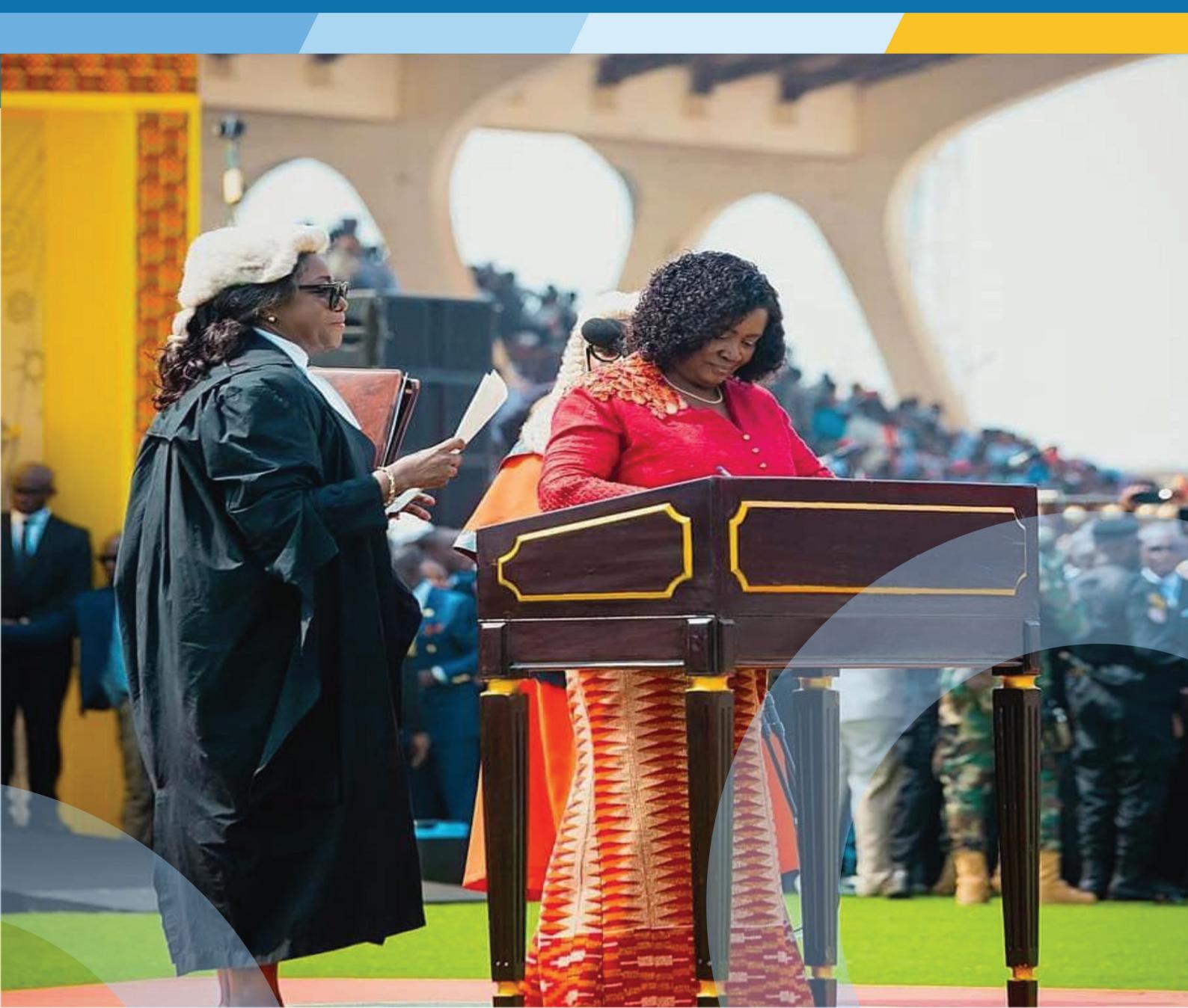


# Long Road To The TOP

## Lessons and Opportunities for Women's Representation in Ghana's Democratic Processes

Afua Lamptey  
Naila Salihu

Occasional Paper 64



**LONG ROAD TO THE TOP: LESSONS AND  
OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION  
IN GHANA'S DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES**

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## Abstract

The coming to office of Ghana's first female Vice President on the ticket of the National Democratic Congress (NDC), 68 years after the country's independence, marks a truly historic occasion but also illustrates the many challenges facing women's political participation and representation in Ghana. Despite the country's commitment to women's empowerment, as evidenced by its accession to global and regional frameworks and the passage of its Affirmative Action bill into law, women remain underrepresented at many levels of society. A cursory scan of Ghana's governance and leadership environment shows that the country is yet to achieve gender parity. Ghana's Parliament has historically recorded low numbers, with current numbers pegged at 14% of the total number of parliamentarians. Again, the current Affirmative Action Law (2024), which seeks to establish a target of 40% women's representation in public sector appointments, took over 10 years from its inception in 2011 to becoming law. Amidst such slow progress in the number of women in politics, the emergence of Professor Naana Jane Opoku-Agyemang as Ghana's first female vice president is a monumental achievement for women's empowerment in Ghana. However, it remains to be seen whether this development will accelerate women's representation within Ghana's democratic processes. Consequently, this paper explores how the prevailing rhetoric on women's empowerment in Ghana can be translated into more tangible outcomes.

