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RESEARCH ARTICLE



‘The mother of all nations’: gendered discourses in Ghana’s 2020 elections

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ABSTRACT

Gendered discourses in Ghana’s politics are not new. Unlike previous years, however, the gendered discourse in the 2020 election was different because the leading opposition party (NDC) selected a female running mate. Considering that the seat has been rotating between the NDC and NPP since 1992, Ghanaians foresaw a “real” possibility of having a female vice president. With data from online news articles and social media, this paper examines the nature of the gendered discourse that characterised Ghana’s 2020 election. We focus on stylistic devices and other linguistic strategies used with a view to understanding how gender either took a centre stage or “seeped” through the political discourse. Underpinned by Ambivalent Sexism Theory and Post-structuralist Discourse Analysis, findings indicate that although the running mate was sometimes represented in ways that challenge traditional gender stereotypes, she was largely represented in stereotypical ways, thereby corroborating findings from other parts of the world. These were done through devices like allusion, sarcasm, simile, metaphor and rhetorical questions. Findings also show that although it was the NDC that actively played the “gender card” to galvanise support, the NPP also played it to dissuade voters from voting for the NDC.

KEYWORDS

Ambivalent sexism theory; gendered discourse; gender stereotypes; Ghana; political discourse, post-structuralist discourse analysis; women and politics

Introduction

Globally, politics has been described as a male-dominated area (Madsen, Aning, and Adu 2020; Inter-Parliamentary Union 2021a; Musah and Gariba 2013; Luecht 2016). According to the 2021 edition of the Inter-Parliamentary Union’s (IPU) UN Map of Women in Politics, although there have been steady increases in the number of women at the highest levels of political power (e.g., 13 countries have 50% or more women in ministerial positions), widespread gender inequalities persist. While this is true across various cultures (see Gibson 2022 on American politics; Williams 2020 on British politics), it is particularly pervasive in patriarchal societies where gender norms are deeply entrenched. For instance, Holland and Wright (2017) argue that the gender-premised inequality in Australia is “cultural, pervasive, and enduring” and a reflection of an “exclusivist national identity narrative” (6) built around male courage, heroism and tenacity. The IPU’s report on Ghana’s parliament also shows that out of the 275

parliamentary seats, women occupy 40, representing 14.55% (IPU 2021b).¹ Although this is an increase from previous years (see Table 1), it is still low compared to global trends, and especially in comparison with other African countries like Rwanda (61.25%), South Africa (46.48%), Mozambique (42.4%) and Namibia (44.23%) (see IPU 2021a). Musah and Gariba's (2013) work on women's participation in Ghana's Parliament from 1992 to 2008 show that socio-cultural, economic and political barriers are among the key factors that impede their participation.

The low participation is in spite of the arguments that women have a lot of potential that can be harnessed for economic, social and political growth (Allah-Mensah 2005). For example, it has been argued that women have demonstrated their ability to bridge political divides, encourage all-inclusive policies and articulate women's concerns (Institute for Inclusive Security 2009). Similarly, McNeil, Roberts, and Snelling (2017) have argued that the approach women adopt to decision making are more inclusive as they seek broader participation and stress on cooperation. There have, therefore, been calls for women's inclusion and participation in governance (see Abakah 2018; Holland and Wright 2017; Musah and Gariba 2013).

Perhaps, it is in line with calls such as these that Ghana's leading opposition party, the National Democratic Congress (NDC), selected a female (Prof. Naana Jane Opoku-Agyemang) as its vice-presidential candidate for the December 2020 elections. This decision sparked a huge debate across the country, with media reportage on various discourses on her personality, political experience, competence and, especially, on issues of gender (similar to what Gibson 2022, 105 refers to as "gender moments" in the 2020 US elections). As Madsen, Aning, and Adu (2020, 2) rightly note, although her candidacy sparked hopes of progress on gender equality, it also triggered anti-feminist and misogynistic rhetoric.

This paper therefore aims at examining the nature of the gendered discourse that characterised Ghana's 2020 elections, not only from the perspectives of the media, but also from that of her party, their major opponents and the electorate. This is a combination which is not so common in studies on gender and politics. The focus is often on either the media's representations of the candidates (Gibson 2022; Van der Pas and Aldering 2020; Holland and Wright 2017; Fofie 2016), or female politicians' shared experiences (Madsen 2021; Abakah 2018; Olufade 2013; Sossou 2011). Yet this combination is key to providing a more holistic understanding of issues of gender and politics in the media and beyond. Data posted between July 6 2020 and March 23 2021 (from nomination till 3 months after the election) were considered for the study. Those that made direct or indirect references to Opoku-Agyemang's sex or gender roles (and political experience or intellectual abilities) were selected for analyses from online media platforms like Facebook, Peace Fm online, Ghanaweb, MyJoyOnline and YouTube. In all, 8 images, 14 headlines, 1 audio recording, 3 video recordings, as well as comments on the images and recordings that address our objectives were considered for analyses. We focused on stylistic devices and other linguistic strategies used, with a view to understanding how gender either took a centre stage or "seeped" through the discourses. A focus on language is critical because it is one productive way through which we can understand the beliefs, expectations and fears associated with having a female vice president.

Table 1. Percentages of female Parliamentarians from 1992 to 2020 (figures adopted from Madsen 2019 and IPU 2021b).

Election Year	President	Ruling party	% of Female MPs
1992	Fl.Lt. Jerry John Rawlings	NDC	8%
1996	Fl.Lt. Jerry John Rawlings	NDC	10%
2000	John Agyekum Kufuor	NPP	10%
2004	John Agyekum Kufuor	NPP	11%
2008	John Evans Atta Mills	NDC	9%
2012	John Dramani Mahama	NDC	11%
2016	Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo Addo	NPP	13%
2020	Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo Addo	NPP	14.55%

Women and politics in Ghana

As noted above, Ghana lags behind most African states in terms of women's political representation in governance. Table 1 shows the low percentages of female parliamentarians.

Table 1 also shows that the 8th Parliament of the Fourth Republic has the highest representation of women in Ghana's parliament (14.55%). The New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the National Democratic Congress (NDC) have 20 female members each, adding up to 40 females out of a total of 275 members. As Madsen (2019) notes, this figure is, however, below the average both globally (23%) and continentally (24%). In Ghana, Madsen (2021) has identified, for instance, political insults, ridicule and rumours as factors that affect women's political representation. Illustrating this with accounts from some female MPs, she argues that women are attacked (by fellow male MPs) based on their gender, sexuality, appearances and accusations of their inability to take care of the state. This politics of insults negatively affects the women (and in some cases their families). It also negatively impacts their ability to win elections. In fact, those women who have actually won elections either had their confidence eroded or it nearly caused their withdrawals (The Westminster Foundation for Democracy, cited in Madsen 2021).

The table also shows that between 1992 and 2020, the presidential seat has been rotating between the NDC and NPP every second term. Indeed, although Ghana formally runs a multi-party system (12 parties for the 2020 elections), in reality, it is the two major political parties – NDC and NPP – that attract over 98% of the votes during elections, thus, making Ghana a “duopolistic system” (Madsen, Aning, and Adu 2020, 3). We provide a brief background of these two major political parties below.

