



KOFI ANNAN INTERNATIONAL PEACEKEEPING TRAINING CENTER

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**Beyond Policy Commitments: Bridging Cultural Norms and Structural Barriers to Gender Equality**

[ Portia Danlugu ]

**Abstract**

This brief examines the gap between gender equality commitments and lived realities in Ghana. Despite progress, persistent cultural, economic, and leadership barriers continue to limit women’s empowerment. It calls for integrated, coordinated action to translate policy into meaningful change.

**Introduction**

Every year on 8 March, the world marks International Women’s Day. A moment to assess progress toward gender equality and recognize the achievements, resilience, and leadership of women across all sectors. The occasion provides a platform for governments, institutions, and advocacy groups to highlight gains, including policy reforms, improved gender parity indicators, and initiatives aimed at empowering women.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, it serves as

a space for reflection on persistent gaps, structural barriers, and the collective effort required to sustain meaningful progress. This year’s theme, “Give to Gain,” emphasizes collaboration and shared responsibility, underscoring the idea that advancing gender equality benefits society as a whole.

In line with this, the Women, Youth, Peace and Security Institute (WYPSI) at the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC) organized a one-day seminar titled “Investing in



<sup>1</sup>Cin, M. (2026). International Women’s Day: A Tribute to Gender Equality from the JHDC. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 1-6

*Gender Equality for a More Inclusive and Safer Ghana for All.*” The event brought together students, government representatives, development partners, and civil society actors to exchange perspectives and strengthen collective action. Discussions highlighted a central challenge: the persistent gap between policy commitments and lived realities. While Ghana has made notable progress in expanding women’s access to education, economic opportunities, and political participation, structural and cultural barriers continue to limit full inclusion.

This policy brief draws on insights from the seminar, emphasizing that legal frameworks and institutional reforms alone are insufficient. Entrenched social norms, unequal power dynamics, and limited economic opportunities continue to constrain women’s agency. Advancing gender equality therefore requires integrated, context-sensitive approaches that address both formal systems and underlying social structures. Strengthening women’s participation in decision-making, expanding access to resources, and challenging discriminatory norms are essential steps toward achieving inclusive development, social justice, and sustainable peace.

## Gender Stereotypes and Cultural Norms: Understanding the Ghanaian Context

Ghana, like many countries in Sub Saharan Africa, continues to grapple with persistent gender inequalities despite notable progress in policy development and institutional reforms. With a population estimate of nearly 35.8 million<sup>2</sup> as of 2021, women constitute approximately 50.7% (about 15 million people) yet the country’s Gender Development Index (0.933)<sup>3</sup> still reflects significant disparities in health, education, and economic empowerment. These gaps are reinforced by deep rooted cultural norms, unequal power relations, and structural barriers that shape the daily experiences of women and girls. As a result, even with improvements in access to education, maternal health, and political participation, many women continue to face limited economic opportunities, underrepresentation in leadership, and social expectations that constrain their autonomy.<sup>4</sup> Addressing these challenges requires

not only strong policy frameworks but also sustained efforts to transform the socio cultural environment in which gender equality is lived and negotiated.

One of the most enduring obstacles lies in deeply rooted cultural expectations around gender roles. Across many communities, women are still primarily associated with domestic responsibilities, while men are expected to occupy leadership and economic roles. These assumptions influence behaviour in subtle yet powerful ways. Everyday interactions often reinforce traditional expectations assigning women domestic tasks or discouraging them from pursuing careers perceived as demanding or male dominated. Such attitudes take shape early through socialization within families and communities, where girls may be encouraged to prioritise caregiving while boys are granted greater autonomy and leadership opportunities. Even when schools promote equality, these household dynamics can undermine those messages.<sup>5</sup> Meaningful progress therefore requires cultural transformation alongside policy reform. Public awareness campaigns, community based engagement, and inclusive educational programmes are essential to challenging entrenched stereotypes and reshaping social expectations.

