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Tackling the legislative underrepresentation of women in Ghana: Empowerment strategies for broader gender parity

Mary Awusi^a, David Addae^{a,b,*}, Olivia Adwoa Tiwaa Frimpong Kwapong^c

^a Department of Adult Education and Human Resource Studies, University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana

^b Department of Adult, Community and Continuing Education, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

^c School of Continuing and Distance Education, University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana

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ABSTRACT

The question of women's legislative underrepresentation is an enduring problem which continues to garner considerable scholarly attention all over the world. Whereas the burgeoning literature on the subject has largely focused on impediments to gender parity in representation in parliament, the interest of this paper is somewhat different. In an effort to make an original contribution to the discourse, the starting point of this paper is the argument that women can be politically empowered to achieve greater representation in parliament. Consequently, in this paper – which draws on empowerment theory as theoretical lens – we present a snapshot of the views of 22 women parliamentarians from Ghana, with the aim of exploring empowerment strategies for attaining greater gender parity in representation in the legislature. They emphasize the importance of affirmative action policies, funding, inclusive political party structures, education, and societal re-socialisation in addressing women's legislative underrepresentation in Ghana. These findings may have some important implications for the nature and scope of interventions targeted at women for the purpose of promoting an inclusive political environment.

1. Introduction

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) stipulates that everyone has the right to take part in the government of his/her country. While this classical but powerful declaration remains as relevant today as it did over six decades ago, all over the world, women have historically been disadvantaged, in many respects, with regard to their representation in national and local decision making. It is therefore not surprising that issues of women's political involvement and representation have in recent decades gained considerable traction in both the popular media and scholarly community mainly due to concerns raised by advocacy groups and activists about the legitimacy of male-dominated decision making. [The Beijing Platform for Action \(1995\)](#) emphasizes the fundamental demand for women's equal rights in political representation, particularly in the legislature. Despite being the majority of the population in many countries worldwide, women have historically experienced low levels of representation in national and local decision-making processes ([Alalaimat, 2019](#)). For instance, only 16 countries worldwide currently have female heads of state or government ([UN Women, 2021](#)). Furthermore, [the United Nations Women](#)

[Calculation \(2021\)](#) and [Kock-Mehrin \(2018\)](#) highlight that at the current rate of progress, gender parity in ministerial positions will not be achieved before 2077, with a mere 0.52% increase per year. In terms of national lawmakers, only 25% are women, an improvement from 11% in 1995 ([Masau, 2019](#)). Remarkably, only four countries, namely Rwanda with 61%, Cuba with 53%, Bolivia with 53%, and the United Arab Emirates with 50%, have achieved or surpassed the 50% mark for women serving in single or lower houses of parliament ([Pepera, 2018](#); [UN Women Calculation, 2021](#)). The [UN Women \(2021\)](#) reports that 19 nations, including nine in Europe, five in Latin America and the Caribbean, four in Africa, and one in the Pacific, have reached or exceeded the 40% mark.

In order to enhance women's representation in the legislature, many countries have implemented gender quotas, whether through candidate quotas or reserved seats. This is against the backdrop of the widespread realization that the pursuit of gender parity in decision-making holds the potential to create a more balanced representation that accurately reflects the demographics of society. Thus to achieve equality, sustainable development, peace, and democracy, women must actively participate in politics and decision-making processes at all levels, on an equal

* Corresponding author. Department of Adult Education and Human Resource Studies, University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana.

E-mail addresses: maryawusi2509@gmail.com (M. Awusi), daddae@ug.edu.gh (D. Addae), okwapong@ug.edu.gh (O.A.T.F. Kwapong).

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footing with men. Accordingly, several UN declarations have been made to support the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 5.5, highlighting the significance of women's involvement in the legislature for long-term development across all sectors of society and for fostering open and accountable government (United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 1995). Also the United Nations (1995a, 1995b) established some benchmark goals to ensure women's representation at all levels of decision-making as a response to the unequal distribution of power and decision-making among men and women. The aim of these goals was to promote women's engagement in politics and to empower them to promote gender equality. They called for legislation to address discriminatory practices, encouraged women's leadership and representation in decision-making processes, and advocated for the integration of women's concerns and perspectives into national policies, thereby promoting the creation of a society that is equal and equitable. Afisi (2010) conducted an analysis of the underrepresentation and limited participation of women in the legislature. The study emphasized the need for policies that facilitate the integration of women into political decision-making processes. This finding is in tandem with Asante's (2011) assertion that every country should provide women with opportunities to participate in politics, as they have the potential to contribute significantly as leaders.

Despite the many interventions designed to facilitate gender parity in legislative representation, United Nations Women (2023) reports that women's legislative underrepresentation still persists with women constituting less than 27 percent of parliamentarians worldwide. While several scholarly accounts have invariably focused on the various factors that impede women's representation in the legislature, there appears to be lack of critical empirical discussions relative to the strategies to empower women in order to promote gender parity in parliament. It is therefore timely to problematize empowerment in the discourse on women's legislative underrepresentation in order to explore viable strategies for achieving greater gender parity in parliament. In this study, we follow Sundström et al. (2017) in conceptualizing women's empowerment as a process of increasing the capacities of women, that gives them greater choice, agency and participation in societal decision-making, seen in terms of universal standards rather than just in relative terms to the men in any given society (Hornset & de Soysa, 2022). A key element in this conceptualization is the notion of agency – the ability to create strategic choices and have control over resources and decisions that will have an important effect on life (Sundström et al., 2017). Being agentic implies that women themselves play a significant role in the process of change – from being unempowered to a state of empowerment. Therefore, using Ghana's 8th parliament as a case in point, we present the voices of women parliamentarians in relation to how women in the country could be empowered to enhance their legislative representation. It is our fervent belief that through this study more realistic empowerment strategies could be advanced to promote gender balance in legislative representation particularly in developing countries where the problem of gender equality still persists.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows: In the next section, 'Problem Statement', we highlight the disturbing picture of legislative underrepresentation of women in Ghana and argue that women's representation in the legislature can be enhanced through realistic and viable empowerment strategies. This is followed by 'Theoretical Consideration' section where we espouse the theoretical lens through which we envision that women's legislative underrepresentation could be effectively addressed. In the next section (The Literature – Women's Political Empowerment) following this, we discuss, in summary, the extant literature associated with empowerment strategies to enhance women's legislative representation. The 'Method' section of the paper explains the various methodological decisions and actions that we undertook as part of the fieldwork component of the study. In the 'Findings and Discussion' section, we present and discuss the findings generated from our study. The findings point to six-fold empowerment strategies for enhancing the legislative representation of women in Ghana. In the

