We would rather be leaders than parliamentarians: women and political office in Ghana

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Ghana, an emerging democracy, lags far behind in women’s representation in Parliament. This article, based on interviews with delegates, aspirants, candidates, Members of Parliament and potential female presidential candidates, suggests that women are dissuaded from standing for Parliament by the exorbitant ‘cost of politics’, humiliating ‘politics of insult’ and keen appreciation of Parliament’s limitations. Still, women may be eager to hold appointive office. Until new democracies are established with electoral systems devoid of costly and insulting electoral politics, and with elected offices in which women may accomplish important goals, women will not exhibit the political ambition to participate in those spaces.

Key words women in Parliament • Ghana • Africa • cost of politics • politics of insult • weak legislatures

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Introduction

Women in Ghana have played major leadership roles in politics since pre-colonial times and were particularly active in the years leading up to and immediately after independence, including enacting one of Africa’s first (short-lived) electoral gender quotas for Parliament in 1960. However, decades of single-party and military rule that relied upon a model of women’s movement mobilisation at the behest of the regime, combined with a single-member district (SMD) electoral system and no electoral gender quota in the post-transition period, have contributed to one of the lowest representations of women in Parliament in Africa (and the world) for Ghana. At the same time, although women’s representation in Parliament is low, there has
been a growing presence of women in cabinets and the courts (with the current and previous Supreme Court Chief Justices being women).

This article seeks to explore why it is that women are so poorly represented in Parliament in Ghana despite their larger presence in the executive and the judiciary, and their active involvement in politics in the colonial and early independence periods. We must begin by acknowledging: that electoral systems are not ‘gender neutral’; that plurality majority electoral systems are particularly ‘woman-unfriendly’ and, we might add, ‘quota-unfriendly’; and that without an electoral gender quota, women face formidable obstacles as they seek to navigate the ‘secret garden of politics’, resulting in many fewer women standing as candidates in plurality majority electoral systems (Dahlerup, 2017: 41–8). In the US, this has been interpreted as women having less political ambition than men. This explanation for why fewer women than men stand for political office has travelled to the Global South via US-based candidate training programmes (Piscopo, forthcoming). We argue, by contrast, that the nature of electoral politics (conditioned by the type of electoral system) and the nature of elected political office since Ghana returned to democratic rule in 1992 – after 25 years of military rule – are unattractive to women. As a result, many women who might otherwise seem to be ideal candidates for Parliament have little interest in seeking elected office. At the same time, they may be keenly interested in serving in other political leadership roles, especially appointed roles. We suggest that these differences may be due to Ghana’s status as an emerging democracy in Africa: electoral politics – especially during the primaries, but also during the general election – is subject to a debilitating politics of insult and reliant upon costly clientelist practices, both of which are gendered. Moreover, the elected office itself and the understanding of what it means to be a Member of Parliament (MP) (in a relatively weak legislature) remain distorted. This finding has broad implications for new democracies with plurality majority electoral systems: until electoral and political systems become more professionalised and more institutionalised, we cannot necessarily expect women to exhibit the political ambition to participate in those spaces.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we suggest that the idea of a gender gap in political ambition may not fully describe the situation in some emerging democracies, particularly in Africa. Second, we provide some background on women in electoral politics and office in Ghana. Third, we turn to the nature of electoral politics and elected office in Ghana, showing how the cost of politics and a politics of insult make electoral politics unattractive to women aspirants and candidates, as does the weakness of the national legislature. Fourth, we reveal many Ghanaian women’s stated preference for an appointed leadership position in government. Finally, we conclude with thoughts about possible ways forward for women’s political leadership in Ghana and across Africa.

The article draws on more than two dozen semi-structured, in-depth interviews gathered over a period of two years, from 2016 to 2018, with a variety of specific informants: male and female aspirants; male and female candidates; male and female political party delegates; and female MPs from four political parties – the National Democratic Congress (NDC), the New Patriotic Party (NPP), the Progressive People’s Party (PPP) and the Convention People’s Party (CPP). Although we interviewed members of all four political parties, in recent years, the latter two parties have been relatively insignificant in national politics and rarely win seats in Parliament. In addition, we conducted a number of interviews with women identified more than...
We would rather be leaders than parliamentarians

once as possible presidential candidates via Ghanaian social media (see Appendix 1). From the interviews, as well as secondary sources, we are able to glean insights into why some Ghanaian women are drawn to electoral politics and many more are not.

A gender gap in political ambition in Africa?

