

Local Government and Community Development: Nurturing Prospective Female Politicians

Janet Serwah Boateng

University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast, Ghana, jboateng@ucc.edu.gh

ABSTRACT: Women's contributions in public space to enhance development at the grassroots ensure their participation in local government administration. Hence, there are efforts to increase assemblywomen in decision-making positions in the district assemblies. Although there is a societal perception about female politicians, assemblywomen encourage prospective women politicians. This study sought to explore assemblywomen's efforts to nurture other women, build their interest in local politics and improve their political participation and develop communities. The study adopted the qualitative method approach to study four regions in Ghana sampled based on their diverse nature and noticeable female representativeness in district assemblies. Thirty assemblywomen were purposefully selected for in-depth interviews. The results show that their responsibilities gained other women's support where they could liaise to build their community. This mentee/mentorship initiative would enhance the women's chances in local government administration. The implication is that once a woman steps out from her private home to contribute to public space, community members recognize her, precipitating the support to engage in local government administration.

KEYWORDS: Assemblywomen, community development, local government, responsibility, representation, Ghana

1. Introduction

When women gained political rights, it took them years to exercise their rights to vote or stand for office (Paxton, Kunovich & Hughes 2007). Hence, there is continuous global advocacy for women to participate in government and occupy political positions in government. Besides, many female politicians serve as mentors to others, and their actions encourage others to engage in local politics (Bexell 2012). Also, exposure to formal political leadership models helps people become more informed and engaged (Doherty 2011). Thus, women's candidacies and terms in office offer positive models of political leadership for other women and girls. This study explores how assemblywomen encourage prospective female politicians to engage in community development to build their interest and participate in local government administration. The paper is organized into five sections. Section one presents the introduction, followed by the concepts' description. The third section presents the methodology, while the discussions are in the fourth section. Section five concludes the paper.

2. Description of Concepts

2.1. Local Government System

The current local government provides a decentralized and participatory system and has become agents of the national/central government and are home-rule institutions to serve their various communities. The system has been an essential component of the country's political system and dates to colonialism in 1844 (Thomi et al. 2000; Ohemeng & Adusah-Karikari 2015). Since 1993, Ghana has been a constitutional democracy in the fourth republic with two spheres of government; the Central government and Local government systems (Boateng 2017). Under the decentralization policy, the local government system is to ensure more equitable participation of people in government (ABANTU for Development 2003).

Section 10, 1-3 of the *Local Government Act 462* sanctioned the district assemblies to be responsible for the overall development of the communities through the exercise of deliberative, legislative, and executive powers (Ofei-Aboagye 2004; Boateng & Kosi 2015). The district assemblies are the highest administrative authorities under the local government system at the local levels (Ahwoi 2010).

2.2. Women's Representation in Local Government

Women's political representation (WPR) is a core element in gender equality and good governance (Araujo & Tejedo-Romero 2016). At the local level, the assemblywomen's responsibilities of reducing malnutrition and implementing nutrition interventions and an anti-poverty approach are like extending such functions from the private spheres to the public space. Assemblywomen are involved in implementing the medium-term policies in the focus area of the National Development Planning Commission (NDPC) in Ghana to achieve the following key objectives: I. Reduce undernutrition and malnutrition-related disorders and deaths among infants and young children and women of reproductive ages; II. Ensure effective coordination, integration, and implementation of nutrition interventions in relevant sectors; and III. Ensure improved nutrition among all segments of the population (National Development Planning Commission [NDPC] 2015). With the involvement of women in the local government system, they will improve female reproductive roles, which seek to nurture people (Boateng, 2009; Abdullahi, Ghani, & Dalhatu 2015).

However, few women are elected to represent the people at the district assemblies because of intimidation, lack of recognition and illiteracy (Gyimah & Thompson 2008). According to Oguonu (2004), lack of resources to execute planned projects, corruption, ignorance, discrimination, and exclusion inhibited women from participating in local government (Abdullahi, Ghani, & Dalhatu 2015). Ghana's 2019 district assembly elections recorded the second-lowest number of women contestants against the 1998 elections, which registered 547 and got 196 elected in 1998 when the current local government system was first inaugurated (ABANTU for Development 2020; Tsikata 2009). Thus, after the 2019 elections, there was a record of 909 female contenders, but only 216 emerged winners. Since many women are not part of the decision-making processes to develop their communities in the district assemblies, strategic needs and female-focused concerns are not provided. For instance, 70% of communities visited during the research had no nursing facilities for nursing mothers in the assemblies and within the communities. Hence, the women could not combine their reproductive, productive and community responsibilities.