final section 'Concluding Thoughts' of the paper, we provide some concluding remarks based upon the findings vis a vis the literature and make recommendations. The section also details the study's limitations and provides suggestions for future scholarship.

1.1. Problem Statement

It has been noted that women's political representation not only promotes women's rights but also contributes to socioeconomic development by influencing legislation (Bari, 2005). Women's presence in the legislature has been found to affect policy priorities and outcomes; women legislators are found to improve the economic performance of their constituencies more than their male legislators (Agarwal, 2023). Hence, the United Nations (1995a, 1995b) Beijing Declaration emphasizes that women's progress and gender equality are crucial for the long-term growth of society. This notwithstanding, in Ghana, women continue to face multidimensional inequalities which prevent them from participating fully in the country's body politic. In the legislature for instance, there are currently 40 women serving in the 8th parliament which comprises 275 seats. Although this number represents a slight increase from the 7th parliament's women representation of 35 women (13%) – which at the time was far below the Africa average of 24% and global average of 23% UN Women (2017) – the data highlights the persistently low levels of women's legislative representation in the country. While it can be argued that some progress has been made in terms of promoting women's legislative representation, there is a general consensus within the scholarly community that focusing efforts on women's empowerment can contribute significantly to achieving SDG objective 5 and equity in politics, particularly within the legislature (Albright, 1997, pp. 139–152; Owusu-Amponsah, Opoku, Amankwa, & Dagba, 2017). There is therefore a pressing need for more comprehensive research to unearth viable empowerment strategies to enhance women's representation in the legislative arm of government. This present study responds to this call by exploring empowerment strategies that can enhance women's representation in Ghana's parliament. By exploring these strategies, it is hoped that meaningful steps can be taken to address the gender imbalance and empower more women to take active roles in the legislature. Accordingly, this study is guided by the following central question:

RQ: How can women be politically empowered to achieve gender balance in legislative representation in Ghana?

1.2. Theoretical overview

This study draws upon the theory of empowerment to understand the various strategies that could be employed to enhance women's legislative representation in Ghana. Women's empowerment is now enshrined as a global development objective, evident in Sustainable Development Goal 5: 'Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls' (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2022 in Gerard, 2023). Narayan-Parker (2005) has observed that the recent flurry of effort within the scholarly community to measure empowerment has already distorted the meaning of the term somewhat by focusing attention ever more on the means of empowerment – such as education, community organisation, the political culture, and openness of institutions (Drydyk, 2013). Consequently, Drydyk has noted that it has become customary to begin any scholarly text on empowerment by lamenting how confused the concept has become over the last decade. This is because many empowerment theorists have argued that empowerment takes on multiple forms across people, is contextually embedded, and shifts over time (Foster-Fishman et al., 1998; Rappaport, 1984; Zimmerman, 1990, 1995). Despite the obvious semantic and definitional laxity associated with empowerment, there appears to be a seeming consensus among theorists that empowerment is a multidimensional construct (it occurs within multiple dimensions such as sociological, psychological, economic, political; at different levels - individual, group and community)

(Hur, 2006 in Addae, 2021) which can be described as scalar (some changes may be more empowering than others).

Of the various perspectives, the social-psychological approach is particularly relevant to examining how empowerment leads to political action (Joo et al., 2019). Zimmerman (1995, 2000), who profoundly advanced the social-psychological approach, saw the transformative capacity of empowerment. From this perspective, the goal of empowerment is to foster change by equipping people with the needed resources to enhance their wellbeing and enable them to solve their own problems. Thus, empowerment is “an intentional ongoing process ... involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring, and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources” (Cornell Empowerment Group, 1989). Similarly, Rappaport (1987) sees empowerment as a process by which people gain control over their lives and participate in the democratic life of their community. The process of gaining control entails agency and power. Recall that in the introductory section of this paper, we, together with Sundström et al. (2017), conceptualized empowerment as agency and power. The first, agency:

... is about more than observable action; it also encompasses the meaning, motivation and purpose which individuals bring to their activity, their sense of agency, or the ‘power within.’ ... it can take the form of bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438).

Agency rests heavily on certain pre-conditions: “agency is exercised (a) insofar as a person either performs an activity or plays a role in performing it, (b) insofar as this activity has an impact on the world, (c) insofar as the activity was chosen by the person (d) for reasons of their own (in individual or group deliberation)” (Drydyk, 2013, p. 252). Therefore, agency can be conceived as both goal-directed and action-oriented – in the sense that it brings about a change in one’s prevailing conditions. Agency is indeed a crucial element in the quest to politically empower Ghanaian women. This is largely because women are political agents who in order to achieve legislative representation must consciously engage in political activities. To succeed in engaging politically, women’s capacities for agency should be expanded while also creating opportunities for them to exercise their agency.

