

## **WOMEN AND 2008 ELECTIONS-**

*Challenges and opportunities for strengthening Ghana's democracy.*

By: Mawuli Dake\*

This year, over ten million eligible Ghanaian voters will again exercise the power to choose a President and 230 members of Parliament. This election is extremely important in many regards. The electioneering process and its outcome will determine whether we will as a nation continue or disrupt our forward march for democracy- *especially in light of what we have witnessed in Nigeria and Kenya*. It also presents the unique once-in-four-years opportunity for citizens to hold Ghanaian politicians accountable for their actions vis-à-vis their rhetoric and promises. When all is said and done, the elections and the subsequent appointment of Ministers and District Chief Executives will determine our political platform and direction for the next four years, and the interests that are represented over the period. In this light, it matters who participates in this process.

For many citizens, the only and the single most important opportunity they have to meaningfully participate in the democratic process is voting. It is also the primary means for Ghanaians – especially the poor, women and other disadvantaged groups of society – to participate in and influence government policy, priorities and practice. This article highlights how the choices we have in the 2008 elections significantly exclude citizenry majorities like women, and what we can and must do about it.

| It is needless to emphasize that one of the most fundamental principles of democracy is equity: – Even if not equal- fair and reasonable participation and representation of all. This of course is recognized not only in many international and regional instruments like African Union and United Nations declarations, conventions and protocols, but also clearly recognized in our own laws. In this spirit, I hope everyone will concur, that the current situation- given the appalling female-male ratio at local, regional and national levels of political leadership- is neither fair nor equitable by any standard, and definitely not democratic.

It is intriguing how our democratic institutions and processes have been able to craftily and systemically exclude “majorities”. As Ghanaians go to the polls in December, a majority of the electorate will be choosing from candidates who have little in common with them. Like in previous years, Ghanaian women will not see the face of any “sista” among the Presidential candidates on the ballots. Neither will the poor have anyone who identifies with their situation on those ballots. Additionally there will be fewer women to choose from among the parliamentary candidates to represent the people. Every time I think about it I wonder why despite there being more women than men in Ghana, they have never had anything close to majority in political leadership.

An electioneering period however is a fine opportunity for us to make the necessary changes that will strengthen our democratic as well as developmental processes. It is in light of this that I hope that we will reflect and strategize to improve the situation.

| It is already bad enough that none of our political parties have considered a woman as their presidential candidate in the coming election, but I hope no party will participate in the election this December without selecting a woman as their vice President. Women in Ghana have demonstrated that they are more than qualified for the job. There are many Ghanaian women (like Betty Mould Iddrisu) that are as visionary and as charismatic (if not more) as any other political

leader we have had since Kwame Nkrumah. I have encountered many women (like the late Hawa Yakubu) who are powerful and strong. And of course, many (like Joyce Aryee), who are as experienced and able like any man we can find for the job.

### **International context**

Ghana is not alone in the marginalization of women in the political processes. The Millennium Declaration emphasizes the importance of democratic governance to the achievement development and just peace, placing particular stress on the importance of ensuring more inclusive political processes that allow genuine participation by *all citizens*. The Beijing Platform for Action also emphasizes that “women’s equal participation in decision-making is not only a demand for justice or democracy, but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women’s interests to be taken into account...” The Platform accordingly proposed two important strategies to- “*ensure women’s equal access to and full participation in all power structures and decision-making*”; and “*increase women’s capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership*”.

Some countries, before and after Beijing have elected women to their highest office. Margaret Thatcher was elected prime minister of Great Britain three times. Other countries that have elected women presidents include Liberia, Argentina, Iceland, the Philippines, Nicaragua and Ecuador. Today, Finland, Ireland and Chile.

Nevertheless, there rages a global debate, over women’s political participation and representation. This ongoing discourse includes extensive studies and analysis in support of varied theories and approaches that comprise intrinsic and instrumentalist arguments. Some argue for equal participation of women in politics from the human rights perspective, - that women constitute half of the world population and therefore, they should have equal (proportional) representation in our democracies. Instrumentalists on the other hand argue for greater participation of women on the grounds that men and women are different- that women have different approaches, vision and concepts of politics owing to their sex and their gender roles- with the assumption that women will bring a special “women values” to politics. Even without reaching an intellectual consensus on the merits and demerits of various arguments, I believe proponents of varied arguments and theories will agree on this one thing - **women must be included in politics at all levels** (from the high office of President to the local government assemblies).