**Keywords:** Gender, Patriarchy, Women's Participation, Democracy, Representation

# Introduction

Ghana has made history with its first female vice president, a move that many analysts agree should be a catalyst for improved gender representation in the country. Since its independence in 1957, the state has experimented with various measures to increase women's participation in governance. For example, the 1992 Constitution of Ghana in Article 17 (1) recognises that "All persons shall be equal before the Law," while 17 (2) says "A person shall not be discriminated against on grounds of gender, race, colour, ethnic origin, religion, creed or social or economic status. Consequently, there is official recognition of gender integration in public sector institutions in Ghana. Once more, the 1992 constitution, under the Directive Principles of state policy, specifically article 35(5), prohibits discrimination and prejudice on the grounds of places of origin, ethnic origin, gender or religion, creeds or other beliefs." Beyond the above constitutional guarantees, Ghana is a signatory to most international and regional instruments that advance the rights of women.<sup>1</sup> However, the number of women participating in local, district and national governance and decision-making structures is very low.<sup>2</sup> The UN's Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BFA), often considered a defining framework for gender equality and women's empowerment globally, was adopted by the government of Ghana in 1995. Since the Beijing Declaration, there

has been intense gender activism led mainly by civil society organizations and other women's groups.<sup>3</sup>

Ever since independence, governments have used affirmative action policies and directives to address gender and regional imbalances in access to health, education, work, and politics.<sup>4</sup> In August 2015, the Government of Ghana adopted a National Gender Policy to mainstream gender in the national development processes.<sup>5</sup> The low representation of women in the political space is part of a broader national problem of gender imbalance in Ghanaian society, especially at the upper echelons of the public sector and governance institutions. Another example is the 1998 Cabinet Directive, which was intended to provide guidelines for the systematic and sustained implementation of various aspects of affirmative action to achieve equality of rights and opportunities for women in Ghana. As a set of extraordinary measures adopted by governments to systematically and institutionally address the structural discrimination and collective disadvantages that women suffer as a group, affirmative action in Ghana has produced mixed outcomes. For instance, the country has seen increasing numbers of girls at the basic and tertiary levels of education. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization - UNESCO, enrollment in tertiary education in Ghana

<sup>1</sup>Such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, AU Charter on Peoples and Human Rights; African Union Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa (2003) among others. The country is also a signatory and ratified in 1986 the UN Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), 1979.

<sup>2</sup>For example, in 2019, fewer than 4% of candidates in district-level elections were women. See Otchere, V. (2024). Breaking Barriers: Women's Leadership in Ghana's Local Governance. GIZ. Available at <https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/142380.html>

<sup>3</sup>For instance, civil society organizations and women's groups such as Abantu for Development, WILDAF-Ghana, the Ark Foundation, and the Network for Women's Rights in Ghana

(NETRIGHT) play a critical role in advocating for women's rights, influencing policy reforms, and raising public awareness on issues ranging from gender-based violence to women's political participation and economic empowerment.

<sup>4</sup> Tsikata, D. (2009). *Affirmative Action and the Prospects for Gender Equality in Ghanaian Politics*, Accra: Abantu for Development and Friedrich Egbert Foundation.

<sup>5</sup> Government of Ghana.net (2015). Gov't approves national gender policy. Available at [www.ghananet.gov.gh/index.../1822-govt-approves-national-gender-policy](http://www.ghananet.gov.gh/index.../1822-govt-approves-national-gender-policy)

was at 20% for men in 2020 versus 18% for women in 2023.<sup>6</sup> However, the country has been less effective in improving women's representation in public life and politics. As noted earlier, the Affirmative Action bill was passed in 2024, following years of advocacy to provide legally mandated systems and policies to ensure women's equal participation in the public sector.<sup>7</sup> On the one hand, therefore, is the rhetoric of gender parity; on the other, the state of play in Ghana.

Against above background, this paper examines what opportunities exist for women's political participation and representation in light of the elevation of Prof. Naana Jane Opoku-Agyemang. The paper analyses speeches and policy documents of the two main political parties in Ghana as well as other relevant gender policies and larger literature on women's representation in Ghana. Following this introduction, the second section of the paper situates the discussion within the theoretical framework of patriarchy to explain women's political participation in Ghana. In the third section, we trace the history of women's leadership roles in politics in the Fourth Republic. This is followed by an analysis of the potential impact of Prof. Naana Jane Opoku-Agyemang on women's Political Participation in section four of the paper. In section five, the paper concludes and offers some recommendations.

## Patriarchy and women's political participation in Ghana

<sup>6</sup> UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Available at [databrowser UIS.unesco.org/resources](https://databrowser UIS.unesco.org/resources)

<sup>7</sup> Information Service Department,(2017). Stakeholders Meet to Review Affirmative Action Bill. Available at <http://www.ghanagov.gh/index.php/media-center/news/>

<sup>8</sup> Lerner, G. (1986). *Women and history*. New York: Oxford University Press. (pp. 154-68).

<sup>9</sup> Walby, S. (1989). Theorising patriarchy. *Sociology*, 23(2), 213-234.

<sup>10</sup> Engels, F. (2001). *The origin of the family, private property and the state*. London: Wellred Books.

<sup>11</sup> De Beauvoir, S. (1949). The Second Sex. Introduction: Woman as Other. 1-12. Available at <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/ethics/de-beauvoir/2nd-sex/introduction.htm>

The paper foregrounds the analysis within the broader context of patriarchy and women's engagement in Ghana's politics, enabling a more nuanced understanding and appreciation of this historic event. In its strictest sense, patriarchy refers to a system rooted in Greek and Roman law, where the male head of the household exercised absolute legal and economic authority over both female and male dependents within the family.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, patriarchy represents a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, subjugate and exploit women.<sup>9</sup>

Existing scholarship examines patriarchy as a system that economically excludes women,<sup>10</sup> institutionalizes their subordination to men<sup>11</sup>, and reinforces gender inequalities.<sup>12</sup> It also highlights how patriarchy assigns gender roles based on the sexual division of labor.<sup>13</sup> While the concept of patriarchy within the context of African societies and cultures is acknowledged mainly, African scholars also contest the Western assumptions of patriarchy by recognizing women's historical leadership roles and resilience in resisting oppression.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, in Africa, women are often argued to have had agency and led historic movements.

