

Women representation in national elections in Ghana since independence: An appraisal

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Abstract

Even though women represent 50.7% of Ghana's population, there are currently only 41 women in Ghana's Parliament. Indeed, in Ghana's 9th Parliament of the 4th Republic, the 41 women Members of Parliament (MPs) represent a paltry 14.9 percent of the 276 total Members, which is a far cry from the Beijing Platform for Action's 30% threshold for women. This gross underrepresentation of women is despite various efforts to improve the representation of women. Using a descriptive analysis and employing data compiled from the Election Research Resource Centre-Ghana, and the Inter-Parliamentary Union among others, the authors critically appraise the issues surrounding women representation in national elections in the country, with a special focus on the trajectory of women's representation in national elections since independence, the challenges faced by women in this regard, and the prospects for increased women's representation. The paper argues that tackling the chronic underrepresentation of women in national elections in Ghana will require bold steps regarding affirmative action policies, gendered electoral financing, building inclusive political party structures, education and training, as well as the re-socialization of society. There is also the need for a review of the 1992 Constitution to better promote the representation of women more broadly in national leadership, in particular, national elections.

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Introduction

The problem of low representation of women in Ghana has been ostensibly perennial (Inter-Parliamentary Union [IPU], 2024; Amoah, 2024; Allah-Mensah, 2005; Tsikata, 2009). Six decades after independence (1957 to 2017), the number of women representatives in Ghana's Parliaments spanning four republics has ranged from 10 (in 1960) to 37 (in 2017). The current 41 women MPs represent a paltry 14.9% of the 276 MPs in Ghana's Parliament, which is a far cry from the Beijing Platform for Action's 30% threshold for women, which Ghana has long acceded to.

Meanwhile, women representation and the broader political participation of women are key to promoting not only gender equality, but overall inclusive democratic progress and development. According to Shvedova (2005, p. 33), "the exclusion of women from decision-making bodies limits the possibilities for entrenching the principles of democracy in a society, hindering economic development and discouraging the attainment of gender equality.... if men monopolize the political process... the decision-making process does not always balance the interests of the male and female populations". Allah-Mensah (2005) points to evidence that shows that women's potential ought to be tapped to meaningfully enhance social, economic and political development at both national and sub-national levels. Women are also better placed to discuss, adopt, adapt, and implement policies that positively impact the welfare of women compared to men. On this score, Asekere and Awaisu (2021) agree with the assertion by Nugent (2019) that women are best placed to represent the interests of fellow women, children and the vulnerable in society.

Available data clearly shows that the drive for the representation of women in national elections and leadership in Ghana has taken many twists and turns, and efforts have generally yielded sub-par results despite some marginal gains. Meanwhile, more than half of Ghana's population is made up of women. Ghana's total population stood at 30,832,019 in 2021. According to the Ghana Statistical Service (GSS) (2021), the country's female population was higher than the male population, amounting to 15,631,579, as against 15,200,440 males. In fact, apart from census data from 1960, the female proportion of Ghana's population has consistently been higher than the male population of the country. Table 1 below shows the population distribution between males and females in Ghana from 1960 to 2021.

Table 1: Gender distribution and population size of Ghana 1960 - 2021

	1960	%	1970	%	1984	%	2000	%	2010	%	2021	%
Total	6,726,815	100	8,559,313	100	12,296,081	100	18,912,079	100	24,658,823	100	30,832,019	100
Male	3,400,270	50.5	4,247,809	49.6	6,063,848	49.3	9,357,282	49.5	12,024,845	48.8	15,200,440	49.3
Female	3,326,545	49.5	4,311,504	50.4	6,232,233	50.7	9,554,697	50.5	12,633,978	51.2	15,631,579	50.7
Excess of Male/ Female	73,725		-63,695		-168,385		-197,415		-609,133		-431,139	

Source: Compiled by Authors from GSS Population and Housing Census Data

The general trend of more females than males in Ghana notwithstanding, women underrepresentation in national elections and leadership has been endemic throughout the history of Ghana. Even with specific constitutional guarantees of women's rights and the recognition of the need for both formal and substantive equality under the Fourth Republic, women continue to be grossly underrepresented particularly in national leadership and elections. It is against this backdrop that this study seeks to critically dissect the issues surrounding women representation in national elections, with a special focus on how far we have gone, the challenges, and prospects for the future.

The article proceeds with an explanation of 'women representation in national elections', a brief outline of the research methodology, an exposition of the international legal instruments underpinning the global drive for gender parity in national elections and leadership, before zooming in on the case of Ghana by detailing women's representation in national elections – presidential and parliamentary – from independence till now. It then highlights comparatively the status of other African countries with respect to women representation in national elections, the factors/challenges accounting for the underrepresentation of women in national elections in Ghana, before dovetailing into various recommendations on the way forward.

Understanding women representation in national elections

The concept of representation fails to lend itself to a tidy definition; especially as everyone seems to know what it is, yet very few agree on any particular definition. This notwithstanding, the most straightforward definition of representation is that which has been provided by Hana Pitkin (1967) in her seminal work *The Concept of Representation*, where she noted that to represent is to "make present again." Commenting on Pitkin's definition, Dovi (2018), noted that political representation broadly focuses on the activity of "making citizens' voices, opinions and perspectives 'present' in public policy making processes. Where political actors therefore speak, advocate, symbolize and act on behalf of others in the political arena, one can say there is political representation.