Second, empowerment connotes changing power i.e. gaining, expending, diminishing, and losing (Page & Czuba, 1999 in Addae, 2021). Rappaport’s (1987) idea of empowerment ‘conveys both a psychological sense of personal control or influence and a concern with actual social influence, political power and legal rights’ (p.121 in Addae, 2021). Empowerment involves the ability to make choices and entails a process of change from being without (sufficient) power to make choices to having sufficient power to do so (Kabeer, 1999, p. 437) or the capacity to achieve a desired outcome. Empowerment therefore “suggests participation with others to achieve goals, efforts to gain access to resources and some critical understandings of the socio-political environment ... empowerment refers to collective action to improve the quality of life in a community and to the connections among community organizations” (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995, p. 571). Several different types of resources can be identified. Pigg (2002) for instance distinguishes between individual characteristics such as skills and attitudes; and social and political resources such as networks or relationships (social capital); also a distinction can be made between material resources such as goods and finances to exchange for power resources. In politics, these resources “are acquired through a multiplicity of social relationships conducted in the various institutional domains which make up a society (such as family, market, community)” (Kabeer, p. 437). Ensuring that women have access to these resources is the responsibility of government, political parties and other key stakeholders. We opine that the various strategies to empower women to enhance their legislative representation could be summed up as the essential resources needed to enhance women’s political standing in order to

propel the desired change in the historically skewed parliamentary representation.

1.3. Women’s political empowerment – a literature review

For several decades, the issue of women’s political empowerment has received considerable attention in the academic literature. This explosion of interest stems from the fact that women have historically been marginalized from mainstream politics. We have already depicted the disturbing picture of women’s legislative underrepresentation in Ghana. It is our belief that women should be politically empowered to be able to play their part in the politics of the country. As Sandler and Lane (2021) write:

Political empowerment involves having the power, ability, critical awareness, and sense of group identity to take action in order to create change in a political system. Having a sense of group identity and collective group interest is a critical component of political empowerment. The processes of individual and interactional empowerment are each essential to the development of political empowerment.

Childs and Krook (2009) have observed that political parties play a crucial role in shaping women’s political empowerment. Parties that actively support and engage women in the political process tend to have higher levels of gender diversity within their ranks. These parties recognize the importance of women’s representation and work towards creating an inclusive and diverse political landscape. Furtherance to this, empirical evidence supports the notion that mentorship programs and networking opportunities play a significant role in promoting women’s political empowerment and career advancement. For instance, research conducted by Armah-Attoh (2017) and Quartey (2020) highlights the positive impact of mentorship programs on women’s political engagement. Thus, mentorship programs provide women with valuable guidance, support, and access to resources that are essential for navigating the complex political landscape. Mentors serve as experienced advisors who offer insights, share their knowledge and expertise, and provide valuable connections within the political sphere. Through these mentorship relationships, women gain valuable skills, confidence, and networks that help them overcome barriers and excel in their political careers. While the positive impact of mentorship programs on women’s political empowerment is evident, it is important to note that the availability and formalization of such programs in Ghana’s political context require further exploration. The study by Means and Fields (2022) highlights the need to examine the extent to which mentorship programs are accessible and widely implemented in the Ghanaian political landscape. Understanding the current landscape of mentorship programs in Ghana could throw light on the gaps and challenges that need to be addressed to ensure their effective implementation.

Additionally, other studies emphasize the significance of sociocultural factors and intersectionality in women’s political empowerment. Specifically, these studies highlight the role of patriarchal norms, traditional gender roles, and cultural biases in shaping women’s access to political power (Anaman & Agyei-Sasu, 2012; Anaman & Bukari, 2019). Intersectional perspectives underscore the specific challenges faced by women with diverse identities, such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and religion (Sarfo-Kantankah, 2022; Odame, 2010). Efforts to challenge traditional gender roles, combat sexism, and promote gender equality in all spheres of society can contribute to greater gender diversity in political representation (Celis et al., 2014). Furthermore, such effort could inspire societal shifts that may help change gender stereotypes and promote inclusive political cultures (Esposito, 2021).

Also, there is ample evidence to suggest that capacity-building programs and leadership development initiatives play a crucial role in empowering women in politics. Training programmes that focus on political skills, public speaking, campaign management, and networking have been effective in enhancing women’s confidence and competence

to run for office (Fox & Lawless, 2014). Dahlerup (2006) highlights the need for tailored leadership programmes and capacity-building initiatives to address the specific challenges faced by women in politics. Such programmes have shown positive effects on women's political engagement, self-confidence, and networking abilities (Awortwi, 2016; Ofo-su-Mensah, 2019). However, limited access to these programmes, especially for women from marginalized backgrounds, remains a challenge (Atinga, 2020).

The literature also underscores the importance of grassroots mobilization and civil society support in empowering women in politics (Sekhon, 2006). Women's organizations and advocacy groups play a vital role in raising awareness about gender disparities, mobilizing women voters, and advocating for policy changes that promote gender equality (Bauer & Burnet, 2002). Sackeyfio-Lenoch (2018) suggests that collaboration between civil society organizations, political parties, and women's groups can create a conducive environment for women's political empowerment.

2. Method

2.1. Research design

We followed a case study design with a process orientation to explore the phenomenon under study. Process oriented case study research "tends to see the world in terms of people, situations, events, and the processes that connect these; explanation is based on an analysis of how some situations and events influence others" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 29). We chose the case study research design for this study to understand a real-world case (women's underrepresentation in parliament) by assuming that such an understanding is likely to involve important contextual conditions pertinent to our case (Yin, 2014).

