

George ASANTE

Women and Education for Accelerated National Development: The Ghanaian Situation

*"If you educate a man,
you educate an individual;
but if you educate a woman,
you educate a whole nation."*

Dr. Kwegyir AGGREY

For a long time, the general notion of Ghanaian society was that the woman's place is in the kitchen. The last few decades, however, have brought a gradual departure from the perceptions that limit the potential of the Ghanaian woman.

AGENTS OF NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The perceptions which most women came to accept as natural, and allowed to hold them back, are gradually being changed due to much education by most women's advocacy groups, such as the Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) and similar organisations.

Women play different roles in any given society, and their situation is determined by several factors like legislation, religion, norms, economic status or class, cultural values, ethnicity and types of productive activities of their country, community and household.

In Thailand for instance, research has showed that Thai women have enjoyed a more active role and better status than women in other developing countries have. This, however, does not free Thai women from discrimination experienced by women around the world.

In Ghana, women constitute 51.4 percent of the total population and form an important human resource base, especially in the urban informal sector. The centrality of women to production and reproduction makes them important agents in accelerated national development.

TO EDUCATE A WHOLE NATION

As Dr. Kwegyir AGGREY, one of the leading Ghanaian scholars, once beautifully put it: "If you educate a man you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman you educate a whole nation."

When it comes to developmental issues, we should look not only at activities that we normally consider as economically relevant, but also at the roles of women as mothers and wives, as these too are of great importance for the national development. Women are often the ones responsible for the care of children, family health, cooking, providing food and other household services. The services they provide to the family and society at large go a long way to help in national development.

NO CONTRIBUTION IS TOO SMALL

In the area of agriculture, for example, women represent more than seventy percent of the workers in the sector. They play a crucial role in food production in Ghana and are largely responsible for the access to food in the urban areas. They engage in subsistence farming, which while giving them little, greatly benefits society. Women are frequently involved in food processing and storage, which saves a lot of perishable food from wastage. Women play an

active part in often insufficiently valued income-generating activities like petty trading, dressmaking, hairdressing and catering, which keep the economy on track.

Unfortunately, society does not recognise that these efforts of women contribute towards national development. However, as the saying goes, "*kitiwaa biara insua*," which means that 'no contribution is too small.'

POOR AND DISADVANTAGED

Women are not left out when it comes to the formal economic sector. They make their mark in the construction industry, banking and finance, politics, administration and health sectors. Let us just think of such extraordinary women as Esther Ocloo, the first female industrialist, or Afua Hesse, the only female paediatric surgeon, or Abena Dolphyne, the first woman professor and the first female pro-vice chancellor of the University of Ghana, as well as many others.

Despite the enormous contributions that women are making to society, they are still the least advantaged of all. They are also considerably poorer and less educated than their male counterparts are. According to the World Bank statistics for the year 2000: "Women in Africa receive less than ten percent of all credit going to small farmers and only one percent of the total credit given to the agricultural sector."

IMPROVEMENT AND ENCOURAGEMENT

For women to become a vital force in accelerating national development, a lot more has to be done to enable them to increase their contribution. For our society to develop, the contribution of more than half of the population can no longer be ignored and relegated to the background.

First and foremost, women have to be encouraged, enabled and empowered to achieve higher levels of education. This will go a long way to increase the participation and output of women in our national development.

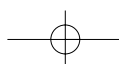
For those who wish to pursue specialist progressive ventures, as in the production of clothing, food processing or in other economic activities, information on how to improve their services and refine their products must be made in a manner that is easy for them to access.

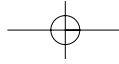
THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

The government quest to empower women in accelerated national development led to the establishment of the Ministry of Women's Affairs whose task is to formulate and implement strategies to elevate women out of their present predicament.

Policy makers need to take into consideration the important role women play in the development of society and work towards safeguarding this contribution, passing laws that protect the life, integrity, respect, health and dignity of women.

In this light, we have to appeal to the government to expedite the passing of laws on Domestic Violence and on Spousal Property Rights. Policy makers also have to work on making sure that legal and policy changes are actually gender-sensitive.





Women also need to be empowered to strengthen their skills in the areas of institution building, of organisation capacity building, in the use of new technologies, banking and management, which will subsequently enable them to transform their activities from small-scale operations to bigger ones.

SERVING AS EACH OTHER'S KEEPERS

The current position of only 9 percent of women involved in decision-making needs large-scale changes. Statistics indicate that, out of the 250 parliamentarians in Ghana only 25 are women.

The president and the cabinet should constantly ensure that the constitutional obligations towards achieving reasonable gender balance in recruitment and appointments to public office are adhered to.

Similarly, the parliament should raise the issue of appointments of women to public office, and ensure that the executive adheres to the obligation to ensure gender balance in appointments to public office.

Furthermore, there should be an excessive media advocacy to portray women in much more positive ways. This will go a long way to influence society for the better. We should encourage each other, serve as each other's keepers, and push the agenda for accelerated national development forward.

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PROGRESS

"We spend our lives trying to bring together in the same instant a ray of sunshine and a free bench"
—Samuel Beckett, Texts for Nothing

Life has taught me to create and manufacture,
To mold a moment into opportunity and result.

Time has taught me to prospect,
To tap each moment for possibility and promise.

Livelihood has taught me to refine,
To transform crude possibility into productivity and progress.

But when I am with you,
I do none of these things—not even consume—

I'm simply the blessed fool
Who has stumbled upon those opposing poles,

Miraculously coexisting in the same moment:
a ray of sunshine and a free bench.

— J. Mueller 2005



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