The major political parties

The NDC is a social democratic political party founded by Fl. Lt. Jerry John Rawlings in 1991. It is presently the major opposition party in Ghana. Its leading rival is the NPP, a centre-right and liberal conservative political party founded by Albert Adu Boahene in 1992. The NPP is currently the party in power (see also Table 1).

Over the years, the presidential and vice-presidential candidates for both parties have always been men. In the 2020 elections, however, the presidential candidate of the NDC (Mr John Dramani Mahama) selected a woman (Prof Jane Naana Opoku-

Table 2. Female running mates (Adam 2020; Africa Global Radio 2020).

Year	Presidential Candidate	Vice-Presidential Candidate	Political party
1996	Edward Mahama	Adeline Dede Nartey	People's National Convention
2000	Dan Lartey	Petra Amegashie	Great Consolidated Popular Party
2008	Emmanuel A. Antwi	Patricia Ameku	Democratic Freedom Party
2012	Hassan Ayariga	Helen S. Dzatumbe Matervi	People's National Convention
	Abu Sakara	Nana Akosua Frimpongmaa Sarpong	Convention People's Party
	Paa Kwesi Nduom	Eva Lokko	People's Progressive Party
2016	Paa Kwesi Nduom	Brigitte Dzogbenuku	People's Progressive Party

Agyemang) as his running mate. Note that Opoku-Agyemang is not the first woman to serve as a running mate to a presidential candidate within the Fourth Republic (see Table 2).

What makes the 2020 elections different is that Opoku-Agyemang's party, the NDC, is a "winning candidate" (see Table 1). The huge debates which surrounded her selection, therefore, raised questions about whether Ghana was indeed ready for a female to occupy such a high leadership position. Similar questions were raised when, in 2011, Nana Konadu Agyemang-Rawlings (a former First Lady) contested John Atta Mills, the then sitting president, for the right to lead the NDC party in the 2012 elections (Fofie 2016). Similar questions were again raised when Nana Konadu, after losing to Mills, defected from the NDC and decided to contest for the highest office in 2016 and 2020 on the ticket of a party she founded (National Democratic Party). She was, however, not given the kind of attention Opoku-Agyemang received because her party was not a "winning" party. Opoku-Agyemang's nomination was therefore "symbolic" since it served as providing a role model for female politicians in Ghana (Madsen, Aning, and Adu 2020).

Previous studies

Several studies report the low participation of women in politics globally (Sossou 2011; Abakah 2018; Luecht 2016; Holland and Wright 2017). This can be attributed to people viewing politics as "the quintessential male sphere of action" (Sossou 2011, 2; see also Holland and Wright 2017), a space where women are unwelcome. In exploring Ghanaian women's perception and voices about gender and equality in politics, Sossou argues that, even though constitutionally women in Ghana have equal rights as males, to actively participate in politics, the reality is that they tend to "face issues of gender-based power imbalance and discrimination in addition to other structural, institutional, cultural, and traditional barriers and roadblocks" (Sossou 2011, 1). These barriers can impede their performance and make them come across as incompetent. Sarfo-Kantankah's (2021, 1) corpus-based research on Ghanaian parliamentary discourses around the nouns *gender*, *men* and *women* and the themes that characterise them also shows that while men are ascribed masculine features like strength and authority, women are discursively constructed as vulnerable and disadvantaged persons who need empowerment through increased political participation, among others.

Research on the media representation of female politicians have also demonstrated that female political leaders are often stereotypically represented in media reportage (Van der Pas and Aaldering 2020; Gibson 2022; Holland and Wright 2017; Lithgow 2000; Bystrom, Robertson, and Banwart 2001; Everitt 2005; Anderson, Diabah, and hMensa

2011). For instance, in their study on the media representation of Liberia's first female president, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, Anderson, Diabah, and hMensa (2011) show how the media stereotypically represented Johnson-Sirleaf by using language that focused on her traditional role as a woman (e.g., mother) and physical appearance (e.g., dressing), rather than on her political experience, even though she was more experienced than her opponent. Adenike Olufunke Olufade also notes how a female politician in Nigeria was told, "men are the decision makers; women should be cooking in the kitchen while men play politics," when she announced her intention to contest for a governorship position (Olufade 2013, 162) – an indication that women are unfit for politics. Such stereotypical representations are not peculiar to Africa. For instance, Gibson's (2022) study on America's 2020 elections show attention to feminine stereotypes, while the "mentioning of policy issues was nearly absent in the titles" (107). These corroborate previous studies that have suggested that "focus[ing] on feminised traits perpetuates the stereotypes of women while simultaneously reducing time for discussing the female candidates' viability" (Gibson 2022, 115; see also Bystrom, Robertson, and Banwart 2001). Lithgow (2000), discussing Asian female political leaders, also argues that rather than highlighting the women's personal achievements and accomplishments, the media in Asia place emphasis on their physical appearance, clothes and hairstyles. Everitt (2005) and Ross et al. (2013) have made similar observations about female politicians in Canada and Britain, respectively. It is the opposite when it comes to male political leaders.

Holland and Wright's (2017) study on Australian politics also show how constraints of gender expectations and exclusivist national identity built around the courage and heroism of Australian soldiers worked together to delegitimise Julia Gillard's leadership. This suggests that female candidates do not only suffer gender biases before elections, but the way the media sometimes portrays them even after winning the elections "delegitimises" them – they will always be defined by their gender first, irrespective of what they do.

It is, however, worth noting that women are not always represented in stereotypical ways. For instance, Fofie's (2016) study on Nana Konadu Agyeman Rawlings and John Atta Mills found that although there were some gender biases against the female contestant (e.g., attention to her gender), there was no significant difference in the quality of coverage for both candidates, and the tone of coverage was neutral. This is contrary to the dominant literature that suggests that media coverage of female candidates is stereotypical and centred on physical traits instead of issues. While her findings are not unheard of (see also Jalalzai 2006), we argue that the reason for them could be because it was an internal election to select a flagbearer and not the national race for presidency – considering that some media houses could be biased because of their allegiance to certain political parties.

Overall, these studies provide useful insights for the analysis of the gendered discourse that characterised Ghana's 2020 elections.

Theoretical frameworks

Post-structuralist discourse analysis

The specific interest of Post-structuralist Discourse Analysis is in 'language as a "site" for the construction and contestation of social meanings' (Baxter 2003, 6). It is generally concerned with examining how speakers construct their identities or how they are

constructed by others as negotiating, conforming to, challenging and resisting existing subject positions in competing discourses (see Baxter 2003, 2008; Diabah 2019). A post-structuralist inquiry therefore sees subject positions as more fragmented, diverse and context-specific. For example, individuals may construct themselves, or they may be constructed by others, as powerful or powerless depending on the context. They may be constructed in ways that sustain stereotypical practices in some contexts but challenge these same practices in other contexts.

In its application to gender research, Baxter (2003, 2008) argues against a unique and consistent representation of women and men across discourse contexts. She advocates for an analysis of the multiple, diverse and sometimes conflicting subject positions of women in various contexts, instead of treating them as a unified body who are always positioned as powerless in discourse (see Anderson, Diabah, and hMensa 2011). In keeping with the tenets of this approach, we sought to analyse the various ways in which the NDC's running mate was subject-positioned in the political discourse before and after Ghana's 2020 elections. Post-structuralist Discourse Analysis has been useful in examining the various nuances of her representations – some powerful and others powerless; some negative and others “positive,” and some of which sustain, while others challenge, gender norms. This can further be explained by Ambivalent Sexism Theory.