2.3. Women's Empowerment

The more women engage in politics, the more their contribution to development becomes enormous and helps solve societal challenges, including poverty, sanitation issues, hunger, and welfare needs. Also, women's economic empowerment could be a strategy to reduce poverty among women by having access to land, credit facilities, information technology, business services and networks (Boateng 2017). Strengthening other women's capacity to generate income will help manage their concerns (Kamau 2010). Also, women's network is essential for rebuilding a conflict-ridden society and enhancing development (Powley & Anderlini 2003; Araujo & Tejedo-Romero 2016). Historically, approaches to women in development (WID) placed women's economic agency on the development agenda. Women's effort to achieve equality in development falls within actively participating in governance (Bexell 2012).

Compared with men, the social reality constructed by women seems exceptional. This study observed that the election of women as members of the assembly saw the construction of nurseries to support other women in the community. These developments appealed to other women to develop an interest in local politics and become part of the local government

administration. Therefore, the elected women in the district assemblies have become responsible for persuading other women to participate in local politics.

2.4. Community Development

This study adopted the explanation of community development by Kamau (2010), where leaders are likely to guarantee that their actions and influences bring development effects to the areas they hail or constituencies they represent. Good governance results in development, and women's contributions attest to why global, national, rural and community development are based on goals in the new millennium. Thus, the MDG 3 and SDG 5 goals ensure gender equality for sustainable development. Women's empowerment principles point out that through community initiatives, equality would be promoted (Bexell 2012).

Studies have shown that rural women contribute to community development when they provide work opportunities, impart skills acquisition, and provide necessary commodities to the community members (Abdullahi, Ghani, & Dalhatu 2015). Therefore, women's efforts to liaise with other women to contribute to community development must be acknowledged. Moser (1993) acknowledged Women in Development (WID) approaches and the interventions made in the 1950s to change rural people's economic and social progress, particularly women's roles as contributors to their community.

3. Methodology

The study employs a qualitative research approach to explore people, social and material circumstances (Denzin & Lincoln 2008; Ormston, Spencer & Snape 2014). The in-depth knowledge through face-to-face interviews expands the comprehension of the phenomena emerging in society. Thus, assemblywomen are liaising with others to impact the lives of community members. The study adopted a purposive sampling procedure to select twenty respondents to account for their lived experiences in the four areas; Western Region (WR), Central Region (CR), Bono Region (BR), Eastern Region (ER), and Greater Accra Region (GAR). The study areas and the respondents were coded as C1, W2, G3, B4, and E5 as pseudonyms to hide their identities.

The respondents' consents were sorted before the face-to-face interview; hence, those who did not feel comfortable could stop participating. The data were coded using NVivo version 11 software during the data analysis. The researcher familiarised herself with the subjective presentation of the participants. Six varied themes emerged: (I) *Communal Labour*, (II) *Seeking Support from the Local Women*, (III) *Male Partners' Support*, (IV) *Constructions of social amenities*, (V) *Supporting girls and children*, (VI) *Women in Electioneering Campaign Teams*.

4. Findings and Discussions

Creswell (2014) and Denzin & Lincoln (2000) suggested that the research approach should be linked to the objectives and questions of the investigation. The study explores assemblywomen's efforts to nurture other women to develop the communities, increase their interest in local politics and improve their political participation. The six themes that emerged from the analysis represent how the assemblywomen could invite other women into local politics.