This is further expanded by Amadiume, who argues that African societies had diverse gender systems that were far more flexible than Western norms, calling for a re-examination of African gender history while critiquing colonialism's role in distorting African gender relations.<sup>15</sup> Notwithstanding the above, and as noted by Bruey, patriarchy and male chauvinism

<sup>12</sup> Stimpson, C. R., Shulman, A. K., Millett, K., & Millett, K. (1991). Sexual Politics: Twenty Years Later. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 19 (3/4), 30-40.

<sup>13</sup> Firestone, S. (2015). *The dialectic of sex: The case for feminist revolution*. New York: Verso Books.

<sup>14</sup> Minna, S. (2024). A Historical Overview of African Feminist Strands. Retrieved from: <https://houseofafricanfeminisms.org/A-Historical-Overview-of-African-Feminist-Strands>. See also Oyéwùmí, O. (1997). *The invention of women: Making an African sense of western gender discourses*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>15</sup> Amadiume, I. (2015). *Male daughters, female husbands: Gender and sex in an African society*. London: Zed Books Ltd.

are deeply intertwined concepts that extend from the family unit to broader societal structure<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, patriarchy and gender dissect pre-colonial and post-independence issues related to male dominance, power and control over the female body in the legal, socio-cultural and political contexts.<sup>17</sup>

In Ghana, male dominance is pervasive and evident at all levels of political power and governance.<sup>18</sup> This gives credence to Enloe's argument that political institutions are designed to maintain male dominance, even in democracies that claim to support gender equality.<sup>19</sup> Regardless of an increase in the number of women elected or appointed, the underlying power structures, policy-making processes, and political culture remain male-dominated. Enloe further asserts that electoral systems, political parties, and legislative processes are designed around male networks, which creates significant barriers for women to access and exercise power effectively.<sup>20</sup> She illustrates that though many countries have introduced gender quotas to increase women's representation in politics, these measures often do not challenge the underlying structures of patriarchy. Instead, they sometimes create an illusion of progress while maintaining male-dominated decision-making.<sup>21</sup> This is clearly evident in the Ghana case, where, despite the rhetoric of gender parity, women's representation and opportunities to contribute to decision-making processes remain low, as indicated earlier by the number of female parliamentarians.

Again, in commenting on patriarchy, Saini explores its roots and its role in shaping human societies throughout history, delving

into the social, cultural, and scientific factors that have contributed to the systemic inequality between men and women.<sup>22</sup> Saini observes that patriarchy was not an inherent feature of early human societies but rather a social construct that evolved as human civilization progressed.<sup>23</sup> She also discusses how patriarchal systems historically excluded women from holding political power or participating in decision-making processes, and explores the development of political structures that were overwhelmingly male-dominated, reflecting a broader societal belief that men were more suited to leadership roles and that women were confined to the private sphere of home and family.<sup>24</sup> This exclusion from political power limited women's ability to influence laws, policies, and governance structures, which in turn perpetuated gender inequality.

In effect, patriarchy can be understood as an institutionalized system that demands not only coherent policies and their practical implementation to dismantle, but also a gradual transformation of centuries of conditioned thinking, ingrained biases, and stereotypes that have unjustly privileged one sex over the other based on biology. In this sense, Ghanaian women in patriarchal societies are faced with systemic barriers to education, cultural, social, economic and political participation, which makes the coming into office of the first female vice president of Ghana more historic. We argue that this could serve as a launchpad for the government to accelerate gender-parity efforts in the country.

<sup>16</sup> Bruey, V. F. eds (2021). Introduction. *Patriarchy and Gender in Africa*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books

<sup>17</sup> ibid

<sup>18</sup> Asekere, G. (2020). Women participation in sub-national level politics in Ghana's Fourth Republic. *Asian Research Journal of Arts & Social Sciences*, 12(3), 44-58.

<sup>19</sup> Enloe, C. (2017). *The big push: Exposing and challenging the persistence of patriarchy*. Oakland: University of California Press.

<sup>20</sup> ibid

<sup>21</sup> ibid

<sup>22</sup> Saini, A. (2023). *The patriarchs: the origins of inequality*. Boston: Beacon Press.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

# History of women's leadership roles in politics in the Fourth Republic

Data from the 2020 Population and Housing Census shows that women account for more than half of Ghana's population (50.7%)<sup>25</sup>. Yet, despite their demographic majority and their acknowledged potential and contributions to governance, female representation in government and many public spaces, including political parties, remains limited.<sup>26</sup> Ghana has appointed some women to top-level government positions, marking symbolic milestones. For instance, Georgina Theodora Wood was made the first female Chief Justice in 2007, similarly Joyce Adeline Bamford-Addo was elected as the first female Speaker of Parliament in 2009. Other women have also held positions such as Attorney-General and Chair of the Electoral Commission. While these above signals some progress and may give the impression of strides in gender equality in politics, they often reflect more symbolic breakthroughs rather than deeper structural changes in political representation. Similarly, the appearance of women as both presidential and vice-presidential candidates, while a good example, may not be sufficient proof that gender issues receive any primary consideration in Ghanaian politics.<sup>27</sup> Notably, most political parties in the country make a show of highlighting their