Pitkin (1967) maintained that representation has four different but integrated dimensions, namely:

Formal representation, which focuses on the institutional procedures and rules that precede and initiate the means through which various representatives are chosen (Dovi, 2018; Schwindt-Bayer & Mishler, 2005). Formal representation therefore relates to the institutional and legal framework through which women can represent women in the larger body politic. Secondly, descriptive representation, which refers to the compositional similarity between representatives and those being represented (Schwindt-Bayer & Mishler, 2005). In other words, it is the extent to which the representative resembles the population cluster being represented (Dovi, 2018). In the context of women representation, descriptive representation focuses on the number of women that are present in a political system (Dos Santos & Wylie, 2018).

Thirdly, there is substantive representation, also known as the responsiveness of representatives (Schwindt-Bayer & Mishler, 2005). This term is used to refer to the various activities taken by representatives on behalf of, and in the interest of the represented (Dovi, 2018). This dimension of representation deals with the congruence between the actions of representatives and the interests of represented parties (Schwindt-Bayer & Mishler, 2005). Substantive representation focuses on women-related policy making and the dynamics surrounding the legislation and implementation of these gender-based policies (Schwindt-Bayer & Mishler, 2005; Pitkin, 1967). A final dimension of representation is symbolic representation. Here, the focus is on feelings of being fairly and adequately represented (Schwindt-Bayer & Mishler, 2005). It refers to the ways in which representatives stand for the represented or the meanings the representative has for those being represented (Dovi, 2018). In the context of women representation, symbolic representation addresses the ways in which the presence of women shapes attitudes and beliefs of both citizens and elites (Dos Santos & Wylie, 2018).

Even though this article appears to focus more on formal and descriptive representation of women in elections at the national level, it contends that the four dimensions are inextricably linked and mutually reinforcing. One can, therefore, view women representation in national elections, not only in terms of the legal and institutional framework through which women representatives are chosen, or simply in terms of the number of women that are in elective positions, but also in terms of the responsiveness of women representatives to women interests, as well as feelings of being fairly and effectively represented on the part of the represented. There is primary focus on women representation in terms of national elections principally under Ghana's Fourth Republic. This is because the ability of women to stand and be voted for into leadership positions in significant numbers at the national level is foundational to their opportunities in several other positions of leadership and policy influence.

The argument is that women (and more specifically Ghanaian women) face significant barriers or challenges in their quest to get elected and participate in political decision-making. Many women do not run or contest in the first place because of the obstacles they

see ahead of them, including ‘gendered social roles and expectations.’ These constitute ‘high entry barriers’ to women that hinder their ability to compete in or contest elections (Rosenbluth et al., 2015. p. 34).

Methods

Given that the paper seeks to examine the representation of women in national elections in Ghana, it employs a multi-method research design to capture the complexity of the subject. Harper (2019) noted that this approach combines qualitative and quantitative research methods to enable the researcher to capture different aspects of a subject and enhance validity through triangulation. The article therefore conducts a quantitative analysis of electoral data covering women representation in national elections since independence sourced from the Election Research Resource Centre, the Electoral Commission of Ghana, and the Inter-Parliamentary Union. This made it possible to examine variables such as the number of female candidates and electoral success rates. A descriptive analysis was thus applied to identify structural patterns in women representation over time (Lindberg, 2006).

The article also undertook a thorough desktop review of the literature on the representation of women in national elections, relevant international instruments and national legislation, archival documents, and other relevant sources, to analyse the factors that account for the low representation of women in national elections in Ghana and the steps that must be taken to stem the tide of persistent under-representation of women in national elections in Ghana. This also helped to situate the statistical findings within the broader scholarly and policy discourse while highlighting the intersection between institutions, culture, and policy commitments to gender inclusion (Glover, 2022).

To gain a practitioner’s perspective and capture lived experiences on the subject, a semi-structured in-depth interview was conducted with a former female Member of Ghana’s 8th Parliament who was selected for her direct experience in navigating electoral politics as a woman. The interview explored barriers to women representation in Ghana and provided qualitative depth to available statistical and documentary evidence. The integration of quantitative data, literature review and a lived experience ensured methodological triangulation, enhancing both validity and richness of findings (Harper, 2019).

International frameworks for women’s representation

The push for women representation has not only been a Ghanaian or even African phenomenon. It is important to note that the drive for women representation has long been on the global agenda as part of the global push for gender equality and empowerment. To this end, several International Conventions and Declarations have made stipulations

to ensure that signatories and participating countries put in place various provisions to ultimately promote gender equality in all spheres of life. The following are a few of the international instruments that speak to the issue:

Article 2 of the 1948 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights prohibits all forms of discrimination, and Article 21 grants the right to everyone to take part in the government of their country, directly or through freely chosen representatives. The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which was adopted in 1979 and subsequently ratified by Ghana in 1986, further calls for the 'adoption of Temporary Special Measures (TSM) aimed at accelerating de facto equality between men and women' (affirmative action) in Article 4(1); and for state parties to ensure women's eligibility for election to public bodies on the same terms as men in Article 7 (Appiah, 2015). Notably, it was within the UN that affirmative action was first promoted as a tool to enhance women's representation in politics. Significantly, the Convention encouraged all member states to take appropriate measures, including preferential treatment, to facilitate women's access to all decision-making areas, including political representation.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (ratified by Ghana in 1995) also re-accentuated the provisions of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and outlined measures to be taken to increase women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership and to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures (Appiah, 2015). It is notable that the Beijing Declaration recommended a minimum threshold of at least 30 percent of all public leadership positions for women. It also called on countries to "rethink, review, and adopt the electoral system that encourages political parties to integrate women in elections" (Lihiru, 2022). Importantly, implementation of the Beijing Platform would require changes in values, attitudes, priorities and practices at all levels.

