembly as an empowered woman?
a) Yes [1] b) No [2]

49. If yes to Question 48, which of the following leadership positions/roles do you play in the Assembly as an empowered woman?
a) Chairperson of a sub-committee [1]. Presiding Member (PM) of the assembly [2]

Please indicate in the Table below the sub-committee that you serve as a chairperson. Tick [√] to indicate the one applicable to you.

No	Sub-committee	Chairperson
50.	Social service sub-committee	Tick (√)
51	Development planning sub-committee	
52.	Justice & security sub-committee	
53.	Finance & administration sub-committee	
54.	Works sub-committee	
55	Gender, children & social protection sub-committee	
56.	Executive sub-committee	
57.	Agricultural sub-committee	
58.	Health & environment sub-committee	
59	Education sub-committee	
60.	Water & sanitation sub-committee	

Assessment of the influence of NFE programmes on the women's levels of participation in the assembly's business

Please indicate in the Table below your level of participation is in the respective assembly's businesses that you think was enabled by your acquired abilities from the NFE programmes you had.

		Levels of Participation		
No	Policy Decision Areas in the Assembly	Being Present (in Attendance) (1)	Being involved (2)	Being in control (3)
61	Planning the Assembly programmes and projects			
62	Taking decisions to implement the programmes and projects			
63	Evaluation and monitoring of programmes and projects			
64	Decisions on distribution and allocation of resources/projects and expenditures on programmes			
65	Participation in budget preparation			
66	Supervision and monitoring of projects and programmes			

67. In your opinion, what do you think are the factors that limited the influence of your acquired abilities from the NFE programmes on your participation in the assembly's business in the Assembly as a woman member? State what these factors constitute.

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Thank you.