commitment to gender issues in general and women's concerns in particular in their manifestos.<sup>28</sup> However, there have been female presidential candidates in previous elections, such as Brigitte Dzogbenuku of the Progressive People's Party (PPP) and Nana Konadu Agyeman-Rawlings of the National Democratic Party (NDP).<sup>29</sup> The latter was the wife of former President Jerry John Rawlings and served as the first lady for nearly twenty years. She also led the 31st December Women's Movement (DWM), which played a crucial role in mobilizing women for the 1992 and 1996 elections. It impacted political representation and organization, economic concerns and social and family issues<sup>30</sup>. Additionally, she guided Ghana's participation at the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, 1995, marking an important step in legitimizing and promoting women's rights in Ghana<sup>31</sup>. Though not without its critics<sup>32</sup>, this highlights the significant influence women can achieve when they are represented. Again two more female presidential candidates - Madam Akua Donkor<sup>33</sup> (Ghana Freedom Party) and Nana Frimpomaa Kumakuma of the Convention People's Party (CPP) were represented on the ballot in 2024. Other candidates, in addition to the NDC, had female running mates - Elizabeth Sam of the Liberal Party of Ghana (LPG) and Maryam Esaka Kriesie of the New Force (an independent political movement). Although women have run for president

<sup>25</sup> Ghana Statistical Service. (2021). *2021 Population and Housing census: Provisional results*. <https://census2021.statsghana.gov.gh>

<sup>26</sup> Azinim, M. & Musah, H. (2023). Under-representation of Women in Leadership in Ghana: Action needed to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Accra: UNDP

<sup>27</sup> Gyekye-Jandoh, M.A.A. (2021). Gender in Ghanaian Politics: A Brief Analysis. Available at <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/gender-ghanaian-politics-brief-analysis/>

<sup>27</sup> Madsen, D. H., Aning, K., & Hallberg Adu, K. (2020). *A step forward but no guarantee of gender friendly policies: female candidates spark hope in the 2020 Ghanaian elections*. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrika institutet.

<sup>28</sup> Allah-Mensah, B. (2005). *Women in Politics and Public Life in Ghana*. Accra: Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation.

<sup>29</sup> The former run as the presidential candidate for the

Progressive People's Party in the 2020 general election, while the latter contested the presidency as the flagbearer of the National Democratic Party in the 2016 and 2020 elections.

<sup>30</sup> Davis, C. P., & Antwi-Boasiako, K. B. (2022). Nana Konadu Agyeman-Rawlings and the 31st December Women's Movement. In *Jerry John Rawlings: Leadership and Legacy: A Pan-African Perspective* (pp. 183-196). Cham: Springer International Publishing

<sup>31</sup> ibid

<sup>32</sup> It is important to note that the 31st DWM has been criticized in several ways including its close ties with the Provisional National Defense Council (PNDC) and National Democratic Congress (NDC) governments, recruiting particular groups of women, and its overpowering of other women's organizations.

<sup>33</sup> She died a few weeks to the elections

and vice president, they have had very little chance of winning based on the ticket on which they were running. It has been observed that, for women to be elected, they have to join the contest where the ‘power lies’ – in the New Patriotic Party (NPP) or the National Democratic Congress (NDC), thus reinforcing the duopoly.<sup>34</sup>

The two main political parties have had the power to nominate women as either presidential or vice-presidential candidates, but they have toyed with the idea.<sup>35</sup> In 2020, the leading opposition presidential candidate, John Mahama of the NDC, chose a female running mate, Prof. Naana Jane Opoku-Agyemang. Her nomination was met with mixed reactions. But it inevitably raised hopes for greater gender inclusiveness. This shifted the election dynamics from a presidential contest between two ‘big men’ to a focus on gender in politics.<sup>36</sup> Even though the NDC did not win the 2020 presidential election, she was re-nominated in April 2024 by John Mahama. Her nomination on both occasions was met with strong support from women’s rights groups, civil society, and many ordinary citizens, though it also sparked debate among political opponents and commentators.<sup>37</sup> For example, three women groups<sup>38</sup> and activists<sup>39</sup> in their congratulatory messages, highlighted its importance for gender equality.<sup>40</sup> On the other hand some comments were noted from political opponents who questioned her general suitability for the position which was swiftly met with condemnation by

women political leaders<sup>41</sup>. The NDC’s 2024 electoral victory was marked by the historic assumption of office by Ghana’s first female vice president. Will her elevation be merely symbolic or does it have the potential to challenge gendered assumptions and expand opportunities for women in politics? We argue that there is huge potential and momentum to accelerate gender parity with this event.

## Lessons and opportunities of Prof Naana Jane Opoku-Agyemang on women’s political participation in Ghana

Prof. Naana Jane Opoku-Agyemang has been a torchbearer, breaking many ‘glass ceilings’ even before entering politics. She is an accomplished educationist who has risen to senior positions, including serving as the first female vice chancellor of the University of Cape Coast (2008-2012).<sup>42</sup> Her stint in politics began in 2013, when she was appointed Minister of Education by then-President John Mahama. Following her inauguration on January 7th 2025, Ghana’s first female vice president is primarily seen as a ground-breaking achievement for gender representation in Ghanaian politics. But what are the implications and opportunities for women’s political participation in Ghana’s democratic processes, particularly under the NDC-led Government?

<sup>34</sup> Madsen, et al. (2020). Op. cit.

<sup>35</sup> In the run up to the elections there are often rumors of names of females being considered these have included names of parliamentarians and former ministers. Yet these have remained just that, rumors until recently.