The United Nations' Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 3, which has now been captured under Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 believes the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women constitute a critical step towards ensuring a prosperous, inclusive and sustainable future for all. Following from the stipulations of MDG 3 and SDG 5, the Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality (2005-2015), which was adopted in 2005 avers that the ability of countries to achieve sustainable development is dependent on the full participation of women in democracy and peace processes (Appiah, 2015).

Under the auspices of the African Union (AU), Article 9(1) of the Optional Protocol to the African Charter on the Human and Peoples Rights of Women in Africa (which was ratified by Ghana in 2007), enjoins states to take specific positive action to promote participative governance and the equal participation of women in political life through affirmative action. The Africa Agenda 2063 also envisages an African continent that has

full gender parity with women occupying 50 percent of elected public offices at all levels (Lihiru, 2022).

It is noteworthy that The Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, also call for 50/50 representation of men and women in positions of power (Lihiru, 2022). States, including Ghana, are obliged, under these international and regional instruments, “to inter alia eradicate all forms of discrimination against women, ensure women vote, stand for, and win elections, as well as adopt some temporary special measures. The conventions, however, do not contain any stipulation on the electoral system member-states can apply to facilitate women’s meaningful engagement in elections” (Lihiru, 2022).

Even though progress has been less than expected, the provisions outlined above coupled with other efforts at the global level have yielded some significant results in many countries and regions across the globe. Using a baseline year of 1995 to correspond to the adoption of the Beijing Declaration, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) (2024) observed significant progress in terms of global and regional averages of women in parliaments between 1995 and 2024. Specifically, the world average of women in parliament has increased from 11.3% in 1995 to 26.9% in 2024 representing a 15.6% increase. The Americas witnessed the highest growth during the period, increasing from 12.7% to 35.1% - i.e. a 22.4% increase. Sub-Saharan Africa has also witnessed a 17.5% increase, moving from 9.8% in 1995 to 27.3% in 2024. Interestingly, the Middle East and North Africa, which happens to be the region with the lowest average of women in parliament, moved from 4.3% in 1995 to 16.5% in 2024. The 2024 average for the Middle East and North Africa (16.5%) is still higher than the percentage of women in Ghana’s 9th Parliament in 2025.

The case of Ghana – From pre-independence to date

It is evident from the preceding paragraphs that Ghana has been a signatory to several international instruments that have a direct relevance for both the legal status of women and the representation of women at different levels of national leadership. Ghana has accordingly made some efforts to internalize these international conventions into its municipal laws. One may, in fact, argue that the key principles on gender equality captured in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the CEDAW, and other similar international instruments served as the basis for different provisions in the 1992 Constitution. The following are a few of the relevant provisions on gender equality and women representation in Ghana’s 1992 Constitution:

Article 17(1) of the Constitution guarantees the equality of all persons before the law, and Article 17(2) provides that no person shall be discriminated against on grounds of gender, race, color, ethnic origin, religion, creed or social or economic status. In recognition of the need for Affirmative Action, Article 17 (4) (a) states that nothing

in the article shall prevent Parliament from enacting laws that are reasonably necessary to provide for the implementation of policies and programs aimed at redressing social, economic or educational imbalance in the Ghanaian society.

Further, with a view to promoting the integration of the peoples of Ghana and reasonable regional and gender balance, Article 35 (6) (b) mandates the state to take appropriate measures to achieve reasonable regional and gender balance in recruitment and appointment to public office. Under Article 36 (6) (of the Directive Principles of State Policy, chapter 6 of the Constitution), the state is again expected to afford equality of economic opportunity to all citizens and in particular, the State shall take all necessary steps so as to ensure the full integration of women into the mainstream of economic development in Ghana.

It is in considering the provisions above and more that the 2011 Fiadjoe Constitutional Review Commission made the finding that the 1992 Constitution adequately provides for a broad framework within which to achieve gender equality and more specifically gender balance and representation in recruitment and appointment in public office. Despite this finding, both the Constitution Review Commission (2011, p.159) and the 2012 Government White Paper on the Constitution Review Commission's Report (p.23), acknowledged the need for the passage of an Affirmative Action Act to among others guarantee 30% representation of men and women in all public institutions and offices in as far as it is practicable. It is notable that the Affirmative Action (Gender Equity) Act, 2024 (Act 1121) was passed by Parliament and assented to by the President on September 11th, 2024. The need for the enforcement of Act 1121 is further discussed in this paper.

Women Representation in Presidential Elections

The dearth of women's representation in national elections since independence is evident in presidential and parliamentary elections alike. Significantly but unfortunately, Ghana is yet to elect a woman as President. It is important to note, however, that a few women have variously contested as presidential candidates or as vice-presidential candidates with male presidential candidates. In the 2020 election, for example, three women stood on the tickets of their political parties as flagbearers to be voted for to become presidents. A farmer and politician, Mrs. Akua Donkor was the flagbearer of the Ghana Freedom Party (GFP), while Madam Brigitte Akosua Dzogbenuku, was the flagbearer of the Progressive People's Party (PPP). Nana Konadu Agyeman-Rawlings, formerly of the National Democratic Congress (NDC), was the flagbearer of the National Democratic Party (NDP). All three candidates did not perform well in the election, obtaining only 0.14% of the total votes cast in the December 7 presidential election.