In Ghana, gender barriers are not taken as seriously as other social ones like religion and ethnicity. The reasons are as pervasive as the air we breathe: because some still fall prey to the stereotype that it is not a women's place to be the Leader of the country; because a few old men have been allowed to dominate the process for so long that society thinks it is their right to do so and exclude everyone else; because of entrenched structural and functional socio-political factors that perpetuate the exclusion of women; and because sometimes women simply choose not to fight for it.

All of this can change. One of my most important observations, as a Campaign Strategist for a black presidential candidate here in the United States is that people are far less prejudiced than we think they are irrespective of race and equally irrespective of gender. This is not to deny the existence of prejudice, but contrarily to popular assumption, I have not come across white or otherwise- who are against having a black or woman president respectively. Likewise, no doubt,

there are men and women in Ghana today who may be against the idea of a woman President, but they are a tiny minority. On one of my recent visits home, I listened to a phone-in program on Joy FM discussing if and which Ghanaian women could be President, the phone lines were jammed with men and women, who did not only think that Ghana was ready for a woman President, but who readily suggested or endorsed capable women for the job. From my recollection, some of the women highly recommended for the job were Betty Mould-Iddrisu, Emma Mitchel, Joyce Aryee and the late Hawa Yakubu.

### **National context**

After emerging from colonialism some 50-plus years ago, Ghana went through an unprecedented history of military coups, counter coups and attempted coups. Ghanaians however resolved to return to constitutional democracy- through the April 28 1992 referendum, followed by subsequent elections including the first and historic democratic change of government effected by a general, free and fair election in 2001- a democracy we have continued to enjoy uninterrupted since then. These achievements are in no doubt, great steps in our forward march for democracy, nevertheless, there still remain serious challenges to this process. Like in too many other countries in the world, the limited and unequal representation of women in political leadership remains one of those challenges, but there also exists opportunities that we can exploit.

A 2003 WISE study - *Dake & Herlands 2003: Data on Women in Leadership in Ghana*, highlighted that in general, women exercise little power in political, economic, and social institutions in Ghana. It particularly highlighted that women are woefully underrepresented in political leadership positions relative to their participation at the middle and bottom levels in society. Even though anecdotal evidence indicates gross inequity in representation of women in leadership positions, the statistics of the survey are shocking. Sample data from the survey is reflected in this table:

	Total	Men	Women	%Women
Ministers of State	62	54	8	13%
Cabinet	20	18	2	10%
Members of Parliament	200	182	18	9%
Supreme Court Justices	10	8	2	20%
Appeal Cour Justices	17	13	4	24%
High Court Justices	41	33	8	20%
Council of State	24	20	4	17%
Ambassadors of Ghana	45	41	4	9%
District Chief Executives	110	103	7	6%
Private Sector - Ghana Club 100	100	98	2	2%

There have been some significant changes since this survey was conducted in 2003 including the appointment of a woman as one of the five Chief Officers of the State- (the appointment of Ghana's current Chief Justice- Ms. Georgina T. Wood). There is also minute less than 2% increase in the number of women in parliament to about 11% compared to 9% in the last house. Nevertheless, this statistics remain a fair quantitative reflection of the inequity in Ghana's political leadership.

These changes have occurred largely due to the untiring efforts of women's rights advocates and women's organizations. Abantu for Development and the Women's Manifesto Coalition for

instance, have not only been aggressively pushing for women's involvement, but have been empowering women to get involved in politics at various levels. I am particularly impressed with the strategic approach to increasing women's representation in local governments. I recently joined one of such efforts to provide campaign-strategy training to women candidates who were vying for seats in the local government elections for the Northern regions of Ghana and was inspired to learn that some of these women now serve in their local assemblies. This shows that things can- and do-change.