2.2. Context and participants

Ghana's 8th Parliament served as the context for this study. Ghana, a country located in the West coast of Africa, transitioned to a multi-party system following the ratification of the constitution in April 1992, marking the beginning of a democratic era, after years of military rule. We focused our investigation on female legislators serving in the 8th parliament, where the phenomenon of women's legislative underrepresentation and is apparent. The participants for this study ($N = 22$) were women parliamentarians drawn from the 8th parliament of Ghana. Convenience sampling technique – locating a nearby source of potential participants who are convenient in their proximity and willingness to participate (Robinson, 2014) – was used to select the participants for this study. We sent emails to all the prospective participants ($N = 40$) informing them of the research and requesting their participation in the study, however, ($N = 22$) women MPs responded timeously and favourably to our emails. The recruited participants were aged between 36 and 68 years.

2.3. Data collection

We designed a one-item interview guide for the purpose of eliciting information from the participants. We employed an open format to the guide, providing the participants the opportunity to further illuminate previous responses or to introduce new issues they felt relevant to the discourse. With the permission of the participants, all the interviews – which lasted averagely 45 minutes – were voice-recorded.

2.4. Data analysis

We employed the reflexive thematic analysis method to analyse the data. Conducting reflexive thematic analysis is not about following and working through a series of steps, rather it is about the researcher's 'reflective and thoughtful engagement with the data ... and the analytic

process' (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594 in Trainor & Bundon, 2021). We engaged in an iterative process of introspective reflexivity in which we used our unique self-understandings to interpret and gain general insights, link knowledge, participant and researcher experiences, and the social context (Trainor & Bundon, 2021). This process consisted of an initial transcription of the audio-recorded interviews followed by a critical review of the transcripts which helped us to familiarize ourselves with the data, straighten messy notes, and correct identified grammatical errors and incoherence. We followed this up with coding which comprised generating coding categories, collating together all instances of text where that code appears in the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2013), while reflecting on the codes. We were reminded of Braun and Clarke's (2013) observation that strong codes 'capture the essence of what it is about that bit of data that interests you ... and informative enough to capture what was in the data, and your analytic take on it' (p. 210). Next, we generated and reviewed the various themes from the codes. Our aim at this stage was to generate domain summary themes where the themes are organized around shared topics (Braun & Clarke, 2019). We then proceeded to define and name the themes. Here, we created themes that captured various aspects of the data, revisited and revised the themes on several occasions to arrive at generally acceptable themes that reflected the focus of the data and the objectives of the study (Addae & Kwapong, 2023). We also ensured that all the themes came together to create a lucid narrative that is consistent with the content of the dataset and informative in relation to the research question (Bryne, 2022). The report writing constituted the last stage of the data analysis. During this stage, we located exemplars that provide compelling verbatim accounts from the participants.

2.5. Trustworthiness

In order to demonstrate and increase the quality of this research viz the findings emanating from it, we had to ensure trustworthiness of the study. According to Rose and Johnson (2020),

increasing the trustworthiness of a qualitative research study involves multiple aspects, including epistemological understandings, the depth of literature reviewed and engaged, the appropriate theoretical positioning of the argument, selection and deployment of the multiple and often conflicting data collection/generation techniques and analytical procedures undertaken, the connection of empirical material to larger theories and discourses, and the ways in which these aspects of the research are interwoven with one another (p. 435).

In this study we adopted techniques that closely parallels the extant criteria suggested by Rose and Johnson (2020). First, we employed member checks which entailed providing the participants with the interview transcripts requesting them to verify the accuracy of our interpretation of their responses. This process provided us (participants and researchers) opportunities to summarize, clarify, discuss, and elaborate the findings during data analysis (DeCino & Waalkes, 2019). Second, we adopted peer debriefing as a tool to strengthen the trustworthiness of our study. We pursued peer debriefing in the following ways: 1. we discussed regularly the emerging findings with knowledgeable colleagues on the subject-matter; 2. We presented and received insightful comments on the study's methods and findings at a Departmental seminar; and 3. We presented the findings and implications to various interested groups including Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), NGOs and the political parties. Third, we engaged in a process of critical reflexivity in an attempt to acknowledge and reduce researcher bias from an ethical perspective (Arday, Belluigi & Thomas, 2021). Qualitative researchers engage in reflexivity – nuanced judgements – to account for how subjectivity shapes their inquiry (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). As part of the reflexive process, it is important to note that this research is part of a larger doctoral study undertaken by Mary (the first author), a politician who contested in the 2016 parliamentary elections

in the Asante Akim North Constituency on the ticket of the National Democratic Congress. Given that both Mary and Olivia (third author) are gender activists in their own rights, we had to acknowledge that their close association with discourses on gender inequality could constitute inherent biases that may compromise the quality of the research. However, we were also mindful of the fact that in qualitative research a researcher's influence is not something to be neutralized, merely acknowledged, or explained away; on the contrary, both [Finlay \(2002\)](#) and [Koopman, Watling, and Ladonna \(2020\)](#) are in agreement that since subjectivity is a productive result of all human interaction, it can be an asset to actively co-construct data and results ([Olmos-Vega et al., 2023](#)). Therefore, the characteristics and experiences of Mary and Olivia served as rich resources in the data analysis. Like [Braun and Clarke \(2019\)](#) we view qualitative research as meaning and meaning-making which are context-bound, positioned and situated; hence the final analysis is the product of deep and prolonged data immersion, thoughtfulness and reflection.