4.1. Communal labor

C1 organized programs and spoke to women to be courageous. The time to meet the women was during communal labour when other people would be present to cheer them up. She was a leader of an association, and her speeches motivated others to come on board to serve the

community. Also, B1 admitted that many people excused themselves during communal labor because they failed to bring tools such as shovels, brooms, spades, and rakes to work. She revealed that the absence of working tools always retarded development. Sometimes the women usually presented the tools to work very hard. B1 said, “Using myself as an example, I put trousers and wellington boots on to get involved. The men stand idle while the women work with buckets, cutlasses, head pans and brooms.” E1 indicated that the assemblywomen always relied on the women who were more committed to developing their communities. She noted that when a woman announced that all women were needed, many women would heed the call within a short moment and assemble to undertake any assignment. E1 said, “As for my community, we listen to women; whoever comes to me for support, I stop whatever I do and attend to them.” E1 indicated that she had incorporated many women into the district unit committees. Hamah (2015) admitted that women’s performances were by no means considered inferior to that of men.

The extent of women’s engagement is not limited to household reproductive activities as they deal with community work. Thus, housewives (women) extend their engagement in the home to communities or public spaces. G1 hinted that in Ghana, women’s duties are associated with improving sanitation; hence, they accompanied her during tours to sanitize the places. After cleaning, G1 organized open fora to meet men and women and brought ideas, fortifying women’s political involvement. From the revelations, women’s multiple roles as wives, mothers, daughters, community workers and income-generators do not entirely limit their time for community interaction and mobilization as some studies (e.g., Ofei-Aboagye 2000) suggested.

4.2. Seeking support from the local women\

As part of their duties, assembly members need to consult community members about developing the areas, which became part of C1’s routine. Though C1 invited all members to clean, her targets were the women who assisted. She always advised them to keep the surroundings clean to ward off weeds, mosquitoes and snakes, as people expected much from them.

While the assemblywomen worked with other women, they invited mentors to speak to them. B1 also talked about a prominent woman in one region who visited them frequently and encouraged them to engage in local politics. Those encounters were motivational periods, and she suggested the assembly take it up to invite more of such mentors to give talks and skills training to make more women engage in politics. Studies have shown that partnerships for women’s empowerment attempt to construct their legitimacy and rationale (Bexell 2012). G1 vowed to always go in for women to participate in decision making.

She said,

“Women are good in leadership. When it comes to effective politics, I will go for a woman because, administratively, women are born with leadership qualities. They are humble and know how to lobby for their needs and change.”

G1 acknowledged that her government vouched for more women to participate in politics. Hence, she roped them into the local government administration. G1 and her female team supported widows, aged, childless, and disabled, whose limited access to labour made them suffer greatly (Ofei Aboagye 2000).

Thus, women's socio-political and economic empowerment could help address the community members' challenges (Boateng 2017). At the local level, women’s active involvement in steering and directing public affairs, including development activities, was critical to successfully implementing government policies such as the Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy (GPRS).

4.3. Male partners' support

E2 always praised her husband for the support she received during her political journey and indicated that the husband was the main sponsor who paid for everything during electioneering campaigns. E1 also praised her husband in front of other men, which served as an eye-opener to help their wives. E1 formed three associations; Land Lords Associations, Residents Associations and Stakeholders Associations chaired by the husbands of the women who worked with her. Such associations comprised males and females, and the wives participated in local politics to develop the communities. E1 also advocated that husbands allow their wives to step up their political games, with which many of them agreed.

On the other hand, E1 complained about unsupportive husbands and urged women to work hard. G1 indicated that society did not accept females in politics, but people embraced their presence for the support they received from their husbands. She said, “The support from my husband, who endorsed my candidature, was a real plus in my political career. There was mutual respect and understanding, and we have no problems.” G1 shared whatever she gained from politics with her husband and discussed politics with him. Particularly the sub-committee she served in the assembly so that he would understand whenever she returned late from assembly meetings. G1 said her husband had been a role model, and other men emulated his support. She believed other husbands equally supported their wives in engaging in local politics. She pointed out that women in their communities should always inform their husbands of their whereabouts, which would enhance their support in their decisions to engage in politics. Although literature (e.g., Borrelli 2002) emphasizes women's challenges in participating in politics, the support from their male partners was a wake-up call for wives to develop an interest in politics.