## Education and Opportunity as Drivers of Self Determination for Women and Girls in Ghana

Access to education remains one of the most powerful drivers of self determination for women and girls, and Ghana’s progress in this area is significant. Goal 5 of the sustainable development agenda focuses on the importance of achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Ghana appears to have made a lot of strides through initiatives such as the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) programme and the Free Senior High School policy. UNESCO reports that Ghana has achieved a net primary school enrolment rate of 84.4%,<sup>6</sup> ranking 1st out of 16 West African countries in basic education performance.<sup>7</sup> Ghana also records a literacy rate of 69.8%, the second highest in Africa, far above the regional average of 47%.<sup>8</sup> These gains reflect a strong

<sup>2</sup>GSS (2021). Ghana 2021 Population and Housing Census.

<sup>3</sup>UNDP (2023). Gender Development Index.

<sup>4</sup>Blau, F. D., & Kahn, L. M. (2017). The gender wage gap: Extent, trends, and explanations. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 55(3), 789-865.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.,

<sup>6</sup>United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). (2018). Women in Science. Fact sheet no 51 June 2018 FS/2018/SC/51. 2018.

<sup>7</sup>GIPC (2022). Ghana’s Education Sector Report.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.,

foundation for expanding opportunity and enhancing the agency of women and girls. Nevertheless, disparities persist, particularly for girls in rural and low income communities who continue to face barriers such as poverty, long travel distances, inadequate school facilities, and cultural expectations that prioritise domestic roles.<sup>9</sup> Early marriage, adolescent pregnancy, and gendered subject choices further restrict long term opportunities, especially in higher return fields like STEM and technical education. While increased educational attainment has improved women's health outcomes, economic participation, and political engagement, education alone does not guarantee equal opportunity.<sup>10</sup> Social norms still shape the careers women pursue and often discourage them from entering male dominated fields such as engineering, science, or political leadership.

Advancing gender equality therefore requires more than expanding enrolment. It demands targeted, context sensitive interventions that address socio cultural norms, ensure safe and supportive learning environments, and empower girls to pursue diverse academic and professional pathways. Educational institutions play a pivotal role by fostering inclusive spaces, promoting mentorship, and nurturing confidence enabling young women to make choices based on ability and aspiration, and strengthening their capacity for self determination<sup>11</sup>

### Economic Empowerment as a Catalyst for Overcoming Gender Stereotypes in Ghana

Economic independence remains a cornerstone of women's empowerment, shaping their autonomy, decision making power, and ability to participate fully in society. Yet many women especially those working in informal sectors or household economies continue to have their labour undervalued or rendered invisible. Limited access to credit, property rights, digital tools, and entrepreneurial opportunities further widens economic disparities. Policies aimed at promoting gender equality must therefore prioritise women's economic empowerment by expanding access to vocational training, entrepreneurship support,

financial literacy, and market relevant skills that enable women to build sustainable livelihoods and contribute meaningfully to national development.<sup>12</sup>

In today's digital economy, social media, content creation, and digital marketing have emerged as powerful new avenues for economic participation, particularly for young women and girls.<sup>13</sup> These platforms offer low barrier entry points for entrepreneurship, allowing women to build personal brands, promote small businesses, access global markets, and monetise creative skills. From online boutiques and food enterprises to digital services such as graphic design, photography, beauty tutorials, and influencer marketing, young women are increasingly using digital spaces to generate income and assert economic agency.<sup>14</sup>

Integrating digital marketing, social media training, and online entrepreneurship into empowerment programmes can significantly expand opportunities for girls, especially those facing traditional barriers to formal employment. When young women are equipped with the skills to navigate digital platforms creating content, managing online businesses, analysing audiences, and leveraging e commerce they gain access to new markets, networks, and forms of visibility. These opportunities not only enhance individual livelihoods but also unlock the productive potential of half the population, driving broader economic growth and innovation.

### Representation and Leadership in Public Institutions

Women's representation in leadership and governance remains a critical dimension of gender equality. Despite progress in some areas, women continue to be underrepresented in political institutions, corporate leadership, and key decision making bodies. This absence narrows the diversity of perspectives that shape public policy and weakens the responsiveness of governance systems to the needs of women and girls. Research consistently shows that inclusive leadership structures produce more equitable

<sup>9</sup>Asitik, A. J. (2023). Drivers of rural entrepreneurship in northern Ghana: A community capitals framework approach. *Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation in Emerging Economies*, 9(2), 270–287.

