

# THE PARTICIPATION OF YOUNG WOMEN IN POLITICS AND LEADERSHIP IN GHANA



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In 2019, GenCED conducted a qualitative research in Ghana to fully gain insight into the barriers that hinder young women's participation in politics while serving as a consequential signpost in informing social policy recommendations on best practices and reforms in achieving gender parity in political leadership. The study specifically sought to explore people's perceptions of young women's participation in politics in Ghana, examined the opportunities and barriers regarding young women's participation in politics and assessed ways in which young women's political participation can be advanced.

The geographical scope of the data collection was in the Greater Accra region, Eastern region and Ashanti region. The data collection used Focus Group Discussions (FGD). The participants were categorized into people already in politics at the local and national level, people who work at the central business districts, post-graduate students, working class citizens from diverse organizations, undergraduate students and people within political parties. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study for their consent to be sought before the sessions were begun. The sessions were recorded and transcribed for analysis after the discussions. In all 200 participants from the various categories were engaged in the FGDs. The data was gathered from eleven (11) focus group discussions, hereafter referred to as FG1, FG2, FG3, and FG4, FG5, FG6, FG7, FG8, F9, FG10 and FG11 where FG means "Focus Group". The views in the form of quotations from the various focus group discussions will be indicated with FG1 – FG11.



## **Discussion of findings**

The study sought to explore the participation of young women in politics in Ghana. It finds that although Ghana has made some improvement in the participation of young women in politics, it is however not encouraging. Young women are still underrepresented and there is still the need for more young women to be encouraged and supported to engage in politics at all levels in society.

There was a general consensus that the participation of young women in politics have witnessed some progress in recent times. The Ghanaian society has witnessed women as young as twenty-three (23) years of age vying for political seats in constituencies as well as the appointments of young women as presidential staffers. This has created the impression that young women can be vibrant in the political space, thereby arousing the interest of other young women to partake in politics. Hence, the involvement of young women in national politics is progressing. However, irrespective of this progress, there is still room for improvement because these young women that participate in politics are few, making them underrepresented. In support of the foregoing discussion, some quotes from the various focus groups are presented:

***“Women are underrepresented in politics because of long standing social norms, low level of education, high level of cost involved in politics and low self-esteem on the part of women.”- FG9.***

***“As I said earlier, the nature of politics in Ghana deters young women from entering into it. If you are not strong like some of us, it will be very hard for you to be able to enter into politics in Ghana”. - FG11***

*“It’s not easy for young women in politics to succeed easily without compromising their moral standards. A lot of them are forced to trade sexual favours for support. The male dominance makes it a tough profession for women”- FG5*

*“I think it is good that young women are finally showing interest and participating in national politics. And now a days, there are a lot of young women who are interested in also becoming politicians. However, young women are stereotyped for being both young and female” – FG1*

*“Yes. More young women are entering into politics. But it must be said that they are still few, comparatively.” – FG2*

*“Politics is a dirty game; people use dubious and evil ways to gain power. This hinders young women who are startled in most cases and very emotional to enter into politics”- FG11*

*“Little confidence is placed in young women in political position therefore, it takes one more than willing to take up the political mantle. Also, the notion of women in power being arrogant or disrespectful serves as deterrent for people voting them into political positions.”- FG7*

Others also argued that even though some progress have been made regarding the participation of young women in politics, their voices are not heard and they do not propagate for any policies that are beneficial to young women in general. In view of this, the respondents opine:

*“Even though there are few young women in politics, which we will say they are representing us, we hardly hear them make contributions on matters during parliamentary discussions. They are always quiet.” – FG1*



Further, the study reveals that the prevailing challenges that serve as bane to the effective participation of young women in politics in Ghana are cultural than structural. In the Ghanaian society, womanhood has been successively characterised with being timid, reticent, less assertiveness and diffident etc. These, however, differs from the characteristics expected of a politician, which are ascribed by same society, as strong, assertive, firm, courageous, confident, and others. Explicitly, these characteristics are not in tune with the feminine traits. This then creates the impression that women do not have the charisma for politics since naturally they do not possess such traits. The continual association of politics to masculine traits than feminine ones will lead to young women facing the effect of the stereotype threat theory. The stereotype threat theory emphasizes that people show low aspirations and perform poorly in stereotyped tasks associated with their social group(s). Davies, Spencer and Steele postulate that when people are conscious of the stereotypes associated with their social group and believe they may be adjudicated based on these stereotypes; they tend to become threatened by that stereotype. This means that when society continuously create the impression that politics is a male activity, then a lot of women will show less interest in it or perform poorly at it. In support of the foregoing discussion, some quotes from the various focus groups are presented:

***“In our homes, especially in the northern parts of Ghana, women are seen as the weaker vessels. They are trained to serve men and be subjects to them. This however, does not help young women to participate in politics.”- FG6***

*“Women cannot take decisions for men and being in political positions puts them in that right.”- FG5*

*“In our communities and even homes, the male has always been presented as the head. Because of this, some of them have ego problems when the thought of having a female leader crops up. They will not just cooperate”. - FG1*