Ambivalent sexism theory

According to Glick and Fiske (1996), sexism is a prejudice, but unlike the traditional understanding of prejudice as uniform antipathy towards women, they see it as a “special case of prejudice marked by a deep ambivalence” (491). This ambivalence encompasses two sexist attitudes, hostile and benevolent sexism:

Hostile sexism seeks to justify male power, traditional gender roles, and men's exploitation of women . . . through derogatory characterisations of women. *Benevolent sexism*, in contrast, relies on kinder and gentler justifications of male dominance and prescribed gender roles; it recognises men's dependence on women (i.e., women's dyadic power) . . . These [benevolent] attitudes are *subjectively positive* for the sexist (Glick and Fiske 1997, 121).

Whereas hostile sexism is sexist antipathy, benevolent sexism encompasses attitudes that are subjectively positive, but underneath them are traditional stereotypes and male dominance which often have damaging consequences. Thus, “both hostile and benevolent sexism serve to justify men's structural power” (Glick and Fiske 1996, 492). They note, however, that a man (or a woman) who is benevolently sexist may genuinely not be aware of the sexist assumptions implicit in his (or her) actions or comments (Glick and Fiske 1997). They conclude that benevolent sexism is a more effective way of coercing cooperation from women.

This theory is useful in analysing the various sexist comments in our data – some of which are hostile and others benevolent. We particularly find the following concepts useful in addressing the nuances of the data: (a) dominative paternalism – a hostile sexist attitude which encompasses “the belief that women ought to be controlled by men” (Glick and Fiske 1996, 121); which is like the kind of relationship that exists between a father and his child, where the father has power and control over the child; (b) competitive gender differentiation – a hostile sexist attitude which “presents a social

justification for male structural power” and perceives only men as “having the traits necessary to govern important social institutions” (Glick and Fiske 1996, 493); and (c) complementary gender differentiation – a benevolent sexist attitude which assigns women traits consistent with traditional gender roles (e.g., wife, mother) which are viewed as positive (Glick and Fiske 1996, 122).

Data analysis and results

The analysis is presented in two parts: the first subsection focuses on discourses that were projected by different news headlines before and after the elections, and the second one focuses on the emerging themes. Sources for the data are provided in the reference section. People who made specific comments have been anonymised by using initials, instead of full names.

Pre-election vs post-election headlines

As shown in several headlines (see Table 3) that reported the selection of Opoku-Agyemang, the pre-election discourse was highly gendered, using the “first woman” frame (Fofie 2016). This was especially so in the days immediately following the announcement (July 6 2020) and her presentation to the public (July 27 2020). On the other hand, the post-election discourse was less gendered, as shown in examples 11–14 on Table 3.

Table 3. Pre-election and post-election headlines (compiled by authors, bolds our emphasis).

	Headline	Date	Summary
Pre-election headlines			
1	Ghana presidential candidate selects first female running mate for major party	6 July 2020	She is the first female vice-presidential candidate for a major party, a former education minister, a professor and the first female VC of a public university.
2	Ghana Opposition Leader Picks Female Ex-Minister as Running Mate	6 July 2020	She is the first female running mate of a major political party and a former education minister.
3	Women hail Mahama for nominating Prof Jane Opoku Agyeman	7 July 2020	Gender activists, market women (and some males) described her nomination as a step towards deepening Ghana’s democratic credentials. It presents an opportunity for women to be part of key decisions. She is a mother of three, the Africa Board Chairperson of the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), former education minister and first female VC of a public university.

Reuters
Bloomberg Politics
BusinessGhana

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued).

	Headline	Date	Summary
4	African Centre for Women in Politics lauds selection of Prof. Jane Opoku-Agyemang as Mahama's running mate	7 July 2020	Her nomination is described by ACWP as "a fulfillment that has been long-awaited by women in Ghana, in Africa and the world at large." It is a progress towards making women part of the decision-making process in the country. It is a recognition that women are partners in development and not only suitable as kitchen or bedroom "tools." Her appointment will deepen the confidence of women across the country and empower them. <i>JoyOnline</i>
5	Ghana May See First Female Vice President	7 July 2020	She is the first female running mate for a major party, former education minister and first female VC of a public university. <i>Petroleum Africa</i>
6	Ghana awaits first female VP if opposition wins 2020 polls	9 July 2020	She is the first woman on a major Ghanaian party's presidential ticket, former education minister, a professor and first female VC of a public university. <i>africanews</i>
7	Women groups back Prof. Opoku-Agyemang as NDC running mate	12 July 2020	African Women Lawyers Association, and African Women in Leadership Organization have released statements supporting her nomination. They note that her selection will ignite women's participation in political development, public service and leadership. It will get women in the top hierarchy of political governance. <i>Citi Newsroom</i>
8	Ghana Presents Female Vice President Candidate	15 July 2020	She is the first woman since the fourth republic to be on a major Ghanaian party's presidential ticket. She is a former education minister, a professor and first female VC of a public university. Other credentials include Academic Director of the School for International Training in the History and Cultures of the African Diaspora, representative of Ghana to the Executive Board of UNESCO, a Fulbright scholar, member of the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences and Fellow of the Commonwealth of Learning. <i>The Election Network</i>
9	FAWE's Board Chairperson in race towards becoming First Female Vice President of Ghana	11 September 2020	Ghana is geared at having its first Female Vice President in history when Hon. Mahama wins elections. She championed a lot of reforms as education minister. Her appointment is a major step in getting more women in the top hierarchy in politics. She is a formidable advocate for women's empowerment. <i>FAWE</i>
10	A step forward, but no guarantee of gender-friendly policies: Female candidates spark hope in the 2020 Ghanaian elections	3 December 2020	Her candidacy has given rise to hopes of progress on gender equality issues, but it has also led to anti-feminist and misogynistic comments. <i>The Nordic Africa Institute</i>
Post-election Headlines			

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued).

	Headline	Date	Summary
11	Prof. Opoku-Agyemang As Vice Presidential Candidate Didn't Help NDC – Political analyst	10 December 2020	According to a Political Analyst and governance expert “one of the reasons the National Democratic Congress (NDC) was defeated in the 2020 general elections was as a result of the party's decision to choose a lady as its vice-presidential candidate.” <i>GhanaWeb</i>
12	Jane Naana Opoku-Agyemang allegedly quits as Mahama's vice president after election loss, video drops	16 December 2020	There is an alleged report that she has relinquished her vice-presidential position to continue her previous position as the VC of a public university. Prior to this, there had been calls for support for her candidacy since women also needed to be in positions of power. <i>Atinkanews.net</i>
13	John Mahama's appointment of Jane Opoku-Agyemang as running mate created 'hatred' in NDC	14 March 2021	According to a leading member of the NDC, her appointment worked against the party. It created animosity among members because she is not a grassroots member. <i>GhanaWeb</i>
14	Mahama can't win 2024 elections with Prof. Opoku-Agyemang as running mate	23 March 2021	A political science lecturer is reported to have said that NDC cannot win the 2024 election if she is the running mate. <i>Pulse.com.gh</i>

As shown above, each of the headlines during the pre-election period has something to do with women. The focus is either on the fact that the running mate is a female/woman (e.g., 1, 2) or that women and women groups are applauding the NDC for choosing one of their own (e.g., 3, 7). In some cases, the main points in the report are about the candidate's sex and the importance of having women in such places to spearhead women empowerment and development (e.g., 3, 4) (see Gibson 2022 for similar findings). In other cases, the gender issues are discussed alongside her academic credentials and political experience (e.g., 1, 9). On the other hand, the gender twist to the discourse is conspicuously missing in the post-election headlines, although some of the reports are gendered (e.g., 11). This has implications for the interpretation of the gendered nature of the pre-election discourse.²

Emerging themes

Some of the themes that emerged from the data include gender blackmail; politics and family relations; women, politics and physical appearance; and women, politics and power(lessness). These are discussed in the subsections that follow.