Notably, the country has also had a few female presidential running mates since the inception of the Fourth Republic. On July 6, 2020, the leadership of the NDC announced

Prof. Jane Naana Opoku-Agyemang as the running mate for Former President John Dramani Mahama for the 2020 election. She became the first woman in the history of Ghana to be nominated as a vice-presidential candidate by a major political party. Even though the NDC lost the 2020 election, the party maintained her as the running mate for the 2024 polls, which the NDC won decisively. This victory made her the first female Vice-President in the country's almost seven-decade history.

Other notable female running mates since 1992 are Madam Brigitte Akosua Dzogbenuku as running mate for Dr. Papa Kwesi Nduom on the ticket of the PPP in 2016, Madam Eva Naa Merley Lokko, also as the running mate for Dr. Papa Kwesi Nduom on the ticket of the PPP in 2012, Nana Akosua Frimpomaa-Sarpong as the running mate for Dr. Abu Sakara on the ticket of the Convention People's Party (CPP) in 2012, and Madam Helen Sanorita Dzatugbe Matervi as the running mate for Dr. Hassan Ayariga on the ticket of the People's National Convention (PNC) also in 2012. The other running mate nominees are Patricia Ameku of the Democratic Freedom Party (DFP) in 2008, Petra Amegashie of the Great Consolidated People's Party (GCPP) in 2000, and Adeline Dedo Nartey of the PNC in 1996.

Women and parliamentary elections (1951 – 1979)

With specific reference to the subject of the representation of women in Ghana's legislature, the memo attached to the Affirmative Action Bill dated August 6, 2020 and signed by the Minister responsible for Gender and Social Protection at the time, Hon. Cynthia Morrison, pointed out that the percentage of women in Parliament fluctuated greatly, falling from 18.2% in 1965 to as low as 3.5% in 1979 and rising from 8% in 1992 to 10.9% in 2004 and 11.3% in 2012 to 12.7% in 2016 placing Ghana at the 139th position of the Inter-Parliamentary Union World Classification. In 2020, with 13.4% of women in Parliament, though an improvement compared to 2016, Ghana's position fell to 145th out of 193 countries. In the 9th Parliament of the 4th Republic, there are 41 women MPs out of 276, representing a 14.9% of the total number of MPs. Meanwhile, the global average share of women in parliament as of January 1, 2024, stood at 26.9%, with Rwanda (61.3%), Cuba (55.7%), and Nicaragua (53.9%), having the highest shares of women in parliament (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024).

The percentage of women representatives to men in parliamentary elections between 1951 and 1979 was always in single digits except in the 1965 one-party parliamentary election where nineteen (19) women were elected to Parliament. The election of nineteen women in 1965 is notable because the Parliament that emerged after the election had women making up 18.2% of the total number of the Members of Parliament (MPs), the highest in the history of Ghana. Table 2 below captures details on the representation of women in parliamentary elections from 1951 to 1979. The 1951 elections period is the starting point because this election marked the first of the pre-independence elections contested by local political elites in the run-up to independence in 1957.

From Table 2 below, the following can be observed. First, there was no female contestant in the 1951 election. Three (3) women contested the 1954 election but only one (1) won – Mabel Dove of the Convention People’s Party (CPP) emerging as the first ever female MP in pre-independence Ghana. However, since there was no female contestant in the 1956 election, independent Ghana had no female MP in 1957. Nkrumah’s government initiated an affirmative action which brought ten (10) elected women MPs as special regional representatives on the ticket of the CPP when Ghana became a republic in 1960. In the one-party parliamentary elections of 1965, nineteen (19) women were elected. This number included nine (9) of the ten (10) special regional representatives who represented specific constituencies in the 1965 election. Another observation is that the 1969 election saw ten (10) female contestants from four political parties. Sadly, only one (1) emerged victorious on the ticket of National Alliance of Liberals (NAL). Meanwhile, a 1970 by-election in Chiana-Paga saw a close female relative of a disqualified PP incumbent emerging as winner. Finally, in the 1979 parliamentary election, twenty (20) females contested on the ticket of six political parties. The election produced five (5) female winners, three (3) runners-up and twelve (12) also-rans. It is pertinent to note that the ‘also-rans’ are those who made third and fourth place and beyond; in other words, they also ran in the elections but did not come close to winning (Frempong, 2023; Nugent, 2001).

Table 2: Women representation in parliamentary elections (1951 – 1979)

Year	# of Seats	# of Female Contestants	# of Female MPs	% of Female MPs	Runners-up	Also-rans	Remarks
1951	84*	0	0	-	-	-	No female contestant; only 38 out of 84 MPs were popularly elected*
1954	104	3	1	1	2	-	First ever female MP elected
1956	104	0	0	-	-	-	No female contestant; no female MP at independence
1960	104	-	10	9.6	-	-	10 special regional representatives became MPs through affirmative action
1965	104	-	19	18.2	-	-	
1969	140	10	1	0.7	5	4	
1970	140	1	2	1.4	-	-	First ever female by-election winner in Ghana
1979	140	20	5	3.5	3	12	

Source: Authors' Compilation from Election Research Resource Centre (ERRC) – Ghana (2023) Database, Frempong (2023) and Data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

Women and parliamentary elections since the Inception of the Fourth Republic (1992 to 2024)