<sup>36</sup> Madsen, et al (2020).op. cit

<sup>38</sup> There are the Network for Women’s Rights in Ghana, the Domestic Violence Coalition and the Women’s Manifesto Coalition.

<sup>39</sup> Salia, K. (2024). Renomination of Prof. Opoku-Agyemang: Historic, encouraging for gender equality — Gender advocates Graphiconline. Available at <https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/politics/ghana-news-renomination-of-prof-opoku-agyemang-historic-encouraging-for-gender-equality-gender-advocates>

<sup>40</sup> See Ghana News Agency (2020). Women’s rights

organisations salute Prof Naana Opoku-Agyemang. Available at <https://www.myjoyonline.com/womens-rights-organisations-salute-prof-naana-opoku-agyemang>

<sup>41</sup> Myjoyonline (2024). Dzifa Gomashie criticises Afenyo-Markin’s comment on Prof Opoku-Agyemang as culturally inappropriate. Available at <https://www.myjoyonline.com/dzifa-gomashie-criticises-afenyo-markins-comment-on-prof-opoku-agyemang-as-culturally-inappropriate>. See also Adomonline (2024). NDC female MPs slam Wontumi for attacking Prof. Opoku Agyemang. Available at <https://www.adomonline.com/ndc-female-mps-slams-wontumi-for-attacking-prof-opoku-agyemang>

<sup>42</sup> GovofGhana (2025). About the Vice President. Available at <https://presidency.gov.gh/profile-nana>

In the prelude to the NDC manifesto, the then incoming running mate promised a new brand of public service that offers a trusted hand to the vulnerable, particularly women and youth and creates a new Ghana for the coming generations.<sup>43</sup> While this is laudable, the rhetoric of a new Ghana has been promised once too often with little to show for it in terms of gender parity.

Since 1992, issues of gender, equality, and inclusion have entered the national and regional development policy discourse, yet have received limited resource support and development programming.<sup>44</sup> For example, the marginalization of women in Ghana persists despite legislative and constitutional provisions established to secure and protect women's rights and inclusion.<sup>45</sup> This is reflected in some global reports, such as the 2023 inter-parliamentary report, which ranked Ghana 147 out of 193 countries in terms of gender parity.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, Ghana was ranked 119 out of 146 countries in the 2024 global gender gap report, signifying that the country is still way below minimum standards for gender equality.<sup>47</sup>

Female representation in Parliament in Ghana's Fourth Republic (1992-date) poses a rather interesting case study. As shown in Table 1 below, out of the 200 members of the Fourth Republic's first parliament, 16 were women. In the second and third Parliaments<sup>48</sup>, respectively,

this number rose to 18 and 19 women. Furthermore, just 25 and 20 of the 230 Members of Parliament (MPs) were female in 2004 and 2008, respectively. In the year 2012, 133 women participated in Ghana's legislative elections. 30 of these women (10.9% of the 276 MPs) were elected to office. In the 2016 legislative elections, this percentage marginally rose to 13.1%.<sup>49</sup> Female representation in Parliament is among the lowest globally, with the 2020 general elections recording just 40 female MPs (14.5%) compared to 235 male MPs (85.4%).<sup>50</sup> This compares with 61.25% in Rwanda and 46.06% in Senegal.<sup>51</sup> Further, only 15.7% of women hold ministerial positions, and at the local assembly level, fewer than 5% are representatives.<sup>52</sup>

The number of women elected at the District level has also steadily declined in recent years, from 478 in 2006 to just 234 in 2019, recent figures show the trend of underrepresentation with a marginal improvement of 4.1% at 259 elected females.<sup>53</sup> At the parliamentary level, in 2024, only 41 women were elected to the 276-seat parliament, 32 from the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and 9 from the New Patriotic Party (NPP). The table below paints a rather dismal picture of the incremental progress of women in Parliament, which is in sharp contrast to the narrative of gender parity and female representation in Ghana. Against this backdrop, the election of Ghana's first

<sup>43</sup> NDC Manifesto (2024) Resetting Ghana, Jobs, Accountability, Prosperity.

<sup>44</sup> Tsikata, D. (2009). Gender, Land and Labour Relations and Livelihoods in Sub-saharan Africa in The Era of Economic Liberalisation: Towards a Research Agenda, in Feminist Africa. *Land, Labour and Gendered Livelihoods* 12: 11–30.

<sup>45</sup> Sossou, M. A. (2006). The Meaning of Gender Equality in Ghana: Women's Perceptions of the Issues of Gender Equality: Implications for Social Work Education and Practice in Ghana. *Women in Welfare Education*, 8, 41–54.

<sup>46</sup> Inter Parliamentary Union, (2024). Women in parliament in 2023 The year in review. Available at: <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2024-03/women-in-parliament-2023>

<sup>47</sup> World Economic Forum (2024) Global Gender Gap Report. Available at: <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2024/in-full/benchmarking-gender-gaps-2024-2e5f5cd886/>

<sup>48</sup> Since Ghana's return to multiparty democracy in 1992, the country has held 9 successive presidential and parliamentary elections every four years. A new parliament is usually

inaugurated per law in the year following the election.