*“Ghanaian political parties use we young women as campaigning and food sharing tools. They fail to integrate us into mainstream politics unlike our male counterparts. They totally relegate us to the back”. - FG6*

*“It is not like the men think the women cannot perform that is why they do not give them the maximum support; it is plainly ego and the mind-set that the woman is a helper and not a leader which is imbedded in our culture”. - FG4*

*“Most political parties lack quota systems and campaign funds which will boost young women’s participation. These are the structures that political parties must put in place to support young women in order to create a fair playing ground for everyone”. FG10*

*“Here is the case we have some churches where women sit at the back, separately from men. They don’t participate in anything in the church, be it singing, ushering, whatsoever. So, it makes them actually feel it is wrong to lead as women.” - FG2*

*“The relative hardship of women in this country as compared to men cannot be overlooked. [...] Some of the men are able to amass wealth through inheritance obtained or opportunities they had in the past. [...] So, raising money for political activities is easier to the men than women.”- FG3*

*“It is very difficult gaining the finances to contest for a seat as an MP. You can’t also finance this personally because what work do you do? Most individuals and organisations that can support also think you won’t win when men are available, so why should they invest in you.”- FG4*

***“as result of fundraising which is very crucial to our campaigning, we as young women with political ambitions are sexually harassed by party officials, top officials and some business men and this greatly deters us from participating in politics”- FG6***

Furthermore, the study finds that there are no or little policies, structures or incentives that are directly linked to supporting young women in politics. The only known approach is the “Agenda 2030: Women in Power and Decision-Making”. This agenda also appears like a wishful thought than an action plan. Although the agenda specifies what it aims to achieve, there are no clear mechanisms or actions that will be undertaken to achieve its aims and objectives.

***“There are not too many incentives, structures, or policies that support young females in politics in this country. What I know of is the agenda 2030. But this is more of targeting women of all ages and not just the younger ones”- FG4***

***“Some of the political parties have affirmative action that creates room for some seats to be reserved for women and the reduction of filling fees creates an enabling environment for all women whether young or old.”-FG7***

Lastly, political parties are found to be playing minimal role in advancing the involvement of young women in politics. Even though the constitutions and policies of political parties do not explicitly bar or restrict young women from participating in politics, political parties fail to create enough room to lift young women to higher levels of political participation. What is expected of them is both an “uplifting environment” and an “enabling environment.” Therefore, the existing political parties must strive to implement policies and establish support programmes that will encourage more young women into the political sphere.

***“Political parties make promises of women representation but are invariably faced with the reality of a male dominated field whose active foot soldiers are mostly men.”- FG7***

***“Imagine if one of the big political parties promotes a young woman to be a flag bearer eeerrrrh, I don’t think the party members will refuse to vote for the said lady just because of gender. It is obvious political parties are key in advancing young women’s engagement in politics.”- FG2***

*“In my view, the political parties do not prevent young women in participating in politics. But they do not also go the extra mile to make policies that support these young women. So, it appears like a level playing ground”- FG4*

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## **Recommendations and the Way Forward**

Considering the complexities involved in governance and politics in the sub-region, young women in the sub-region need mentorship on governance since they lack experience, have inadequate political knowledge, interest and sense of civic duty. They also need to be empowered. Empowering young women to participate substantively in politics does not only bridge the existing gender disparity in politics, but significant to achieving gender equality in the sub-region.

The ECOWAS regional body needs to play the role of a “gender norm entrepreneur” in the sub-region to influence its member states to gradually ignite the adaptation of national gender sensitive laws that will aid in increasing young women’s representation in politics across West Africa. However, young women’s appointment or participation in the political space should be on merit not along political lines so that qualified young women can hold leadership positions.

In addition, governments and political parties should adopt gender quotas as a dependable measure with potential prowess to address the political marginalization of young women in politics in the various West African States. Also, political parties should amend their ideologies, organizational structures, gender-sensitive policies, percentage of women’s activists, ratio of women party leaders to aid the election of young women political leaders.

Governments, CSOs, NGOs and political parties should invest greatly in young women by training, nurturing, exposing and encouraging them to take up political roles. The older generation in politics should also share experiences and generational ideas with young women to promote intra and inter-generational communication and cooperation among women. The government, political parties and CSOs must bring out policies and strategies that will support young women financially during their campaigns. Parents of young women should be supportive and provide the exposure and space to participate as opposed to keeping the girls silenced and in the kitchen. Parents must also be sensitized on the importance of political participation of young women. The government must work hard to deconstruct the mind of society on young women participation in politics.

There should be a parliamentary youth forum and youth councils established in West African parliaments to support the representation of the youth mostly young women and also enhance capacity building.

Governments should support young people with scholarships for study, in areas such as political science, governance, international affairs etc. The media should positively and adequately cover the works and contributions of young women in governance and politics. Institutions responsible for civic education and the Electoral commissions of the various West African States should provide adequate electoral education specially targeting young women since they are a marginalized group to get them interested in the political space. The educational systems in the sub-region should also make civic education a part of their curriculum in order to get young women interested in politics.

Internal party democracy must change to support young women by adopting new strategies address the disparities between young men and women entering parliament. Eligibility ages for political participation and parliamentary candidacies should be lowered to the minimum voting age.

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