Following the coming into force of the 1992 Fourth Republican Constitution on January 7, 1993, and with various constitutional provisions aimed at promoting gender equality and balance, one would have hoped to see a marked progress in the representation of women. Available data from ERRC-Ghana (2023) database and other sources, however, reveal a rather lackluster progress. Table 3 below shows details on the representation of women under Ghana’s Fourth Republic:

From Table 3 below, it is important to note that the boycott of the 1992 parliamentary election by four losing parties (New Patriotic Party (NPP), People’s National Convention (PNC), New Independence party (NIP) and People’s Heritage Party (PHP)) in the presidential contest took twenty-five (25) women out of the contest. The NIP female candidate, however, contested as an independent candidate and won. In all, thirty (30) females contested the 1992 parliamentary election with sixteen (16) emerging victorious. Ten (10) contestants came in second place and there were four (4) female also-rans. Between 1992 and 1996, four by-elections took place, and in a September 1993

by-election occasioned by the death of an NDC female MP, the only female contestant in the by-election was elected. This maintained the number of female MPs in the first Parliament of the fourth Republic at 16 out of 200 MPs.

Table 3: Women representation in parliamentary elections under the Fourth Republic

Year	# of Seats	# of Female Contestants	# of Female MPs	% of Female MPs	Runners-up	Also-rans	Remarks
1992	200	30	16	8.0	10	4	Parliamentary election boycotted by 4 parties
1996	200	58	18	9.0	20	17	3 contestants withdrew
1999	200	-	19	9.5	-	-	By-election following the death of a male-MP
2000	200	96	18	9.0	24	54	
2003	200	-	19	9.5	-	-	By-election following the death of a male-MP
2004	230	101	25	10.8	26	50	Number of seats increased to 230
2008	230	96	20	8.7	17	59	
2012	275	133	30	10.9	24	79	Number of seats increased to 275
2016	275	132	37	13.4	31	64	
2020	275	120	40	14.5	32	48	
2024	276	118	41	14.9	-	-	Number of seats increased to 276

Source: Authors' Compilation from Election Research Resource Centre (ERRC) – Ghana (2023) Database and Data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

In the 1996 election, of the fifty-eight (58) women who contested eighteen (18) were elected as MPs. There were two by-elections between 1996 and 2000, and the only female contestant in the 1999 by-election, which was occasioned by the death of a male MP, won. This brought the number of women MPs to nineteen (19) out of 200 MPs. In the 2000 election, the number of female contestants jumped from fifty-eight (58) in 1996, to ninety-six (96). Again, eighteen (18) women were elected which was one short of the nineteen (19) in the previous parliament after the 1999 by-election. There were as many as seven by-elections between 2000 and 2004, and in an April 2003 by-election, a female contestant won, following the resignation of a male MP. Here again, this brought the number of female MPs to 19 out of 200 MPs. The number of parliamentary seats increased from 200 to 230 ahead of the 2004 elections. In all, there were 101 women contestants in this parliamentary election. Twenty-five (25) female contestants emerged victorious.

In the 2008 election, the number of female contestants reduced from 101 to 96, and the number of female MPs reduced from twenty-five (25) to twenty (20) out of a total number of 230 MPs. This number went down further after a 2009 by-election following the death of a female MP, as the by-election was won by a male contestant. Ahead of the 2012 elections, the number of parliamentary seats increased from 230 to 275. Out of the 1,332 parliamentary contestants, 133 were women, representing 10.1%. In the 2012 election, the number of female MPs went up from twenty (20) to thirty (30) out of 275 MPs representing 10.91%. In 2016, the number of female MPs increased from thirty (30) in 2012 to thirty-seven (37) out of 275 MPs. In 2020, the number of female MPs increased yet again from thirty-seven (37) in 2016 to forty (40) out of 275 MPs, and in 2024, the number of female MPs increased by one, from forty (40) in 2020 to forty-one (41) out of 276 MPs.

Arguably, the steady increase in the number of female contestants in parliamentary elections from only thirty (30) in 1992 to over a hundred contestants over the years (133 in 2012), the almost equal numbers of runners-up and the even larger numbers of also-rans than winners show the resilience of women, and that with the right constitutional and legislative help, the numbers of women contestants and eventual winners could increase exponentially. On this score, Frempong (2023) has also provided important data on women parliamentary contestants who have contested across electoral epochs, those who have served for more than one term. He noted that of the 40 female MPs in the 8th Parliament, 12 were serving their third terms, and another 12 their second term (Frempong, 2023). This clearly shows the resilience of women when given the opportunity.

Women representation in national elections in comparative perspective

The share of women in Parliaments across Sub-Saharan Africa stood at 27.3% as of January 2024 (IPU, 2024). The IPU (2024) noted that this was a 0.8-percentage-point increase from 12 months prior and it represented the third highest ratio of male-to-women MPs among all regions in the world. Furthermore, of all parliamentary elections that were held in 2023 (elections in 13 countries for 18 chambers), an average of 19.1% of those elected across the Sub-Saharan Africa region were women. The IPU also observed that the highest shares of women elected to Parliament in 2023 in Sub-Saharan Africa were recorded in the upper chambers of Zimbabwe (45%) and Eswatini (43.3%). Nigeria, by contrast, elected the least gender-representative parliament in the region, with women making up only 2.8% of MPs in the upper chamber and 3.9% of MPs in the lower chamber in their election in 2023 (IPU, 2024).