Discourses of gender 'blackmail'

As noted earlier, the literature on gender and politics point to the underrepresentation of women in politics. The NDC therefore considered its selection of a female running mate as a way of encouraging more participation from women as well as indicating their support for women empowerment. However, one of the pre-election discourses that dominated the debate was whether the NDC's selection of a female running mate was not to “blackmail” Ghanaians into voting for them. Taking the luring aspect of “blackmail”

into consideration, the use of “gender blackmail discourse” here centres around an understanding that selecting a woman to lead a major party such as the NDC was a way of gaining advantage over their opponents by soliciting votes, especially, from women (i.e., playing “the gender card,” Donaghue 2015, 168). Examples of the gender blackmail discourse are discussed below.

By arguing that “Ghana does not have a woman leading any of the three arms of Government” (Figure 1), the NDC points readers to the need to have a woman in one of the three main government positions; and the time to make that happen is “now”! This may be interpreted as indirectly luring people to vote for NDC so a woman can occupy a powerful position. On this Facebook post, AO comments “the issue is not about getting a woman to run affairs or to be in the arms of government. It’s about serious business, if probably you can head the economic team and perform better than Bawumia [sic].” Another continues with a rhetorical question “is this the reason why you brought a woman or she is capable?” (MA). AO and MA’s comments suggest that it is more relevant to highlight the candidate’s competence rather than her sex. In fact, AO challenges the candidate’s competence by asking whether she is capable of heading the economic team and performing better than Bawumia (the then and current Vice-President who is an economist) – note AO’s use of the sentence “it’s about serious business,” as if women are not into serious business. This aligns with Glick and Fiske’s concept of competitive gender differentiation which perceives men as the only people who have “the traits necessary to govern important social institutions” (Glick and Fiske 1996, 493).

Another instance of the gender blackmail discourse is seen in *3FM* news’ interview with one of the NDC leaders. Extract 1 is an excerpt of the interview:

We the NDC and the Ghanaians, **we want every Ghanaian woman to be big**; . . . Women, that is our mothers! (Extract 1, 2, and 3 2020, AA, our emphasis)

The term “big woman” in Ghanaian parlance refers to a well-accomplished woman, often in terms of wealth, status, academic standing etc. AA here acknowledges the fact that not all Ghanaian women are “big.” Thus, he tries to persuade the “small women” to vote for the NDC by promising them a rise in status i.e., to become “big women.” The NDC leader plays the gender blackmail card, and viewers/listeners interpret it as such, as shown in Extract 2 (after Figure 1).

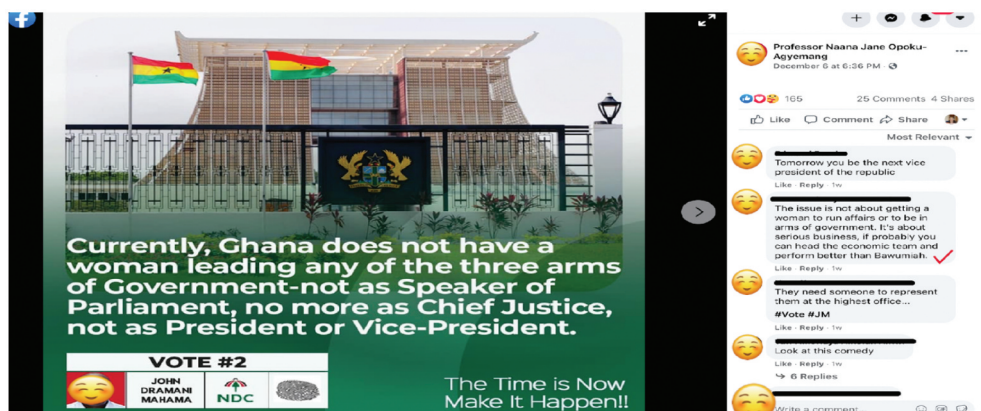


Figure 1. No female leader in the three arms of Government.

You are using this as a **strategic way** of deceiving the **ordinary cheap brains of some Ghanaians** but not all of us will be able to be **deceived** by these NDC-NPP [people] with their greedy and wicked leaders we have here in Ghana (JA)

What kind of policy is this? I should vote for the NDC because the vice is a woman? Let's tell the masses what we shall do instead (RY) (Extract 2 2020, our emphasis)

JA uses the phrases “a strategic way” and “deceived” as instantiations of the gender blackmail discourse, a blackmail that only the “ordinary cheap brains” (i.e., those with shallow minds who cannot read in between the lines) will fall for. On his part, RY uses rhetorical questions as evidence of the gender blackmail discourse. He questions the thinking behind playing the “gender card” and rather proposes a discussion of competence as the way forward (see similar arguments by AO and MA above).

Others are also quick to describe AA and the NDC as hypocrites by reminding them of the “bloody widow” discourse (see Diabah 2022). The following comments illustrate this further:

Our politicians are so **dishonest** sometimes it bores me. Are these not the same NDC people who called another woman seeking to enter parliament on the ticket of NPP “a bloody widow” she de3, na [as for her] she is not a woman? (Extract 3 2020, SS, our emphasis)

Like JA and RY, SS questions the thinking behind playing the “gender card,” but especially so for him since the NDC has not proven to be pro-women. He alludes to the story of the “bloody widow” to argue that politicians are dishonest.³ Since the NDC rejected a female NPP MP, turning around (a year later) to argue that “we want every Ghanaian woman to be big” is hypocritical.

Darko (2020) provides a reason for the NDC's gender blackmail as follows:

The NDC ... is seeking to garner political capital riding more on the back of the Prof's gender than on her credentials and capabilities. ... **The impact of this choice is to give some temporary shield to him [the flagbearer] as the gentle Prof takes the limelight. He carefully considered the blackmail value in this choice.** (Darko 2020, n.p., our emphasis).

The author indirectly argues that the gender blackmail is to shift attention from the flagbearer, who has been described by some people (especially members of the ruling NPP) as incompetent and corrupt, to a woman who he describes as “gentle.” Underneath this argument also is the perception that politics is a dirty game, and women bring sanity into it. The Institute for Inclusive Security (2009), for instance, notes that women in politics tend to build more stable and transparent governance systems. They have also proven to be capable of decreasing government corruption and press for government accountability (see also Musah and Gariba 2013). The gender blackmail is therefore intended not to win the votes of only women but also men who are sympathetic to the cause of women as well as those who believe in the credibility of women.