<sup>49</sup> Gyekye-Jandoh, M.A.A. (2021). op. cit Madsen, et al, (2020). op. cit

<sup>50</sup> Madsen, et al, (2020). op. cit

<sup>51</sup> Africa Barometer (2024). Women's Political Participation. Available at: <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/2024-07/womens-political-participation-africa-barometer-2024.pdf>

<sup>52</sup> Bukari, S. (2024). Women empowerment in Ghana, 2024 Manifesto provisions of NDC and NPP. Available at [https://www.myjoyonline.com/women-empowerment-in-ghana-2024-manifesto-provisions-of-ndc-and-npp/#google\\_vignette](https://www.myjoyonline.com/women-empowerment-in-ghana-2024-manifesto-provisions-of-ndc-and-npp/#google_vignette)

<sup>53</sup> Frimpong, J. (2023). Monitoring of the 2023 local government elections in selected electoral areas in Ghana. Available at [https://bri360.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Report\\_Monitoring-of-Local-Govt-Elections-in-selected-districts-in-Ghana\\_16th-Jan.-24.pdf](https://bri360.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Report_Monitoring-of-Local-Govt-Elections-in-selected-districts-in-Ghana_16th-Jan.-24.pdf)

EJS Centre (2024). Women leaders can transform the political landscape in Ghana 2024 general election. Available at: <https://ejscenter.org/women-leaders-can-transform-the-political-landscape-in-ghana-2024-general-elections/>

female vice president has generated considerable optimism for faster progress toward gender parity, despite the prevailing unfavourable dynamics.

Women Elected to Parliament, Ghana, 1992–2024

| Election year | Number women MPs | Total number MPs | Women MPs% | Women candidates% |
|---------------|------------------|------------------|------------|-------------------|
| 1992          | 16               | 200              | 8.0%       | 5.2%              |
| 1996          | 18               | 200              | 9.0        | 7.3               |
| 2000          | 19               | 200              | 9.5        | 8.7               |
| 2004          | 25               | 230              | 10.9       | 10.9              |
| 2008          | 20               | 230              | 8.7        | 9.5               |
| 2012          | 30               | 275              | 10.9       | 10.0              |
| 2016          | 36               | 275              | 13.1       | 11.7              |
| 2020          | 40               | 275              | 14.5       | 13.8              |
| 2024          | 41               | 276              | 14.8       | 12.8              |

Source: [Bauer and Darkwah 2024, p. 279](#).

**Table 1.**

With a population of 34 million, 50.7% of whom are women, these numbers indicate that very few women participate in decision-making processes in the country. Though policy reform and affirmative action has expanded education for females, it has not necessarily translated into proportional political representation or led to them overcoming entrenched obstacles for electoral success.<sup>54</sup> During the 2024 manifesto launch, the NDC presidential candidate John Mahama intoned that an NDC-led government would place Ghana's women at the centre of national development and governance and that women would lead at the highest levels of politics, would be economically empowered, and have access to the education and health care they needed to thrive<sup>55</sup>. Overall, the manifesto recognized the critical role women play in Ghanaian society. In this sense, the NDC hopes to promote gender parity at the decision-making process level by implementing some policies, such as the Affirmative Action law.<sup>56</sup> This includes addressing

barriers that continue to militate against women's empowerment. The NDC has also pledged to establish a gender equity committee and resource it to ensure effective exercise of its mandate and accountability.

While the commitments and intentions are commendable, Ghana's experience with women's empowerment across all levels of society is mixed at best, and women's political participation remains a work in progress; more efforts are needed to address systemic inequalities and ensure greater representation. It is also worth noting that during his previous term as president (2012-2016), Mahama appointed the most female cabinet ministers in Ghana's history – six out of 19.<sup>57</sup> However, this figure has dropped to 2 out of 19 in 2025. Again, as at October, 2025, just about 5 in 29 commissioned envoys (ambassadors) are female<sup>58</sup>. This casts doubt on his rhetoric of gender parity, despite his previous record. Additionally, his first set of temporal appointments, such as the security coordination committee, had no females. While it is early days yet, one would have hoped that with the attention given to gender empowerment, it would feature strongly in his first actions.

In recent years, global discussions about gender equality have gained momentum, with many nations emphasizing the importance of empowering women as leaders, policymakers, and agents of change.<sup>59</sup> The focus has shifted beyond merely increasing female representation to addressing the underlying systemic challenges that restrict women's full

<sup>54</sup> Azinim, M., & Musah, H. (2023). Under-representation of women in leadership in Ghana: Action needed to achieve the sustainable development goals. Accra: United Nations Development Programme.

<sup>55</sup> Baah, E (2024). NDC launches women's manifesto: Party will implement Affirmative Action law – Mahama. Available at <https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/general-news/ghana-news-ndc-launches-womens-manifesto-party-will-implement-affirmative-action-law-mahama>

<sup>56</sup> The affirmative action bill was passed by parliament in July 30, 2024, and assented to by the president on September 19,

2024.

<sup>57</sup> Bauer, G. and Darkwa, A. K (2024). Ghana's election system keeps women out of parliament. How to change that. *The Conversations*, December 11. Available at <https://theconversation.com/ghanas-election-system-keeps-women-out-of-parliament-how-to-change-that-245187>

<sup>58</sup> GovofGh (2025) Eleven more envoys commissioned. Available at <https://presidency.gov.gh/eleven-more-envoys-commissioned>

<sup>59</sup> World Economic Forum (2024). Global Gender Gap Report.

participation in governance. These challenges include ingrained cultural norms, discriminatory practices, and unequal access to essential resources and opportunities.<sup>60</sup> A UN Women report discloses that with only six years left to achieve gender parity by 2030, the world is failing women and girls.<sup>61</sup> The report highlights active resistance to gender equality and chronic underinvestment as key factors in slow progress and, in some cases, reversals of gains already made.<sup>62</sup> This further speaks to underlying patriarchal systems that continue to impinge on women's empowerment in societies.