It is notable that following the enactment of a Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act in Sierra Leone to introduce a mandatory 30% quota for women

among election candidates in January 2023, the country proceeded to elect 41 women to its parliament representing 30.4% of directly elected MPs (IPU, 2024; Bauer & Foli, 2024). Benin has similarly elected 28 women representing 25.7% of all MPs following a constitutional amendment and the introduction of a new electoral law in 2019, which added 24 reserved seats for women in the country's parliament (IPU, 2024). This has moved Benin from 169th in the world in terms of women's parliamentary representation to 87th by the end of 2023. Countries, such as Tanzania and Rwanda, have also made use of Proportional Representation (PR) electoral systems, electoral gender quotas, and special seats (Lihiru, 2022). From the foregoing comparison, Ghana's performance is below average in the Sub-Saharan Africa region.

Challenges and obstacles to women representation in national elections

Nadezdha Shvedova (2005), in her work titled "Obstacles to Women's Participation in Parliament", provides a great framework for understanding the challenges and obstacles to the representation of Ghanaian women in national elections. She categorized the obstacles to women's participation in politics (which logically includes women's representation in elections) into three main areas: political factors, socio-economic factors and psychological/ideological factors. Tsikata (2009) has also identified the impact of societal values and perceptions on the position of women in the larger society, the skewed electoral system, and the failure of public policies aimed at addressing issues of the poor representation of women as the key factors to explaining the poor representation of women in Ghana.

It is noteworthy that a female member of Ghana's 8th Parliament identified the following as the top three hindrances to the representation of women in national elections in Ghana:

First, too few women at the top does not give women a picture that it is a normal path for a woman to thrive in politics. Second, the dirty nature of our politics, and third, financial limitations – people feel a woman will not make it if they support them. (Field Interview, July 2025)

In terms of the political factors or obstacles, Shvedova (2005) discusses the prevalence of masculine dominance, which she calls the 'masculine model' of political life, arguing that political life is often organized according to male norms and values and in some cases male lifestyles. She noted that men may be less averse to confrontation and competition instead of collaboration and consensus, making it more conducive for men to take part in active politics rather than their female counterparts. The challenges of masculine dominance in politics were highlighted:

Women often have to overprove themselves above and beyond men to gain acceptance. Men tend to gain acceptance easily in the political space compared to women. This makes it difficult for the women to match men. (Field Interview, July 2025)

Further, the 'lack of party support' faced by women, including limited financial support for their campaigns, women's limited access to political networks, the 'more stringent standards and qualifications applied to women', limited access to well-developed education and leadership training systems, and the nature of the electoral system (Shvedova 2005, p. 35), which is usually unfavorable to women (Lihiru, 2022, Bauer & Foli, 2023) has meant that women candidates are often deprived of the stuff (the motivation, positive attitude and the financial and logistical wherewithal) that make for successfully contesting primary elections in the first place, and becoming candidates in the general elections. When women are properly networked and given financial resource support, a larger percentage of them would run for the primaries and win in national elections (Shvedova, 2005; Bauer & Darkwah, 2021). It was noted that:

The opportunities for raising funding are much more restrictive for women compared to men. Also, people tend to want to support men because of the assumption that men are more likely to succeed in politics. This difficulty in raising funding thus exposes women seeking support to all manner of risks and predators (Field Interview, July 2025)

In addition to the above political obstacles, Shvedova (2005) contends that socio-economic factors, in the form of limited access to education, high rates of illiteracy, the 'feminization of poverty', as well as the dual burden of domestic tasks and professional obligations, also limit women's participation in politics (see Britton, 2005). Women also face unique disadvantages in career progression due to caregiving responsibilities (motherhood penalty) with recent evidence showing that motherhood continues to hinder women's advancement despite various interventions (Correll et al., 2007; Torres et al., 2024). In Ghana, these challenges have been compounded by limited institutional mechanisms such as flexible party structures, access to adequate information and childcare support (Amoah, 2024). The quote below is instructive:

It is difficult to marry family roles and politics, and most women simply do not have the necessary support systems to go beyond the family. (Field Interview, July 2025)

Ideological and psychological factors have also impeded the growth of women in the political arena. These include women's lack of confidence to contest elections, women's perception of politics as a 'dirty' game, gender stereotyping, cultural patterns, and predetermined roles assigned to women and men, as well as the media's portrayal of

women in the mass media, including a dearth of proper coverage of women's issues and political activities. These have contributed to their low representation in politics and in parliaments (Shvedova, 2005, p. 35). According to Shvedova (2005, p. 35), almost all societies across the world are dominated by an ideology of "a woman's place". Women are, therefore, to restrict their activities to 'their place' as defined by society, which is usually understood to mean private life rather than the public sphere of politics. The participation of women in active politics is further hindered by the idea of politics as a dirty game. In a world where politics has tended to connote corruption, intimidation, and organized crime, many women tend to distance themselves from political activities. As many potential women contestants view politics as 'a dirty game', they shy away from it due to the violence and politics of insults that often go with it, as Bauer and Darkwah have shown in their work on women in recent primary elections in Ghana, where key informants (MPs and contestants) lamented the high cost of politics and especially the politics of insults (Shvedova, 2005; Bauer & Darkwah, 2021).