Politics and family relations: the mother of all nations

Cross-culturally, mothers are associated with certain characteristics like being procreators/life givers, carers/nurturers and homemaker/caretakers (Diabah and Amfo 2015). Their role as carers/nurturers involves ensuring that all members of the family are properly taken care of

(e.g., food, health, education). Motherhood was identified as one of the themes associated with the political discourse before and after the elections. Figures 2 and 3 and Extract 4 illustrate how Opoku-Agyemang was represented as a “mother.”

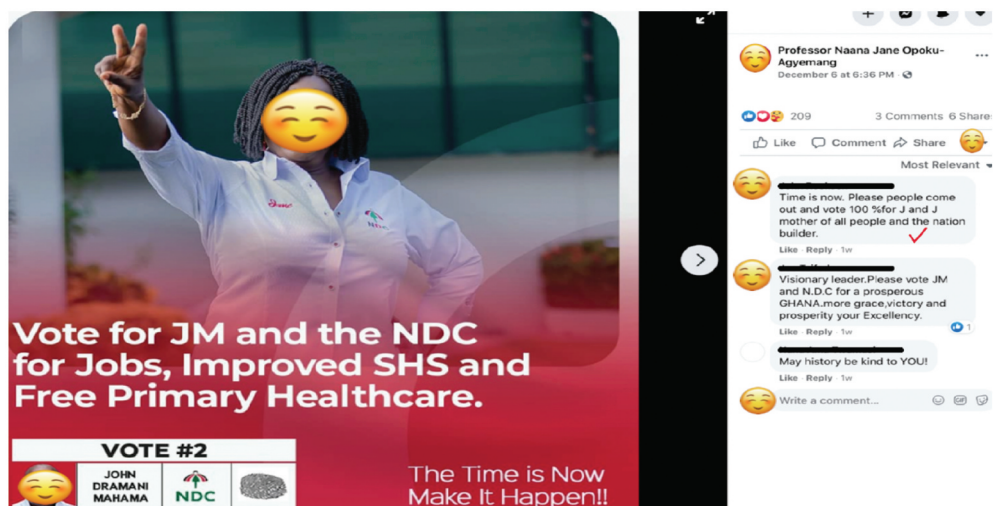


Figure 2. The mother of all people.

In the comments on the Facebook post (Figure 2), JR refers to her as the “mother of all people and the nation builder.” As a mother of the nation, she is expected to be a nation builder (which is a position of power) by providing certain necessities of life – jobs, improved education and free primary healthcare.⁴

The nation-building role of a mother also includes uniting people in conflict situations by showing love and affection to all. An example of this can be found in Figure 3(a,b), i.e., when Opoku-Agyemang visited victims of the election violence (after commiserating with the families of those who lost their lives). As shown in ET’s comment in Figure 3(a) (“very touching, see mother, how deep she is feeling”) and AK’s comment in Figure 3(b) (“A TRULY CARING MOTHER;” note the use of caps to show emphasis), we see an expression of a mother’s affection, concern and sympathy, as she puts her arm around the boy and wipes away his tears.

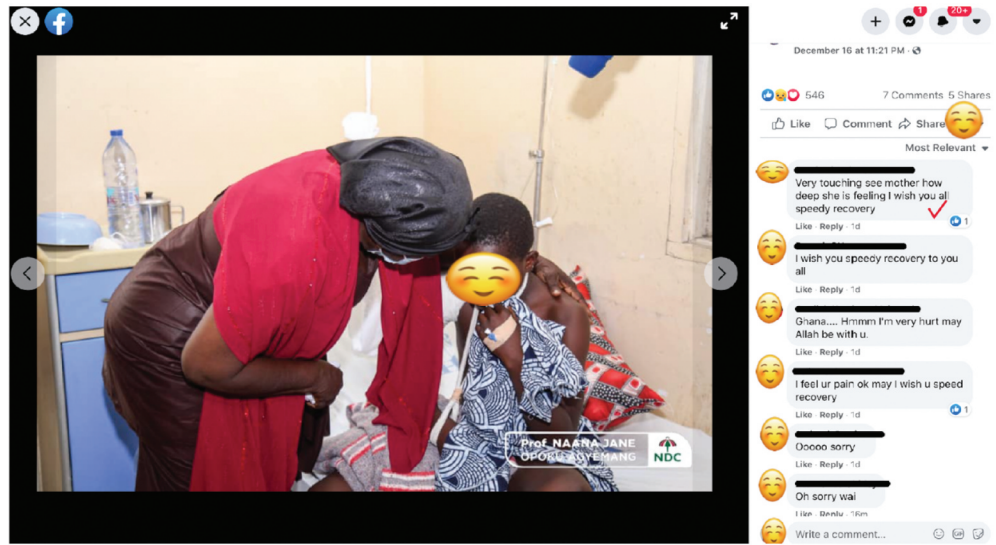
Some sympathisers of NPP also used the mother of all nations discourse, but they did so in ways that discredited her true motherly nature. This was key in the discourse surrounding the cancellation of nurses and teacher training allowances when she was Minister of Education.⁵ Extract 4 illustrates their argument:

You can’t help but ask yourself whether this was the woman the NDC and Mr John Dramani Mahama were capable of selecting as his running mate. **What I have heard is that women are supposed to have empathy and sympathy. What I have heard is that women take care of the home . . .** But it is during this woman’s time that the allowances for the children to take care of their needs were cancelled. . . **It is the same mother figure that we were all looking up to, thinking that even if president Dramani Mahama said it, she would be**

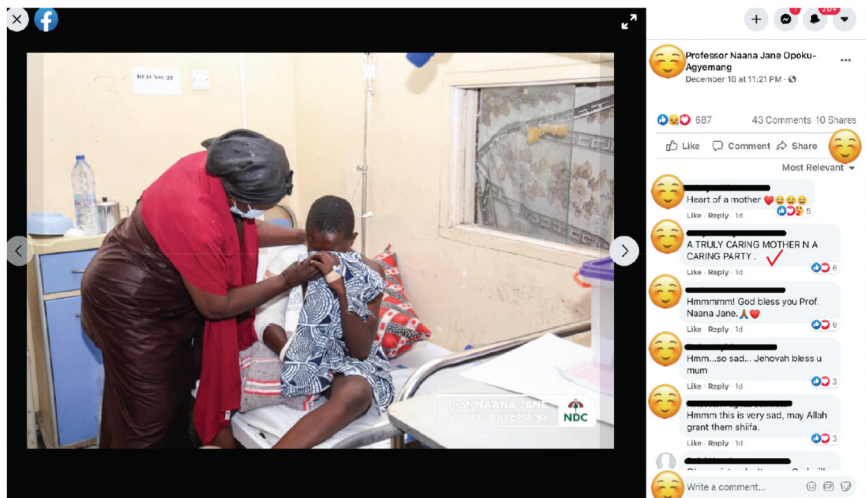
firm and tell him “oh, father, I beg you, there are children at home, let’s take care of the home. Some even claim that they won’t be able to continue their education if we cancel the allowances”.