In Ghana, a cross-section of civil society actors has called on political parties to allocate quotas for women and ensure they have a fair shot at parliamentary representation.<sup>63</sup> In 2015, the New Patriotic Party (NPP) attempted to introduce quotas in its parliamentary primaries by reserving specific "safe seats" for female candidates to enhance women's representation. However, the proposal provoked strong resistance from male Members of Parliament, many of whom feared losing their positions and even threatened to contest as independents.<sup>64</sup> Consequently, the NPP abandoned the plan, retreating from what could have been a landmark reform for advancing gender inclusion in Ghanaian politics. To date, no political party has been able to institute a quota system.

Moreover, for women in Ghana, the path to political equity is steep and riddled with challenges. Discrimination, intimidation, lack of resources, gender-based violence, and insufficient support from political parties continue to obstruct the full participation of Ghanaian women at the highest levels of political life.<sup>65</sup> Issues of patriarchy reinforce these alluded to earlier, which is pervasive in Ghanaian culture and traditionally casts men as leaders and women as subservient. Some analysts have suggested women are dissuaded from standing for Parliament by the exorbitant 'cost of politics', humiliating 'politics of insult' and keen appreciation of Parliament's limitations.<sup>66</sup> Women in politics often endure verbal abuse, derogatory labels, and social backlash, which not only discourages participation but also undermines their credibility in the political sphere.<sup>67</sup> For example, campaigns are frequently marred by character assassinations targeting female candidates, with critics labelling them as "aggressive" or "unfeminine" for aspiring to leadership.<sup>68</sup> These often tend to undermine the political message by focusing on tangential issues stigmatizing cultural tropes. Other studies show that the media rarely portrays women in democratic governance as competent actors with meaningful societal impact. Instead, their appearance, family responsibilities, parental roles, or marital status are emphasized, producing a narrow and stereotyped public representation that

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> UN Women (2024). The 11 biggest hurdles for women's equality by 2030. Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/feature-story/2023/09/the-11-biggest-hurdles-for-womens-equality-by-2030>

<sup>62</sup> The Gender Snapshot (2024). Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals. Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/progress-on-the-sustainable-development-goals-the-gender-snapshot-2023-en.pdf>

<sup>63</sup> For instance, the Abantu for development group and Affirmative Action coalition have continued to push for gender quotas within political party structures to balance the gender disparities in Ghana's political arena.

<sup>64</sup> CDS Africa (2021) Obstacles to Gender balance in Ghana's Parliament: The Affirmative Action Bill in Perspective. Available at <https://www.cdsafrica.org/obstacles-to-gender-balance-in-ghanas-parliament-the-affirmative-action-bill-in-perspective>

<sup>65</sup> EJSCentre (2024). Women leaders can transform the political landscape in Ghana 2024 general election. Available at: <https://ejscenter.org/women-leaders-can-transform-the-political-landscape-in-ghana-2024-general-elections/>

<sup>66</sup> Bauer, G., & Darkwah, A. K. (2020). We would rather be leaders than parliamentarians: women and political office in Ghana. *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 3(1), 101-119. Available at from <https://doi.org/10.1332/251510819X1569835118598> (Accessed on March 12, 2025)

<sup>67</sup> Azumah G. (2024). Understanding the Affirmative Action Bill's relevance; Gender representation in Ghana's political landscape. Available at: <https://univers.ug.edu.gh/gloria-azumah-writes-understanding-the-affirmative-action-bills-relevance-gender-representation-in-ghanas-political-landscape/>

<sup>68</sup> Ibid

constrains perceptions of their leadership potential<sup>69</sup>.

Against the background of the Affirmative Action Act and in tandem with the 2015 National Gender Policy, which was incidentally passed under Mahama's first term, there are sufficient legal and normative frameworks for women's empowerment to take off. Is Ghana now about to see positive changes in addressing the inequalities faced by women? The Affirmative action law aims at promoting gender equality and women's empowerment by addressing systemic barriers that have hindered women in Ghanaian society. It seeks to increase women's active participation in public life from 30% to 50% by 2030. The law also prohibits gender-based stereotyping, verbal attacks, intimidation, and hate speech against employees, with penalties for violations.<sup>70</sup>

In the 2024 general elections, 118 women contested for parliamentary seats, showing a notable increase in female participation. This included a mix of candidates from major parties such as the NPP and NDC, as well as smaller parties and independent candidates. Despite this rise in candidates, only a fraction of the overall 276 seats are held by women. As stated above, 40 women served in the 2020 Parliament, but only 29 of them secured nominations to run again in 2024.<sup>71</sup> Apart from the quota system, women also need funds to stand for political office. In this vein, the NDC's manifesto promise to establish a women's development bank may hold promise, but it offers no specific measures for women in politics. In her acceptance speech, as Vice President-Elect, Naana Jane Opoku-Agyemang stated that:

"My nomination has many, many implications... It means all of us are on board. The victory is for all of us, but especially for our daughters, for our youth, for our women... I know this is a big responsibility... My job was to open the door, and it doesn't end there. Actually, that is where the work begins."<sup>72</sup>

She has promised to hold the door open to empower others. What does this really mean for women in Ghana? The practice on the ground appears different because, so far, men have been holding the door. Will this historic change be the watershed moment for women in Ghanaian politics and leadership?. Trends in Ghana indicate that electorates do not out rightly discriminate against women during voting, and that the gender of a candidate is not a significant factor that is considered.<sup>73</sup> This also means that the low representation of women in Ghanaian politics is more likely a product of the low number of women running for office, and not of voter discrimination.<sup>74</sup>

With her own individual track record as the country's first female running mate of the NDC, and her previous achievements as an academic, a lot of optimism abounds for gender parity. However, there are real challenges with being a Vice President to an overly powerful president. The 1992 Constitution grants excessive powers to the President with little or no powers to the Vice President. Successive Vice Presidents have tended to remain in the shadow of their powerful bosses. Being a woman poses additional challenges for the Vice President, including the risk of being sidelined by party leaders and persons close to the president. It is yet to be seen how Prof. Naana Jane Opoku-

<sup>69</sup> Asare, E. N. A., & Agomor, K. S. (2023). Women's Representation in Media in Ghana's Democratic Governance. *Social Sciences*, 12(3), 116-125.