There is the general perception of politics as a dirty game and how people manufacture stories about women politicians. Women naturally like looking beautiful, and they are generally not able to handle the insults, and dirt people throw at them in politics. (Field Interview, July 2025)

Bauer and Darkwah (2021) have also found that even though women have made incremental gains into Parliament since 1993, in the absence of changes to the country's electoral system, or legislative gender-based quotas, gender parity is still several decades away. This is because politics continues to be full of insults and harassment, and the cost of running elections as a candidate continue to remain high, serving as a major deterrent to the active participation of many women. Lamenting the cost of contesting elections as a major cause of women's under-representation in elections, Murray et al. (2023) observed that contesting elections is extremely expensive, and the need for money to run elections excludes many prospective candidates, resulting in the over-representation of wealth within politics.

Ghana's First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) electoral system has itself often been cited as a major obstacle to women contestants. It has been argued that FPTP is strong on accountability but weak on the inclusion of marginalized groups. In this vein, the Proportional Representation (PR) system of elections has been touted by researchers as more amenable to increasing women's representation in national elections and in politics (Lihiru, 2022; Bauer & Darkwah 2021; Shvedova, 2005). Shvedova (2005), for example, has asserted that the PR system resulted in three to four times more elected women in countries with similar political cultures. Electoral systems are important because they "define how votes cast for parties or candidates convert into actual seats, consequently affecting the processes related to candidate nominations, campaigning, voter mobilization, voting, and the actual winning of elections" (Lihiru, 2022, p. 62).

Commenting on some other factors that account for the painfully slow progress in women's representation in Ghana compared to progress elsewhere, it was noted that:

During the drafting of the Affirmative Action Law, we got support for various groups, but the advocacy side is lacking. The number of times women MPs met when I was in Parliament to ensure various targets on women representation were met was zero. The pressures of parliamentary work, attending to constituents, family, self, committee work, Board works, simply pushed out the focus on women issues. It is not for lack of interest, but the pressures are simply too much. (Field Interview, July 2025)

The interviewee further highlighted the pressures she faced as a female MP:

I wake up, and there is a queue waiting for me which I must attend, then head to Parliament, attend to various calls. I was on the Finance and Works and Housing committees. You also have to go to the plenary to participate a little (Field Interview, July 2025).

Adams et al. (2016) have blamed Ghana's slow progress on the country's democratic transition, the absence of legislative and party quotas, and the country's single-member district/plurality (FPTP) system for the under-representation of women in the country's legislature, and by extension in elections. They noted that countries that experienced sharp and dramatic democratic transitions in Sub-Saharan Africa have tended to provide better opportunities for women representation. Further, quotas and reserved seats have typically helped to boost women's presence in parliament; and these are lacking in the Ghanaian context (Adams et al., 2016). Madsen (2019) has also noted that the in-built winner-takes-all bias of FPTP electoral systems, the substantial monetization of politics given the economically disadvantaged position of women, as well as cultural stereotypes against powerful and outspoken women are the main obstacles to the political representation of women in Ghana.

Prospects for increasing women's representation in national elections

Given all the obstacles/challenges outlined above, and yet acknowledging the incremental progress of Ghanaian women representation in elections and politics since independence and especially under the Fourth Republic, we contend that there is the need for strong political will and constitutional and legislative changes, strong political party support, and other strategies aimed at achieving gender parity or near gender parity in election of women and their representation in political decision-making. This need for intentional effort found support in the field interview:

Ghana is nowhere near achieving the goals of women representation. Women are over 50% of Ghana's population, and yet we don't have enough women at

the decision-making table. We don't have a system that would look at the gender perspective on every single policy before implementation – I thought that the Ministry for Gender and Social Protection would do this, but they seem not to be able to do it. We need to be very intentional about women empowerment and representation, but this does not seem to be the case currently. Women would come only when they feel invited to the table – so we need to be intentional about improving their representation. It takes a special kind of woman to match a man in politics and in the corporate world. A level playing field is not enough to bring women on board. Indeed, women need targeted efforts to bring them into the main of national election (Field Interview, July 2025)

A review of Ghana's 1992 Constitution to introduce provisions that specify quota and non-quota measures to ensure gender equality would be a great boost to women representation in Ghana. The Affirmative Action (Gender Equity) Act, 2024 (Act 1121) mandates Government and all institutions (both public and private) to put in place policies and programmes to redress the political, social, economic and educational gender imbalances in Ghana. The Act in its First Schedule establishes a system of progressive targets for women's representation in decision-making positions with a 30% target for 2026 and 50% (gender parity) by 2034. Section 22 of the Act requires political parties to ensure the progressive achievement of these targets in respect of party executive positions, the membership of party committees, and the election of parliamentary candidates; with the Electoral Commission acting as the institution to ensure compliance. Political Parties are also expected to include these targets in their manifestos and Constitutions for elections in respect of safe constituency seats. Notably, a political party that fails to comply with these provisions is merely denied support in kind provided by the Electoral Commission with funds from the Government, and courtesies provided by State Protocol. Moreso, full implementation of Act 1121 depends on secondary legislation (Legislative Instrument), institutional guidelines, budgetary allocations and political or public will.

The paper recommends a clearly defined quota system that reserves a percentage of seats for women, and with much harsher penalties for non-compliance under the country's constitutional architecture as an important step towards boosting the representation of women in national elections. Article 80 of the Rwandan Constitution, for example, provides that at least thirty percent (30%) of elected and appointed Senators must be women. The Constitution is thus categorical in noting that there is the need to build a Rwandan state that is governed by the rule of law, a pluralistic democratic government, equality of all Rwandans and between men and women which is affirmed by women occupying at least thirty percent (30%) of positions in decision-making organs. Given the long-standing imbalances in the representation of women in elections in Ghana, such clearcut affirmative action would mark an important step in addressing the gender

imbalances in the legislative representation of women (Awusi et al., 2023). This will also lead to the active recruitment of women by political parties to have enough qualified candidates to fulfill the quota and bring on board women's voices (Dahlerup, 2005).