## **The Women's Manifesto of Ghana**

The women' manifesto of Ghana is a political document that sets out critical issues of concern to Ghanaian women with clear demands for addressing them. The manifesto covers areas such as Women in Politics, Decision-making and Public Life, Women's Economic Empowerment and Women, Human Rights and the Law among others- clearly laying out the issues and demands that can guide government's efforts.

The manifesto states *“In spite of the pivotal role Ghanaian women play ... they do not occupy key decision-making positions in any of the sectors of economic, political and social life. They are relegated to the background as far as public decision-making is concerned. This is because no concrete policy measures are in place to ensure that the structural inequalities between women and men are taken into account in promoting participation in policy decisions. The document outlines some concrete action demands to address this. Two of these include - “That political parties ensure that by the year 2008, there is at least 50% representation of women in party executive and other decision-making structures’ and “That by the year 2008 at least 50% of appointees to public offices, such as boards of corporations and institutions and the higher echelons of the bureaucracies, are women”*.

## **December 2008 elections**

One of the best things about elections and change of governments is the opportunity it presents to citizens to get involved in processes that affect them and the opportunity it offers for change or for correcting wrongs. 2008 particularly gives Ghanaians an unprecedented opportunity to chose not only between NPP and NDC (both of which they have tried and tested), but if they so wish, opt for a third option- CPP. Exciting.

## **What is to be done?**

As we approach December and the elections, I invite political parties, government, the media and civil society as a whole to consider and take some of the following steps to promote the greater participation of women.

It should begin with ensuring that all the political parties choose woman vice-presidential candidates. This demand is not only for democracy sake, but also for respect and recognition of the capabilities, dignity and rights of Ghanaian women. Additionally, we will be honoring our commitments and obligations as a country under international instruments to promote gender equity. Not to mention the strategic good-will that such step could generate for our country

internationally as we have witnessed on Liberia and in Nigeria (when a woman served as the country's Finance Minister).

It must be noted that that it is ultimately the responsibility of government to spearhead efforts to ensure equal representation. The role of civil society is to compliment this effort. We must however be quick to recognize from the history of such struggles that, change hardly occurs without a strong demand and fight, be it the right to vote, for independence or other basic rights. Frederick Douglas puts it in the best possible way - "...power concedes nothing without demand, it never has and it never will."

Political parties must show greater commitment to the issue of gender equity by deliberately supporting and increasing the number of female candidates especially for the parliamentary elections; ensuring that women play more visible official roles as well as increasing women's representation on committees and in other official party structures. Finally, they must ensure speakers who address all political rallies and platforms include women.

The media remains the most visible platform for highlighting political issues. And I want to urge the Ghanaian media to continue to highlight and make women more visible in this year's elections. Photos from the grassroots should not only show women laying their cloths down for the men to walk over. Their struggles, their views and efforts must be highlighted.

Imperatively, advocates of gender equality in Ghana will need to be aggressive, strategic and unequivocal in their demands on government and the political parties to do the right thing, while at the same time providing the necessary moral, technical and resource support for women candidates. The movement must strategically sustain the momentum generated from the elections processes to ensure that the pressure is brought to bear on post-election appointments. Being mindful of the practical realities that the change we seek will not happen in one election, but will require long term commitment and struggle, we should continue to call upon all Ghanaians of good will to voice and provide their strongest support for women candidates.

We can start with some of these simple steps above. For example, while we could argue that it will be laborious to legislatively award quotas for equal representation, nothing can prevent the President from ensuring gender balance in his appointments. And some unacceptable acts like the President handpicking 103 men against a woeful 6 women as DCE's as revealed in our 2003 survey should not be tolerated by anyone. Let's start from doing the simple things and we will get there.

In conclusion, I want to state that we as a people cannot claim to be committed to the principles and ideals of democracy and the universal values of equality, but deny any groups equal opportunities for involvement. The continuous limited participation of women in our political process is detrimental to the progress of Ghana. For some, it may be too difficult an issue to tackle, yet difficulties must be overcome and not swept under the carpet. There is no question that the full and active participation of women in leadership is a pre-requisite for positive change and development in Ghana and in Africa.

*\*Mawuli Dake is an African human rights and social justice advocate, strategist and consultant. He currently serves as a Campaign Strategist for a US presidential candidate.*