(Extract 4 2020, ND, our emphasis)

Like the other commenters, ND (a prominent member of the ruling party) identifies empathy, caring and nurturing as some of the characteristics of a mother (which align with Glick and Fiske’s [1996, 1997] complementary gender differentiation – see above). Unlike the others, however, he sees these characteristics as something the running mate lacks, for which reason her party must not be voted for. He believes that even if the father (president) says something and it is not in the interest of the children, a good mother will intervene. In other words, even if



a. An empathetic mother



b. A caring mother

Figure 3. (a) An empathetic mother. (b) A caring mother.

she was not the one who initiated the decision to cancel the allowances, she failed as a mother to stop its implementation. This is similar to Chang and Hitchon's (2004) findings that voters often judge female politicians based on gender expectations.

Women, politics and physical appearance

Unfortunately, gender biases which focus on the physical appearance (instead of competence) of women in politics still persist in spite of the fact that an increasing number of women have taken up key positions in various governments and have performed creditably (see Van der Pas and Aaldering 2020). It is particularly troubling when the person in question is not completely new to politics. In perpetuating the stereotype that women are expected to be beauty-conscious (Agyepong and Diabah 2021), a prominent member of the ruling party attacked Opoku-Agyemang's physical appearance in the most derogatory manner (which received nationwide condemnation). Excerpts of his comments are reproduced below:

It appears Mahama is looking for someone with whom he can conspire to steal. You just look at the woman's face. Line up a number of women and take a number of pictures; **If you look at the woman's face from top, her hair, right down to her feet, including the dress she is wearing, you can see that the woman herself is someone who is disappointed in herself; a disappointment to her family, Ghanaians and women as well.**

(Extract 5, CW, our emphasis)

It is worth noting from the first sentence of this extract that the discussion at this stage was on corruption. However, CW digresses and attacks the woman's physical appearance. The question that needs answering is what her physical appearance has got to do with whether she will be able to fight corruption or not. By this digression, CW shifts our focus from the most important (issues of corruption) to the trivial (beauty-consciousness). He draws attention to the stereotype that women are beauty-conscious (which makes them unfit for politics); and as such, she should be concentrating on that, instead of engaging in politics – what AO refers to in Figure 1 as “serious business.”

In another example (Figure 4), one of Ghana's celebrities, AS makes the following comment about her physical appearance:



Figure 4. AS's sarcastic comment about appearance.

At face value, the comment “hair and makeup on point” appears positive, but Ghanaians were quick to identify the sarcasm beneath it. In one of backlashes to AS’s comments (Figure 5), RN points out the sarcasm in AS’s post:



Figure 5. A rebuke of AS’s sarcasm.

RN also trolls AS using innuendo (an allusive or oblique remark) in her comment above. Note that this comment can also be interpreted as sarcastic. Three additional linguistic strategies used in this comment are key to the discussion here. RN combines a conditional clause (if...then...), a metaphor (“what lies in her head,” i.e., sense/knowledge) and personification (“the complexion of your elbow would nod in agreement”) to draw attention to the inconsistency in AS’s complexion, which some people have alleged in other posts is the result of bleaching. She therefore questions the sense in AS’s comment because she is indeed no better in terms of beauty. By this, RN also draws attention to what should be the focus in politics and political discourse – the knowledge/sense and experience, rather than a mere physical appearance.

These findings are consistent with global trends, where some studies have shown how media coverage of female politicians often centre on feminine stereotypes (e.g., appearance, family relations) instead of their achievements and abilities (Van der Pas and Aaldering 2020; Bystrom, Robertson, and Banwart 2001). As Van der Pas and Aaldering (2020) rightly note, “women politicians are more often discussed in terms of their gender, their family life, and their physical appearance, but not in terms of their personality” (132), thus, focusing on “trivial matters” (119).

Women, politics and power(lessness)

In line with our post-structuralist stance, this section looks at how Opoku-Agyemang is represented as powerless in some contexts and powerful in others.

Representations of powerlessness. Consistent with the general representation of women as powerless, including in politics (see Anderson, Diabah, and hMensa 2011; Sossou 2011; Lithgow 2000), there is a representation of powerlessness in the comments by a leading NPP member. He makes an analogy between the role of the NDC’s running and the role of a wife (in this case, Ms Mahama – a former first lady) in the extract below:

John Dramani nominating her is **just like** nominating his wife Lordina as a vice or running mate; because, during the time Mahama was president, Lordina Mahama did all the administrative work. So, regarding politics, **Mahama has made us understand that it is not necessary to nominate someone who is knowledgeable to work with. Do you understand? Mahama has made us know that he wants someone who cannot challenge whatever he says.**
(Extract 6, CW, our emphasis)

Firstly, CW's comment (which is perceived here as an allegation) suggests that former First Lady Lordina Mahama had no experience or expertise for the job, and neither does the running mate ("not necessary to nominate someone who is knowledgeable"). Secondly, Lordina's role was only so the President could have his way ("someone who cannot challenge whatever he says"). Here, we refer to understandings of the kind of power relations that exist between a husband (the more powerful – head of the home, decision-maker etc.) and a wife (the less powerful/powerless – submissive, supportive etc). For instance, as Diabah and Amfo (2015, 14) note, allowing the man to lead and submissiveness are key indicators of the Akan perception of a virtuous wife because "a good woman is she who listens to her husband's advice."

Through the use of a simile ("like") in Extract 6, CW ascribes to the running mate the powerlessness that is often associated with wives – like the "virtuous" Akan woman who is expected not to challenge her husband. This representation is despite the woman's academic credentials (a Professor of English) and experience (a former Minister of Education and a former Vice Chancellor of a public university), leading and taking decisions for both men and women. But she is represented as though she has no mind of her own – a representation that can best be described as an example of Glick and Fiske's (Glick and Fiske 1996, 1997) concept of hostile sexism. More precisely, this can be likened to what they refer to as "dominative paternalism," which is "the belief that women ought to be controlled by men" (Glick and Fiske 1997, 121).

Another example of the representation of powerlessness (or incompetence in some cases) is found in Extract 7, which consists of a selection of interviews (by *GhanaTube*) with some traders:

MN1: He has done well by selecting a woman. But since I was born, I have never seen a woman governing Ghana before. So, I am double-minded. I don't understand. As for me, I don't think it will be helpful, because **why should a woman rule? After all, they were created with our ribs so they cannot help us in any way.** So, I believe that what Mahama has done will not help us.

MN2: This issue is quite disturbing because, how do things play out **even when there is a male running mate, let alone going for a woman?** It is quite surprising and disturbing (Extract 7 2020).

In this extract, MN1 alludes to the creation story (Genesis 2:21–22) in ways that suggest women's powerlessness in politics. Many have drawn on this aspect of the creation story to perpetuate what they perceive as women's subordination to men or their second place in the gender order (see Young 2009). It is worth noting that this man (who claims to be a member of the NDC) acknowledges the value in selecting a woman as a running mate. However, he is not ready to be ruled by a woman (note the rhetorical question "why should a woman rule?") because it has not happened before and, obviously, he is not ready for a change. His argument is premised on his perception of women as weak and powerless, and thus incapable of ruling, especially the men from whose ribs they were made. Like the hierarchist who argues that the woman was made *for* the man (see Young 2009, 14), MN1's comment suggests that the woman cannot be better than her "master." It can also be argued that MN1's fears are not based on just his unwillingness to be governed by a woman, but by the fact that men (and women) who think like him may not vote for his party, thereby causing their defeat ("what Mahama has done will not help us"). This corresponds to the notion of "electability," as

described by Gibson (2022) in the US elections – a word which became conflated with women’s viability. In the case of MN2 (NPP supporter), he finds the NDC’s choice of a female quite “disturbing” because *even the men* have not performed creditably (note his use of a rhetorical question). By his comparing and contrasting strategies, he insinuates that a woman cannot be better than a man, and as a result, they are incompetent and unfit for such high leadership position.