Lihiru (2022) has also shown how Rwanda's adoption of the Proportional Representation (PR) system for its lower House of Deputies, along with the 2003 constitutionally-created 30% quota for women in all decision-making bodies and 24 reserved seats for women in its Senate led to its status as a global leader in women's representation, despite the lack of a gender quota in the nomination of candidates and no specific positioning of women in the candidate lists of political parties. In contrast, Tanzania's use of the FPTP system with no gender quotas for candidate nominations has not resulted in many women's nominations and election victories. While admitting that 42% of countries still use the FPTP system, she goes on to argue that there is an increasing shift to the PR system (with 33% of countries using it). In Africa for instance, of the 54 countries, 23 use the FPTP system, eighteen use the PR system, while ten countries use mixed electoral systems (a combination of the FPTP and PR) (Lihiru, 2022). In the long-term, it may be prudent for Ghana to review its electoral system to explore the possibility of changing from a FPTP electoral system to a PR system with its attendant benefits for women's representation and for the quality of democracy.

As has been highlighted in this paper, the cost of contesting elections has been a major cause of women's under-representation in elections across the world. Indeed, even though prospective women candidates are often faced with multi-dimensional gender-based disadvantages, they are often confronted with greater difficulties in raising funds for elections compared to their male counterparts (Murray et al., 2023). This was affirmed during the field interview conducted in this research. It is notable that some gendered electoral financing initiatives such as the discounting of filing fees for women have been pursued as important support for women candidates (Awusi et al., 2023). Both the NDC and the NPP have offered a 50 percent discount to women aspirants in a few elections (Bauer & Darkwah, 2021). However, such support, it has been noted, is woefully inadequate:

We need a system that supports women who have passed the litmus test of a party primary But the real cost of running an election is not in filing fees, but with campaign financing – t-shirts, food, transport, organizing events, etc. It may be important to think of some support in that regard. (Field Interview, July 2025)

Bauer and Darkwah (2021) noted that the discounting of filing fees for female contestants during party primaries, while significant, pale in comparison to the overall cost of waging a campaign for parliament, both during party primaries and the general election. Direct financial assistance from political parties would therefore prove more valuable in enhancing women's chances during competitive elections (Awusi et al., 2023).

There is therefore the need for gender-targeted public funding through the introduction of systems that ensure that funding mechanisms of political parties are tied to provisions on gender.

As established earlier, being a member of Parliament does not only go beyond voting on issues but also comes with several pressures. There is therefore the need for the introduction and formalization of various mentorship and educational programs to help provide women with valuable guidance, support, and access to resources that are essential for navigating the complex political landscape. Such programs can be relevant for helping women gain valuable skills, confidence, and networks that help them overcome barriers and excel in their political careers.

We need to take baby steps and gradually get there. There is also the need for a system that equips and encourages women to rise to the occasion (Field Interview, July 2025).

It has been noted that 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 (Awusi et al., 2023). In addition to formal education, Dahlerup (2005) has highlighted the need for tailored leadership programs and capacity-building initiatives to address the specific challenges faced by women in politics.

There is also the need for the establishment of cross-country learning platforms and opportunities particularly in relation to the positive experiences of countries like Rwanda, Kenya or Namibia in creating and implementing the legal and policy framework for gender equality and women's empowerment.

Given that societal assumptions about women's perceived identity and place in society create barriers to their representation in the legislature (Tsikata, 2009; Shvedova, 2005), there is the need to educate and re-socialize society (Awusi et al., 2023) to ensure the enhanced representation of women in elections and beyond. To bridge gender gaps, the thinking pattern of society must change, and institutions must be set up to ensure this re-socialization (Awusi et al., 2023).

Conclusion

It has been argued that the "historical disenfranchisement of women and persistent gender norms that perceive women as private beings means the underrepresentation of women in elections is a dilemma of democracy" (Lihiru, 2022, p. 61). This article sheds light on the historical trajectories of women representation in Ghana, the obstacles to women representation, and viable empowerment strategies and proposals for tackling the chronic underrepresentation of women in national elections in Ghana. It found that women representation in Ghanaian elections has increased incrementally over the years

since independence but is still way below the threshold of the 30% Beijing Platform and other international recommendations. The finding that an increased number of women continue to be runners-up and also-rans in elections especially under the Fourth Republic showed their resilience in persisting in contesting national elections and their potential for winning if given the right resources and opportunities. The political, socio-economic and sociocultural/psychological obstacles faced by women were also highlighted, noting the importance of deliberate strategies to help women succeed in Parliament and in the primaries. Prospects for increased women representation include bold steps to implement affirmative action policies, gendered electoral financing, build inclusive political party structures, enhance education and training, as well as the re-socialization of society. A review of the 1992 Constitution to include Act 1121 to give it stronger teeth to promote the representation of women in national elections and in political leadership is urgently called for. By ensuring that women's voices are heard, their perspectives are valued, and their leadership is recognized, we can cure this 'dilemma of democracy' and create a more representative and inclusive democracy that benefits Ghanaian society as a whole.

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