2.6. Ethical considerations

The demand for attention to ethics is apparent in all research since ethical considerations inhabit each phase of the research process ([Sobočan et al., 2019](#)). Thus, this study demonstrated a commitment to upholding ethical standards by adhering to some key principles. First, we sought the informed consent of the research participants to participate in the study by providing them with adequate information about the purposes and methods associated with the study, as well as their right to consent voluntarily to participate, refuse or withdraw consent devoid of any adverse consequences. Second, all the participants were accorded due respect. We did this by not being judgemental in our interactions with them, not discrediting them, ensuring that their views are faithfully recorded and given due consideration in the analysis phase ([Vancly et al., 2013](#)). Third, we safeguarded the anonymity of the participants by not disclosing their names or identities throughout the study. Tied to anonymity is the principle of confidentiality. We ensured that all private and personal matters discussed with the participants were not publicly disclosed to any third party. Finally, we provided the participants with the opportunity to check how they were quoted and to make changes to the transcripts and draft report to ensure that they agreed with the way they have been recorded.

3. Findings

This section presents the findings derived from the study. It has been noted that we employed domain summary themes (see [Braun & Clarke, 2019](#)) to capture shared topics that emerged from the in-depth interviews with the participants. The study identified 6 broad themes in relation to realistic empowerment strategies that could be employed to enhance women's legislative representation by listening to the voices of women parliamentarians in Ghana.

3.1. Affirmative action

It was apparent from the engagement with the participants, that women could benefit from policies that promote affirmative action to address the gender imbalances with regard to legislative representation. According to [Tsikata \(2009\)](#), affirmative action:

is a set of measures adopted by governments and public and private institutions such as political parties, educational establishments, corporations and companies to address a history of systemic discrimination and exclusion of particular social groups or to encourage the efforts of particular social groups in the interests of certain development goals (p. 5)

[Sommer and Asal \(2019\)](#) have noted that affirmative action policies are aimed at facilitating the integration of historically disadvantaged

groups into society and in some cases to enhance their equal standing in society. In Ghana, there have been several clarion calls for a concerted and deliberate policy that promotes gender equality in all spheres of society. [Tsikata \(2009\)](#) however notes that while affirmative action has been used in Ghana since independence to address gender and regional imbalances in access to education, health, work and politics, it has been less effective in improving women's representation in political and public life as compared to the successes chalked in the education sector. However, the argument can be made that enhancing women's representation in parliament holds significant importance in achieving the development goals set for Ghana and, by extension, Africa, considering women's untapped potential as a valuable resource on the continent. Recognizing this, the participants placed a strong emphasis and advocated for affirmative policies and initiatives. This view was largely driven by the shared belief among the participants that affirmative action policies and initiatives would politically empower women as a means to achieving a more inclusive and equitable society. The following are some narratives on the need for an affirmative action policy:

Adoption of a national affirmative action policy in favour of women especially in executive appointments will help to promote women's participation and representation in politics. (Participant 3)

We need an affirmative action policy that will be formulated and supported by both men and women parliamentarians aimed at active participation of women in decision-making. That is the only approach to bridge the gender gap between men and women participation and representation in national decision-making. (Participant 6).

Acknowledging that some efforts are being made to achieve gender parity in the politics of Ghana, other participants decried the lack of support for an affirmative action policy noting that such a policy could only succeed if it is supported by their male counterparts and by extension parliament as a whole. In effect, parliament as an institution should take greater responsibility in the push for affirmative action legislation:

I think the way forward is affirmative action. Although there are some efforts to push for gender balance in our politics, I don't think much is being done in terms of policy. Take parliament for instance, we have not been able to push such an agenda. I think the numbers (number of women parliamentarians) tell it all. (Participant 13)

There has not been a day in parliament where discussions were centered on strategies to promote women's representation in national politics. One of the things we expect from our colleague male MPs and parliament as whole is to move a motion for the institution of an affirmative action policy aimed at enhancing women's representation in national policy ... (Participant 4)

These suggestions are crucial to the success of any affirmative action initiative. Indeed, while affirmative action may or may not arise from the agitation of disadvantaged social groups and advocates, the state and its institutions are central to its design and implementation and for this reason, without public policy in support of affirmative action, it cannot be adopted and implemented ([Tsikata, 2009](#)). In tandem, despite the existence of campaigns, action plans, initiatives, and interventions aimed at promoting women's representation in politics in Ghana, it is evident from the study that these efforts lack robust policy support. [Bengtson and Pedersen \(2023\)](#) however caution that "abstaining from introducing affirmative action, if one is in a position to do so, is to fail to mitigate the inequality of opportunity between members of disadvantaged groups and members of advantaged groups; one thereby disregards the vital interests of the former compared to the latter's vital interests" (p. 2). This, in turn, poses a considerable challenge in bridging the gender gap in national political engagement between men and women. It is therefore imperative, as advocated by the women MPs, to adopt or establish a comprehensive national policy that explicitly

supports and prioritizes women's representation in politics with particular emphasis on the legislature. Such a policy would provide a solid foundation for sustained progress and address the systemic barriers that hinder women's political empowerment.

Funding

Murray et al. (2023) point out that money is power, and power is very difficult to access without money, consequently, contesting elections is a very costly affair that compels many candidates around the world to have, and/or raise, large sums of money. Acknowledging the intertwinement of politics and money and the essentiality of the latter for enhancing women's legislative representation, Participant 9 observes as follows:

Politics is about money. Without money, count yourself out. How will you engage the constituents? How will you travel from one community to another campaigning if you don't have money? How will you feed your entourage? How will you assist individuals within your constituency? To be honest, I spend more than I earn. Most of the MPs fund their activities through bank loans.