4.4. Constructions of Social Amenities

B1 admitted that there was no bridge on the stream in their community, which had daunting and unhealthy situations for the people. They encounter snake bites whenever they cross the river. She wrote to the district assembly and requested that wood logs be spread on the stream to serve as pathways. Although the local authority did not heed her request, B1 suggested that her enthusiasm for demonstrating the need attracted other women to her camp. They showed their displeasure, and the semi-literate women began to notice the essence of knowing their rights as citizens. That action, B1 believed, was an eye-opener for women to step out of their private sphere to engage in the public space. Women's Rights and Gender Equality Programme supports women's political participation and engenders public policymaking (Kamau 2010).

With the women's demonstrations, the government heeded their needs through policy formulation and implementation. B1 still appealed to NGOs that came to their aid and built toilet facilities, schools, school fields and shared school bags and bicycles. E1 pointed out that she and her husband established a primary school in 1997 for the children in their community to attend for free. The gesture encouraged many parents, particularly single mothers in the area who found it difficult to pay for their children's school fees. They voluntarily attended community gatherings to support any proposed development initiatives.

4.5. Supporting girls and children

C1 aimed to develop her electoral areas, cared for the constituents, and concentrated on making children live a better life. She sometimes gathered children and fed them breakfast, which was very fulfilling. She accompanied parents and their children to the hospital for treatment. C1 said, “The children's mothers had been grateful and always informed community members about my support.” These women had been caring for other people in their communities and were acknowledged though they were not in government. Studies support women's impact in shaping values for children (Zipp, Prohaska & Bemiller 2004). C1 took the opportunity to invite such kindhearted

women and worked with them. She also secured national health insurance cards for the underprivileged, the poor and children. She always sorted for admission for Senior High School leavers. She said, “Whenever there is time for school admission, I go round from house to house and ask so that those who need help will be supported through my relationships with the schools and colleges.” She only collected lorry fares from the prospective students’ parents and journeyed through to get support for them.

C1 also supported orphans and kept the children whose mothers suffered from mental diseases. These mothers might have been impregnated by men they could not identify. She was with eight abandoned children she was nurturing. She said, “When they are happy, I am happy.” C1 believed that the work she had been doing support the well-being of the people; if she stopped, many of them would face problems.

E1 also paid children’s school fees and registered their health insurance fees. Studies have shown that women (and young people) with little education, poorer health and greater food insecurity are at risk (Ofei-Aboagye 2000). Assemblywomen properly communicate this information to other women to be involved in politics and decision-making to seek women and children’s needs.

4.6. Women in electioneering campaign teams

While women were involved in spraying their community and fighting dirt and cholera outbreak, others organized themselves to sweep and campaign during elections. Their activities have helped ward off plagues and illnesses. Ghanaians have been free from diseases due to what they have been doing. E1 visited older women who campaigned on her behalf to attract voters. She always gifted them on her birthday, and it went well to collaborate more with many other younger women who would remain in politics for a longer period. Campbell and Wolbrecht (2006) believe that female role models make young women more likely to express an intention to engage in political activity. E2 also managed to bring on board many females during her campaign periods in 2002, 2006, and 2010 district assembly elections. Those energetic female team members could sing and dance to attract many people to the rally grounds. They organized picnics and cooked for the teeming supporters. These spectacles attracted prospective women politicians, and the assemblywoman took no chances but co-opted them into her camp and groomed them to become politicians.

Anytime E2 won elections, she invited the enthusiastic women into her administration. She confessed that she had been able to encourage four women to contest and win the 2019 district elections. G1 supports everyone and helps those she sees as vulnerable. She said, “I am that kind of person who has the passion for helping people, and the women in the community, particularly those in my team, have seen my hard work.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the efforts of assemblywomen in Ghana who encourage other women into local politics. The findings indicated that their care for younger people and the vulnerable in their communities attracted other women to be involved. The engagement with other women and their husbands supported them in their responsibilities for community development. The husband’s involvement cemented the wives’ political actions. Though some husbands preferred that their wives never got involved, especially when they were on the same political teams, they eventually supported them because of the assemblywomen’s roles. The ideas from the female politicians to persuade and motivate other women to engage in politics has been a great initiative, which I believe the stakeholders should hold tight. There is still less participation of women in government and decision-making positions, and such actions from women politicians would support addressing unfair representation in decision-making.

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