<sup>70</sup> Republic of Ghana (2024). Affirmative Action Law.

<sup>71</sup> Badu-Agyei Bertha (2024). Vote for women contesting in your constituencies – women's groups appeal to electorate. Available at: <https://gna.org.gh/2024/11/vote-for-women->

[contesting-in-your-constituencies-women-groups-appeal-to-electorate/](#)

<sup>72</sup> GHOne TV (2024). I Will Hold The Door Open For Others I Vice President-Elect Speaks. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4vijT5B5nU>

<sup>73</sup> Gyekye-Jandoh (2021). op.cit.

<sup>74</sup> ibid

Agyemang successfully navigates the political hurdles to make a mark as vice president.

Besides, despite successive political turnovers, Ghana's democratic system appears dominated by a small group of elites who are perceived by many Ghanaians to be using the state to enrich their networks rather than to serve the public interest.<sup>75</sup> While research supporting the negative effect of corruption on women's representation has grown weaker over the last forty years, the causal impact of increased women's representation on reducing corruption has remained relatively stable.<sup>76</sup> Therefore, as argued by Esarey et al., corruption networks might be less effective now than they once were at protecting their operations by excluding women from public office, given increased women's representation worldwide.<sup>77</sup> This suggests that women's presence in government can stabilize institutions and drive change, creating opportunities for deeper democratic gains through gender equity. Yet, it is still too early to judge whether President Mahama and Vice President Prof. Naana Jane Opoku-Agyemang will fulfil their promise of "resetting" the nation.

What is evident, however, is that the NDC-led government holds a unique opportunity to advance gender mainstreaming, particularly through the enforcement of minimum quotas on gender parity in Ghana. With her rich academic background, there

are also opportunities to build cross-sectoral networks of academics, CSOs, media, and policymakers, among others, to form strategic coalitions that will push gender issues more effectively. Again, CSOs have proved that, through their advocacy, they can contribute to more open spaces for female representation and participation in Ghana's democratic processes. Essentially, Ghana has to learn from countries such as Rwanda, which have successfully implemented gender quotas, increased women's representation, and brought gender issues into the mainstream of their political spaces. However, as noted by Sossou, the full political participation of women in Ghana's sociopolitical development is not just an issue of affirmative action and the implementation of quota systems.<sup>78</sup> It is a social justice and human rights issue that requires social transformation and change in the attitudes, institutional and cultural structures of the whole society.<sup>79</sup> Notwithstanding the promise of affirmative action policies, it is equally important to be mindful of the tension between individual merit and social justice.<sup>80</sup> Principally, challenges related to implementation, enforcement, and backlash against affirmative action policies should be acknowledged and addressed to ensure their long-term effectiveness.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Yerkes, S. and Hogan, E. (2024). Ghana's Presidential Contest Shows Why Democracy Requires More Than Well-Run Elections. Available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2024/12/ghana-election-democracy-challenges-lessons?lang=en>

<sup>76</sup> Esarey, J., & Dalton, M. (2024). The changing relationship between gender and corruption1. In *Handbook on Gender and Corruption in Democracies* (pp. 125-136). Edward Elgar Publishing.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid

<sup>78</sup> Sossou, M. A. (2011). We do not enjoy equal political rights:

Ghanaian women's perceptions on political participation in Ghana. *Sage Open*, 1(1), 2158244011410715. Available at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2158244011410715>

<sup>79</sup> ibid

<sup>80</sup> Sommer, U., & Asal, V. (2019). Political and legal antecedents of affirmative action: a comparative framework. *Journal of Public Policy*, 39 (2), 359-391.

<sup>81</sup> Awusi, M., Addae, D., & Kwapong, O. A. T. F. (2023). Tackling the legislative underrepresentation of women in Ghana: Empowerment strategies for broader gender parity. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 8(1), 100717.

## Conclusion

Ghana has sufficient experience to chart a course towards gender equity, and the election of its first female vice president should act as a catalyst for a fairer and more balanced evaluation of gender parity within Ghana's democratic processes. As one of the first countries in sub-Saharan Africa to attain independence, the country should do more to accelerate gender parity. The inauguration of its first female Vice President presents an epochal development in Ghana's political dispensation. Prof. Naana Jane Opoku-Agyemang continues to break the glass ceiling in both her professional and political careers. After 68 years, the case for women's empowerment has been long and arduous, and it is time Ghanaian policymakers move beyond rhetoric and give women a meaningful place at the top, free of tokenism. Nonetheless, if Ghana's languid attempts at gender parity are anything to go by, the rhetoric of gender parity may yet persist long before any meaningful shifts in women's representation in Ghana's democratic processes. Finally, the new government in Ghana has the momentum and opportunity to improve women's participation and representation in Ghana's democratic processes. Beyond tokenism, the office of the Vice President should be empowered to play key roles in governance.

Further, Vice President Naana Jane Opoku-Agyemang must be supported (and form strategic coalitions) with resources (both technical and human) to pursue her agenda towards the advancement of Ghanaian women. A well-structured gender mainstreaming implementation plan must deliberately cultivate strong male allies to help overcome potential challenges and avoid the common pitfalls that often undermine implementation.

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