Representations of power. In line with our post-structuralist discourse analytic stance that no one is positioned in the same way across all discourse contexts, the data indicate that Opoku-Agyemang was not always constructed as powerless. Indeed, most of the posts from her party in support of her nomination drew on women’s empowerment as a key factor for voting for the NDC. The following are some examples (additional examples can be found in Extract 1 and Figure 1):



Figure 6. Power to the women.

Opoku-Agyemang is represented in both Figures 6 and 7 in ways that exude power. First, her posture in Figure 6 (one hand holding her waist and the other raised) is a representation of strength and power. Note also how her pictures in both examples are bigger and placed above those of the flagbearer (the one who actually needs to be voted for), thereby drawing attention to the fact that a consideration for the woman is key to Mr Mahama’s success. But of course, it is his success that will eventually reinforce women empowerment because “a vote for John Mahama is a vote for a woman to be in one of the highest positions of leadership in Ghana” (Figure 7). These power-constructions are reinforced by the two comments visible in Figure 6 – whereas BY sees it as giving power to the woman, JB sees the woman not just as an asset, but a *great* one.

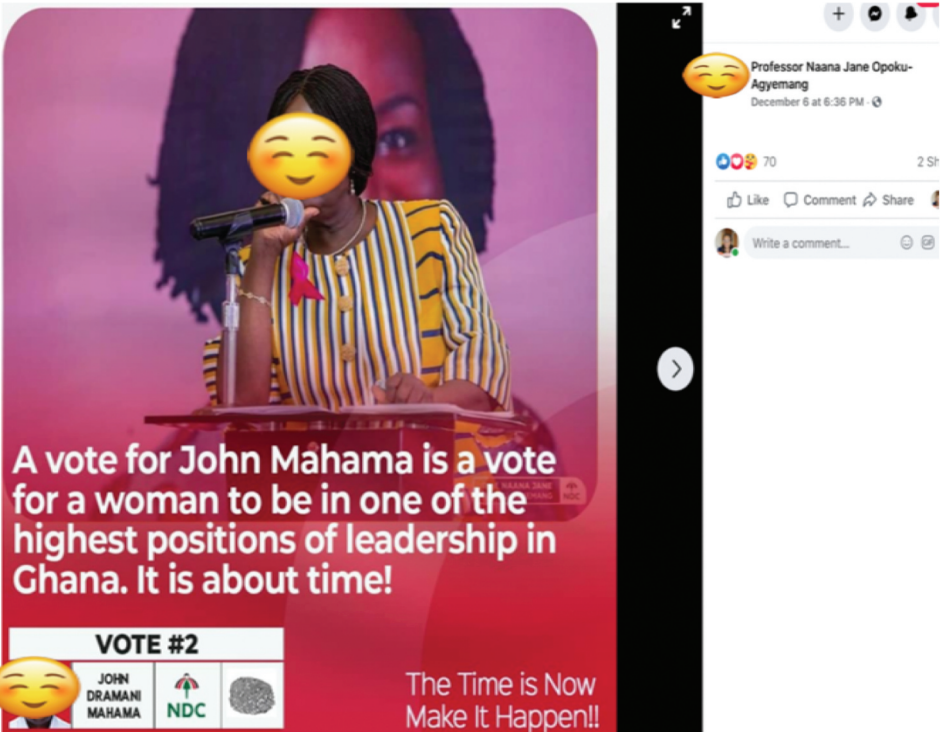


Figure 7. It is time for the women.

In another construction of power, the NDC alludes to a popular quotation by Dr. Kwegyir Aggrey (a Ghanaian scholar and educationist) in Figure 8:

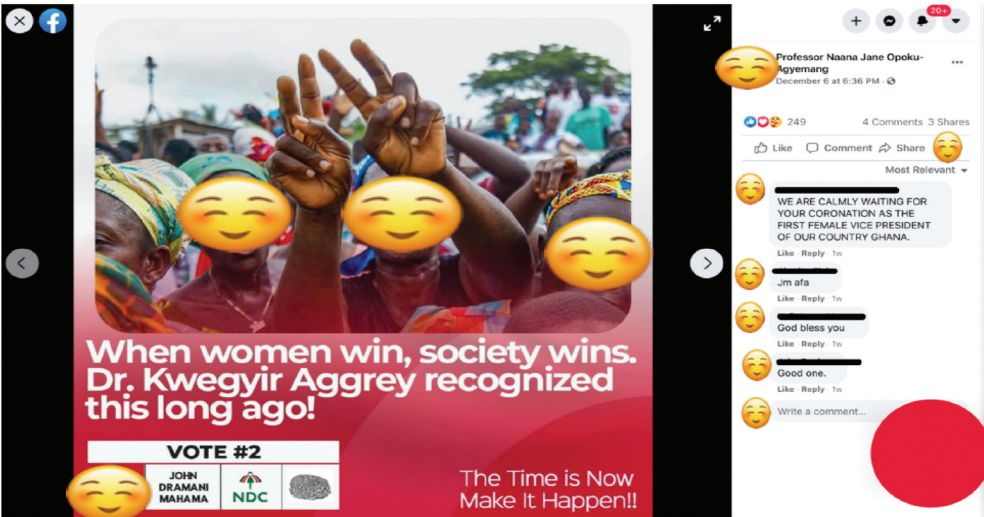


Figure 8. Women as the builders of society.

To properly contextualise the argument, Aggrey (1875–1927) is often quoted as saying “The surest way to keep people down is to educate the men and neglect the women. If you educate a man, you simply educate an individual; but if you educate a woman, you educate a family/nation” (see Jacobs 1996, 7; Sarpong 2015, 17). This quotation, which has been described as a profound statement that still rings true today (Sarpong 2015), is often used to reiterate the importance of girl-child education. For many, the education of a woman is linked to an entire nation because a society can only reach its full potential when women reach their full potential. For instance, since the woman spends more time nurturing the children, it is expected that whatever knowledge she acquires can be passed on from generation to generation. By alluding to this popular statement, the author of the post here draws on the power that education is perceived to have. This is significant because Opoku-Agyemang, on whose account this quotation is referenced, is a scholar and an educationist with a lot of academic credentials (some of which have been noted in column 4 of Table 3). In effect, the relevance of having someone like her in such a high leadership position is not just about empowering women but the whole society, which includes men. This aligns with Glick and Fiske’s (Glick and Fiske 1997, 121) argument that benevolent sexism “recognises men’s dependence on women (i.e., women’s dyadic power).”