Thus, the argument can be made that funding plays a role in excluding many prospective candidates, resulting in the overrepresentation of wealth within politics (Murray, 2023). Undoubtedly, in many political systems, female prospective candidates face multidimensional gender-based disadvantages that make it more difficult to raise funds, including the gender pay gap, gender inequities in candidate selection processes, sexist abuse and family responsibilities (Murray, 2023). However, Fallon (2008) opines that a notable weakness of the plural majority system and 'first by the post' voting is the importance of the financial resources of individual candidates which unfortunately puts women at a disadvantage. For some reason, there is a homosocial dimension to fundraising, with men obtaining a larger proportion of their campaign donations from other men, and women from other women (Swers & Thomson, 2020). Nonetheless, since men often have access to powerful networks from which women are excluded, they are able to tap wealthy male donors (Carroll & Sanbonmatsu, 2013); therefore, if men receive more financial donations from other men, more often, then women could face a greater challenge in raising funds for their campaign (Tolley et al., 2020). Accordingly, the need for political parties to provide aspiring women parliamentarians with funding for their political activities was mentioned by the participants as a key empowerment strategy that could facilitate their enhanced legislative representation. Although in Ghana gendered electoral financing initiatives such as discounted filing fees have been used to support women candidates (Muriaas et al., 2020), it is clear from the analysis that direct financial assistance from political parties would greatly enhance women's quest to become more politically competitive. Away from enhancing their competitiveness, direct financial support to women would help to address the gendered nature of political financing and level the political playing field for both men and women parliamentary aspirants. Participant 12 for instance notes that:

... funding from political parties will enhance women's representation in national politics. (Participant 12)

As Murray et al. (2023) indicate, women face gendered barriers to fundraising, including needing to work harder to raise money due to their exclusion from affluent networks and their reliance on smaller donations. Narrating the difficulty that women often face in raising funds for their electioneering activities and the need for targeted gendered financing, a participant intimated:

We often struggle to raise money for our campaign and other activities. I believe the political parties should make funds available to women aspirants to help us in our campaigns. (Participant 19)

Political parties require money to fund their political activities

including the conduct of elections, yet they are also fraught with fund-raising challenges which hamper their political operations. In Ghana, political parties generate funds for their political operations through membership fees, nomination fees for presidential and parliamentary primaries, voluntary member contributions and donations, and other fund-raising events. Therefore, during the electioneering period, political parties expect the candidates to take up the responsibility of raising funds for their own campaign. For women aspirants (including their male counterparts), a huge chunk of their campaign finance is derived from their personal fund-raising endeavours and in most cases their personal savings. The question however remains as to how political parties can raise the funds needed to support women parliamentary aspirants. In response, Participant 17 called for gender-targeted public finance, whereby political parties are given hypothecated funds by the state to spend on initiatives to support women's access to politics (Murray et al., 2023). Her views are stated as follows:

I think government should support the political parties to be able to offer us the needed financial resources for our campaign activities. The budget should be expanded to provide targeted financial assistance to women.

This view points to the need for specific policy formulation in relation to gendered electoral financing. As explained by Feo et al. (2023) gendered electoral financing – what Ohman (2018) and Muriaas et al. (2020) refer to as gender-targeted public funding – implies the introduction of systems where the funding mechanisms of political parties are tied to provisions on gender. In fact, while proponents argue that public funding schemes may help strengthen political parties and party systems, critics on the other hand argue that subsidies may privilege established parties (Carlson & Nakabayashi, 2023). Despite the obvious debates, there is a general consensus among scholars that gendered electoral financing can help to enhance the legislative representation of women.

3.2. Inclusive party structures

The need to develop inclusive party structures was also a key theme generated from our interactions with the participants. In conventional democracies, the idea of inclusion is not superfluous as it constitutes a concretization of a fundamental right to all citizens. According to Zilla (2022), the concept of inclusion is multi-faceted in nature and denotes access to a plurality of entitlements and material as well as immaterial resources in different social systems or societal realms. This view of inclusion succeeds in constituting access to resources as a progressive form of democracy and hence there is a huge responsibility placed upon political parties and other interest groups to ensure that this fundamental right is fulfilled. Acknowledging the crucial role played by political parties in ensuring gender inclusion in contemporary democracies, the National Democratic Institute (2018) elaborate as follows:

Political parties are a cornerstone of democracy, providing critical pathways for the political participation and engagement of citizens. Parties mobilize citizens behind ideologies and policies, select candidates for representative posts, lead electoral campaigns, form legislative blocs in parliaments, and if elected, implement a program of government. Women's full and equal political participation benefits communities and results in real gains for democracy and improved outcomes for countries.

However, the low representation of women in the legislature in Ghana is telling of the political party structures and indicates that the parties are characterised by masculinist institutional structures which do not work in favour of female Parliamentary candidates (Madsen, 2019). Also, Bjarnegård and Kenny (2016) note that male political dominance and women's continued underrepresentation is the result of the interaction of formal and informal rules taking place at the level of the

political party, which is supposed to act as a gatekeeper for candidate selection (Geha, 2019). Krook and Mackay (2011) argue that any discourse on women in politics could benefit greatly from adopting institutional conceptions to uncover the multiple ways that institutional practices construct gender power relations and inequalities.

In the African context, politics and processes of political representation are characterized by not only formal but also to a large extent informal institutions (Madsen, 2021). Thus, while the participants in this study acknowledged that formal party rules do not necessarily discriminate against and are actually in support of women's enhanced representation, they however observed that the informal institution which manifests in informal norms, practices and values, often favour men's legislative representation. Waylen (2014) defines informal institutions as 'socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels' in opposition to formal rules defined as 'rules and procedures that are created, communicated and enforced through channels which are widely accepted as official' (p. 114). Recognizing the interplay of both formal and informal institutions in the political processes of her party, a participant explained that; *our party's rules are very clear on equality, however, in practice you realize that men are often favoured in the party* (Participant 16). This suggests that informal rules will often work against or parallel formal rules, as they seek to preserve the status quo and maintain existing power structures and therefore work against more women in politics and/or substantive changes in a more gender-friendly direction (Madsen, 2021).