<sup>10</sup>Odondi, W. (2024). Empowering equality: Advancing quality education in the contemporary global landscape. *Future in Educational Research*, 2(1), 40–48.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.,

<sup>12</sup>Nielsen, N.H. and I. Nyborg. 2020. "The role of social norms in female labor force participation in developing countries." *World Development* 125, 104670.

<sup>13</sup>Amoateng J. (2026). 'Investing in Gender Equality for a More Inclusive and Safer Ghana for All', panel discussion at International Women's Day, KAIPTC-WYPSI Seminar, Accra, Ghana, 11 March 2026.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.,

and effective outcomes. Strengthening women's representation therefore requires both institutional reform and grassroots engagement through leadership development programmes, mentorship initiatives, and political participation campaigns alongside supportive frameworks that dismantle long standing barriers to women's advancement.

The pathway to leadership, however, begins much earlier. Secondary education plays a pivotal role in shaping girls' aspirations, confidence, and leadership skills, particularly through debate clubs, student governance, STEM initiatives, and civic engagement activities.<sup>15</sup> In today's digital era, digital skills, content creation, and online entrepreneurship have also become powerful tools for cultivating leadership and visibility among young women. Social media platforms allow girls to express their voices, build communities, and influence public discourse long before entering formal leadership spaces. Integrating digital literacy, media training, and entrepreneurship education into school curricula equips girls with strategic thinking, communication, innovation, and self advocacy skills competencies that translate directly into leadership. By nurturing talent early and leveraging digital tools to amplify women's voices, Ghana can build a strong pipeline of confident, skilled, and visible women leaders who shape the country's future.

### Engaging Men and Boys as Partners in Gender Equality

Advancing gender equality is not solely a women's issue; it requires the active participation and commitment of men and boys as partners in change. Gender norms shape expectations for all genders, and sustainable progress depends on transforming these attitudes collectively. When boys are encouraged from an early age to share household responsibilities, respect women's leadership, and challenge harmful stereotypes, they grow into men who support equitable relationships at home, in schools, and in workplaces.<sup>16</sup> Educational programmes, youth clubs, and community initiatives that engage boys in conversations about consent, respect, and shared responsibility help dismantle the rigid norms that limit both women's opportunities and men's emotional expression. Importantly, when men are positioned as allies rather

than adversaries, gender equality initiatives gain broader social legitimacy and community buy in. This collaborative approach fosters environments where everyone regardless of gender can thrive, participate fully, and contribute to building more inclusive and just societies.

### Conclusion

The pursuit of gender equality remains complex and ongoing. Despite progress in policy frameworks, persistent cultural norms, economic inequalities, and leadership gaps continue to limit impact. Bridging the gap between commitments and lived realities requires coordinated, multi-level approaches that combine cultural change, economic empowerment, and inclusive governance. Public dialogue is important for surfacing lived experiences and identifying barriers, but it must translate into concrete, accountable action. Governments, institutions, and civil society must work collectively to address structural inequalities. Ultimately, gender equality is not only a policy goal but a fundamental condition for sustainable development and inclusive societies.

### Recommendations

- Governments, ministries of gender and education, and civil society organisations should fund sustained community programmes engaging traditional leaders, men, and boys to challenge stereotypes.
- Ministries of education, local school boards, and NGOs must address barriers to girls' schooling through mentorship, STEM promotion, and leadership opportunities.
- National empowerment agencies, private sector partners, and digital innovation hubs should integrate financial literacy and entrepreneurship training into programmes for women, especially in informal economies.
- Political parties, corporate institutions, and regional bodies must adopt quotas, mentorship pipelines, and leadership development initiatives, while schools embed civic engagement and digital literacy to build a pipeline of future women leaders.

<sup>15</sup>Ford, S. J., dos Santos, R., & dos Santos, R. (2024). Empowering Female High School Students for STEM Futures: Career Exploration and Leadership Development at Scientella. *Education Sciences*, 14(9), 955. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14090955>

<sup>16</sup>Kaufman, M. (2001). Building a movement of men working to end violence against women. *Development* (Rome:Society for International Development), No. 44, issue 3. Available from:

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