Conceptual implications of this study

This paper set out to examine the gendered nature of Ghana’s political discourse in the 2020 elections. It has been noted that the pre-election discourse was highly gendered, and arguably so because there seemed to be a “real” possibility of having Jane Naana Opoku-Agyemang as the first female vice president. In other words, the female presidential and vice-presidential candidates in past elections did not pose any threat to male dominance and supremacy in the political space because they did not belong to “winning” parties – hence the use of the “first woman” frame (Fofie 2016). On the other hand, the post-election discourse was less gendered because Opoku-Agyemang’s party did not win after all. This shift was especially evident in the headlines – almost all the pre-election headlines announcing her nomination had vocabularies like female, woman/women or gender but the post-election headlines practically had none.

According to Fairclough, because ‘discourses “word” or “lexicalise” the world in particular ways’ (Fairclough 2003, 129), vocabularies are the most obvious distinguishing features. As such, one way through which we know a particular perspective or point of view is represented is by examining the vocabularies used. The *presence* or *absence* of certain vocabularies is, thus, a reflection of the angle an author intends to project, and in this case, it is the fact that she is a *woman* that is largely considered relevant in the media headlines (see also Van der Pas and Aaldering 2020). Although her party fully embraced this – they used it to their advantage, focusing more on the “first woman” frame (Fofie 2016) – they also highlighted the empowering nature of her gender (among others). In line with Fairclough’s point above, we argue that the absence of words like female, women etc. in the post-election headlines is significant because it suggests that the gender argument has outlived its purpose (since her party lost) and, as such, there is no need to draw attention to it again. Like Gibson argues, “the focus on a woman’s identity and novelty is pervasive enough that it undercuts the discussion on policy and goals for the woman, should she be elected” (Gibson 2022, 117).

On emerging themes, discourses of gender blackmail; politics and family relations (the mother of all nations); women, politics and physical appearance; and women, politics and power(lessness) were identified. In line with the post-structuralist understanding of subject positions being more fragmented, diverse and context-specific (Baxter 2003, 2008), these themes reflect how Opoku-Agyemang was constructed in diverse ways by her party, their opponents and the electorate – most of which sustain gender norms (e.g., mother of all nations, physical appearance), while others challenge gender norms (e.g., women, politics and power). The discourse of gender blackmail appears to be an overarching theme as evidence of this can be found under other themes like politics and family relations, and gender, politics and power(lessness). Indeed, gender was used as a blackmail, not only by the NDC and their sympathisers (who actively played the “gender card” to galvanise support), but also by the NPP and their sympathisers to dissuade voters from voting for the NDC (which indirectly works in their favour). Thus, the NDC’s representation of the candidate was positive and empowering, while that of the NPP was negative and disempowering. This is not unexpected because it is popular knowledge that Ghana is quite divisive along political lines, to the extent that politicians and party faithfuls/sympathisers, especially from the NDC and NPP, support almost everything from their camp and fail to see the good in others. For instance, whereas the NDC camp drew on a “mother of all nations” discourse to represent her as someone who can help nurture Ghana’s democracy and development, the NPP camp drew on the same discourse to disqualify her as a “true” mother. If these were to be presented as statements, then whereas the NDC may say “she is a mother of all nations (caring, nurturing, understanding, empowering etc),” the NPP may say “yes! a mother should be caring, empowering etc., but not supporting nurses” and teacher training allowances suggests that she is not a good mother (and she must therefore not be voted for).”

Motherhood, in both cases, was considered “positive” (in line with Glick and Fiske’s 1996 benevolent sexism), but it also puts restrictions on what a leader can do. As Chang and Hitchon (2004, 197) observe, voters often expect female candidates to be “compassionate towards disadvantaged and minority populations” (see also Luecht 2016). In our case, motherly love was expected to override what some people interpreted as her tough and insensitive decision to discontinue some students’ allowances, even if the government could not genuinely afford to continue such payments.⁶ Yet, politics (good governance) sometimes requires very tough decisions to be made – decisions that will not favour everybody. In effect, if motherly love is expected to overrule tough decisions for national development, then women will always appear as “unfit” for politics. Note that the same expectation is not required of “fathers.” Like ND noted in Extract 4, even if the president made that decision (meaning it is ok for the man to make such decisions), the woman was expected to “beg the father on behalf of the children.” Being the one to take and/or implement such decisions should therefore be out of the question for a “mother.” One then wonders how such a person can also perform better than the economist, Bawumia (see AO’s comment in Figure 1). These create incompatible expectations of womanhood and leadership, and women are required to achieve a balance which is practically impossible – what has been referred to in the literature as “a double bind” (Holland and Wright 2017, 4; see also Hall and Donaghue 2012). Indeed, as Holland and Wright’s (2017) findings show, being a female leader is ‘akin to walking a “tightrope of gender expectations” (Johnson 2010, 1), with apparently contradictory gender expectations

pulling female leaders in different directions.’ Like Glick and Fiske rightly point out in their Ambivalent Sexism Theory, competitive gender differentiation, as shown in this study, “presents a social justification for male structural power” and that only men can be “perceived as having the traits necessary to govern important social institutions” (1996, 493).

Conclusion

With reference to a recent report by the National Commission for Civic Education, which indicated that 66% of voters were willing to vote for a female president and 76% for a female member of parliament, Madsen, Aning and Adu reiterated Ghanaians’ readiness for a more inclusive democracy (2020, 3). Unfortunately, the results from the 2020 elections indicated otherwise, since the NDC (with a female running mate) did not win and only 14.55% females were elected to parliament (IPU 2021b). This raises questions about Ghanaians’ readiness for a female vice-president or president. These questions are further deepened by the findings from our research, much of which is stereotypical.

We therefore agree with Madsen, Aning, and Adu (2020) that although selecting a female running mate is relevant for both descriptive (in terms of numbers) and symbolic (by providing a role model) representations, it is essential that we also have substantive gender-friendly policies for a more meaningful representation of women (2020, 3). These may include policies that actively engage women at various levels, and also those that encourage them to take up leadership roles since they have a lot of potential that can be harnessed for economic, social and political growth (Allah-Mensah 2005). We would again add that removing sociocultural barriers that impede their political ambitions (see Diabah 2022; Holland and Wright 2017) and reorienting citizens’ mindset, including the ways in which we use language to discuss issues relating to wo(men) in politics, would be steps in the right direction – and the role of the media in recasting the discourse is key to its success.

Notes

1. See full list on Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_female_members_of_the_Eighth_Parliament_of_the_Fourth_Republic_of_Ghana.
2. See the section “Conceptual implications of this study” for a discussion of this.
3. During the swearing in ceremony of a newly elected female NPP MP (Ms Lydia Alhasan) in February 2019, the NDC MPs walked out of parliament, holding placards that read ‘bloody widow.’ The walk-out was occasioned by their disapproval of Ms Alhasan’s election, an election which was marred by violence. It is worth noting that this was a by-election resulting from the death of Ms Alhasan’s husband, so she contested on the ticket of her late husband’s party (NPP). The behaviour of the NDC lawmakers received nationwide condemnation.
4. See Figure 5 for a discussion of mothers as nation builders.
5. Note, however, that the official communication from the NDC (including an explanation from the running mate herself, who took part in a virtual seminar presentation on our paper) is that the allowances were not cancelled, so to speak, but they were replaced with student loans (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AdrXVadx0MI>).
6. We do not believe this argument that the government indeed could not indeed pay the students any longer. Note however that the official explanation from the NDC was that converting it into student loan was to make room for more students to be enrolled.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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