It is worth noting that in Ghana, although some political parties have made efforts to put in place different initiatives to support female candidates – such as introducing an initiative to support women economically as both the NDC and the NPP have reduced the filing fees to half for the female candidates; as well the NPP's initiative or voluntary measure in 2015 which focused on women seats in constituencies where a woman was already the MP (Madsen, 2019) – it is apparent from this study that more needs to be done to enhance the legislative representation of women. Particularly, it appears that despite these initiatives, neither of the country's two major political parties have policies that promote women's representation and engagement in national politics. Political institutions must therefore create policies that promote equal representation and engagement of women in politics. To effect the needed institutional change in a more friendly direction, Mahoney and Thelen (2010) propose the following strategies: 'layering' (when new rules are attached on top of existing ones), 'displacement' (replacement of existing rules with new ones), 'drift' (when rules remain the same but their impact changes due to external factors) and 'conversion' (when rules remain but institutions designed with one set of goals in mind are redirected to other ends) (Madsen, 2021). The participants' views point to a displacement of some sort of the existing patriarchal institutional structures – both formal and informal. For instance, one of the participants elaborates:

Political parties need to eliminate all obstacles that directly or subtly limit women's representation, enhance their ability to examine issues from a gender perspective, and establish policies as necessary to support women's ability to participate fully at all levels of decision-making within those political parties. (Participant 9)

Other participants called for party-level quota to enhance women's legislative representation

The political party's need to adopt the quota system to ensure equal representation of both men and women. (Participant 21)

Our parties need to adopt a quota system in order to enhance women's representation in parliament. (Participant 8)

The literature on quota distinguishes between legislative binding quotas that apply to all parties and voluntary measures adopted within single parties (Sundström & Stockemer, 2022). While legislative binding

quotas are enforceable by national legal requirements, party-level quotas, on the other hand, are voluntary initiatives by political parties and by no means a legal obligation. Party quotas generally have a positive impact on women's political representation (Lilliefeldt, 2012). Despite its immense impact in enhancing women's political standing, the argument can however be made that the implementation of gender quotas challenges power balances within parties by effectively demanding that party gatekeepers put (female) newcomers on the lists and remove some (male) candidates that were previously on the lists (Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2016). This notwithstanding, we believe that political party agency in the form of institutional change could help in the realization of the proposed quota system.

3.3. Education

The question of whether education affects political participation and representation is a long standing debate within the academic literature. Indeed an explosion of research studies have sought to answer this thorny question. Many scholars see education as a necessary precursor to active political participation (Willeck & Mendelberg, 2022). For instance, Galston (2001) has argued that a healthy democracy requires an educated, politically engaged citizenry. Nie et al. (1996) also contend that formal education has a consistent and overwhelming association with political participation (in Willeck & Mendelberg, 2022). As noted by Gutmann (1999) 'education, in a great measure, forms the moral character of citizens and moral character along with laws and institutions forms the basis of democratic government' (p. 49). In this study, the participants emphasized the significance of formal education in women's legislative representation. To the participants, the foundation for active engagement and representation in national politics is formal education which serves as a springboard for women to comprehend and actively engage in legislative matters.

low levels of formal education is one of the stumbling blocks to women's representation in the legislature. Building capacities will help women to be courageous as they venture into politics. (Participant 3)

Being a member of parliament goes beyond just voting on issues. It encompasses diverse areas which call for a well-equipped individual. To be equipped means to be educated. With the requisite education, it will push women to actively participate and be represented in national politics. (Participant 7)

As pointed out by Lewis-Beck et al. (2008, p. 102) "with more formal education comes a stronger interest in politics, a greater concern with elections, greater confidence in playing one's role as a citizen, and a deeper commitment to the norm of being a good citizen". Education fosters skills and knowledge relevant to politics. Other participants underscored the importance of higher education in enhancing women's representation in the legislature.

Higher education matters in politics. On the floor of parliament many issues spanning from archeology to zoology are discussed. Little or no knowledge on key issues will hinder representation. It is important for women vying for parliamentary seats to attain higher education which will enable them to be active and not passive participants. (Participant 21)

The relevance of higher education to women's legislative representation is also shared by Converse (1972) as follows: education "is everywhere the universal solvent and the relationship is always in the same direction. The higher the education, the greater the 'good' values of the variable. The educated citizen is attentive, knowledgeable and participatory, and the uneducated citizen is not" (p. 324). The various responses underscore the significance of formal education in political representation at the national level. It is not surprising that women MPs emphasized the importance of formal education as a means to address the gender gap. On the floor of Ghana's 8th Parliament, it can be

observed that men often participate more in parliamentary discussions than women counterparts. This gender disparity in participation may be attributed, at least in part, to the ratio of men to women. However, it is also plausible that the discrepancy in academic achievements between men and women plays a role. Therefore, it is imperative to take immediate action to devise strategies for enhancing women's knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

3.4. Re-socialisation of society

The need to re-socialise society was a key topic that was generated from our engagement with the participants. In many African countries, the question of who should hold positions of power is heavily influenced by societal beliefs and norms. According to George (2019) women's political representation – or ability to engage politically – is often defined by traditional norms that drive wider social structures. Fundamental to the constraints confronted by women is an entrenched patriarchal system where family control and decision-making powers are in the hands of males (Mlambo & Kapingura, 2019). Despite women's progress towards achieving full and active participation in politics, Mlambo & Kapingura (2019) contends that their identity is still predominantly conceived of as being domestic in nature, and continues to act as a barrier to women's entry into formal politics as intimated by these participants:

The society still sees women's place as being subservient to men; that women should focus on raising and taking care of the family and nothing else. (Participant 1)

To be factual, the society in general is anti-women. It cuts across both educated and the uneducated. When it comes to women taking up leadership roles, the society fights against it due to norms and tradition. This calls campaigns aimed at changing the mind-set of Ghanaians. (Participant 17)

We argue that societal assumptions about women's perceived identity create barriers to their representation in the legislature. However, Krook and Mackay (2015) remind us that if society as an institution is gendered, it can also be 'regendered'. To regender society – gradual societal and institutional change – we propose a renewed thought and agency modeled on the principles of feminist institutionalism which posits that there is a need to apply a gender lens in order to better understand both the formal and informal institutions which control women's political careers. The need to raise awareness was also mentioned by the participants as a way to re-socialise the society in an effort to ensure the enhanced representation of women in the legislature. The following quote from a participant illustrates this perspective:

Gender gaps can only be bridged if the thinking pattern of the society is changed. Women can lead. Women have the capacity to lead. However, women do not see themselves as capable of leading. Why is it that all constituencies in Ghana have high women population and yet men are in the majority in parliament? This is because the societal norms and perception of people which need to change. (Participant 16)

In order to facilitate this change, other participants called for awareness raising to highlight the crucial role of women in politics ipso facto governance.

This calls for awareness raising to change the perception of the society. Perception affects people ways of life. (Participant 1)

The masses need to be aware that women can also play assertive and constructive role towards the development of Ghana. (Participant 19)

We argue that societal norms, beliefs, and priorities, which are shaped by traditions, play a significant role in defining gender roles in politics. Democracies, on the other hand, are associated with more gender-neutral attitudes. Throughout history, gender norms have had a profound impact on women's ability to have their voices heard in

parliament, alongside other factors such as wealth, race, and ethnicity. Prevailing societal standards regarding women's domestic responsibilities have historically deprived them of their fundamental rights to actively participate in and be represented in national politics. In light of this, the suggestions put forth by the participants are valid. The question of who will take charge of reorienting society to promote women's representation becomes pertinent.

3.5. Concluding Thoughts

This paper sheds light on viable empowerment strategies for tackling the legislative underrepresentation of women in Ghana. We have used empowerment theory to further our understanding of ways to enhance women's legislative representation in Ghana. We have conceptualized empowerment as constituting power and agency. Power relates to having control over resources to bring about desired change while agency is conceived as both goal-directed and action-oriented process. Despite these two dimensions, we believe that the common thread in discourses on empowerment is the issue of change. We find evidence that women's political empowerment is closely linked to the acquisition of certain key resources – policy, money, personal competencies (knowledge and skills). In terms of policy, the study has shown that the development and implementation of an affirmative action policy could help increase women's representation in parliament. Such a policy has the potential to address gender imbalances and create a more inclusive political environment. Despite the promise of affirmative action policies in the quest to balance the gender representation in parliament, we have to be mindful that the understanding of the tension between individual merit and social justice may be informed by past experiences of groups that have benefited from such policies; hence the need to care about the antecedents of affirmative action policies (Sommer & Asal, 2019). Particularly, challenges related to implementation, enforcement, and backlash against affirmative action policies should be acknowledged and addressed to ensure their long-term effectiveness. Also, political parties play a significant role in promoting women's political empowerment. Parties that actively support and engage women tend to have higher levels of gender diversity. Strategies such as recruiting and training women candidates, implementing internal party quotas, and providing financial and logistical support can enhance women's representation in the legislature. Moreover, the study highlights the importance of formal education in political engagement and representation. Closing the gender gap requires addressing disparities in academic achievements and providing opportunities for women to enhance their knowledge, skills, and attitudes in political domains. Additionally, re-orienting society's norms and beliefs is crucial for promoting women's representation in parliament. Challenging societal conventions, traditions, and rituals that hinder women's representation is essential. Awareness-raising campaigns and efforts to foster gender-neutral attitudes can contribute to a more inclusive political system. This article emphasizes the significance of adopting comprehensive policies, supported by robust political will, to empower women and achieve gender diversity in Ghana's parliament. Such policies should address barriers, provide support mechanisms, and create an enabling environment for women's legislative representation and hence influence in decision-making processes. Moving forwards, policymakers, stakeholders, and scholars should endeavour to continuously evaluate the progress of such policies, identify areas for improvement, and develop evidence-based approaches to empower women in politics. Ultimately, achieving greater gender diversity and empowerment of women in politics is not only a matter of social justice and equality but also a crucial step toward sustainable development and inclusive governance in Ghana and beyond. By ensuring that women's voices are heard, their perspectives are valued, and their leadership is recognized, we can create a more representative and inclusive democracy that benefits society as a whole.

3.6. Limitations and future scholarship

Given the number and specificity of the participants selected for the study, our findings are not generalisable; although the purpose of this study was not to generalize the findings but to provide fresh insights into how to address the issue of legislative underrepresentation of women in an effort to advance gender parity. The study, by its qualitative design, sought to bring to the foreground the voices of women MPs, who in the quest to represent their constituencies have encountered a myriad of challenges; hence are in a better position to provide suggestions on how best to empower aspiring women candidates for parliament. We do however recognize that a much broader study which involved women aspirants could have offered wider perspectives on the phenomenon under investigation. This could be considered in future scholarship. Therefore, readers should exercise some caution when interpreting the study's findings, as the findings pertain specifically to the women MPs who participated in this study and may not reflect the general perspectives of all the women MPs in the 8th Parliament of Ghana.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Mary Awusi: Conceptualization, Software, Writing – original draft, preparation. **David Addae:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Software, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Olivia Adwoa Tiwaa Frimpong Kwapong:** Conceptualization, Software, Writing – original draft, preparation.

Declaration of competing interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors. The authors have no affiliation with any organization with a direct or indirect financial interest in the subject matter discussed in the manuscript.

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