What explains women’s political ambition? Most of the research comes from established democracies, in particular, the US (with its electoral system in which candidates stand in SMDs), and argues that there is a gap in political ambition: that men have it and women do not (Fox and Lawless, 2004: 2014). At the same time, plenty of research also suggests factors that may not only not encourage, but even discourage, women from standing for office, contributing to what may appear to be a gender gap in political ambition. For example, in the US, even ‘highly qualified and politically well-connected women’ are less likely than similarly situated men to be recruited for public office by all types of political actors. Moreover, they are less likely than men to be recruited intensely and less likely to be recruited from multiple sources (Fox and Lawless, 2010: 310). Further, women are least likely to get the kind of encouragement most likely to increase their likelihood of running, namely, from party leaders and elected officials, with strong party organisations in the US having a discouraging effect on potential women candidates (Dittmar, 2015). Similarly, we suggest that there may be other factors at work in emerging democracies (with plurality majority electoral systems), beyond a lack of political ambition, that keep women from seeking elected office in greater numbers – factors having to do with the nature of electoral politics and of elected political office.

Some of those factors include a politics of insult that may be exaggerated and act as a deter to women candidates in some emerging democracies. Indeed, a negative labelling of women aspirants and candidates and the practice of a politics of insult seem nearly ubiquitous in SMD parliamentary elections across the African continent, according to reports from Botswana, Nigeria, Malawi and Uganda, among others (Tamale, 1999; Tripp, 2000; Ibrahim, 2004; Bauer, 2010; Kayuni and Muriaas, 2014; Osori, 2017).1 Tamale (1999: 93) has described that women candidates in Uganda in the late 1990s could expect that once they entered electoral contests, ‘femininity and gender identity assumed center stage’. Women had to endure constant slurs about their marital status and sexuality: ‘A married woman was penalised for neglecting her husband and family. A woman who was “unattached” was put to task to prove that she was not a malaya (prostitute)’ (Tamale, 1999: 93). Osori (2017: 10), in her account of her own run in the 2015 People’s Democratic Party primaries in Nigeria, relates that ‘the narrative around women in politics in Nigeria is nasty and sexist. A common description for women who are involved in politics is “prostitute”, and the stories about female politicians and campaigners being raped and verbally and physically abused were scary’, with the result that many women who could contribute greatly to politics and society in Nigeria chose not to even try – sentiments echoed in our interviews in Ghana.

Another factor may be the clientelist politics that may prevail in some emerging democracies, increasing the cost of standing for political office in SMD electoral systems, as well as influencing what it means to be a legislator. For example, while Barkan (2009: 6–7) has described the four core functions of modern legislatures and their members as to represent, to legislate, to exercise oversight and to provide constituency services, Lindberg (2010: 118) has noted that in developing countries
such as Ghana, there is a fifth function: the ‘provision of private goods in the form of favours, personal assistance, cash handouts and so on’, giving rise to what is typically referred to as clientelism or patronage politics. In poorer countries, the general poverty of the population is largely to blame for this situation, creating a ‘dependency relationship of the electorate with the political class generally, and their elected representative in particular’ (Ninsin, 2016: 118). Of significance to the selection of candidates for Parliament, demands associated with this ‘fifth function’ commence long before an MP even takes office and continue once the MP wins, greatly increasing the cost of standing for political office and holding political office.

Such clientelist or patronage politics is common across Africa, with negative implications for women aspirants and candidates. As Beck (2003: 147) observed years ago in Senegal:

The continued importance of patronage politics in both Senegal and Africa in general suggests the need to look beyond women’s legal rights and election to office to less visible or formalized political activities in order to assess the degree to which women are [or are not] full participants in the political process.2

The continued influence of patronage networks on candidate selection processes, the high costs of standing as aspirants and candidates, and the consequential gendered implications have been documented in Malawi and Zambia, other African countries with SMD electoral systems (Kayuni and Muriaas, 2014, Wang and Muriaas, 2019).

Relatedly, and partially as a consequence, national legislatures are weak across Africa, and the role of MP may be misunderstood and distorted, with potentially negative impacts upon what legislative and policy goals members may accomplish. Despite democratic transitions and the restoration of multiparty politics over the past three decades, ‘legislatures have yet to emerge from the shadows of executive hegemony to which decades of military or presidentialist one-party rule have consigned them’ (Prempeh, 2008: 114). For these reasons – the nature of electoral politics and of elected political office in situations of executive dominance – non-legislative offices may be deemed more valuable by women, with cabinet appointment being a potentially more attractive alternative to election to Parliament. In late 2018, Ethiopia’s Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed transformed his government with the appointment of a gender-parity cabinet, a woman president and a woman Supreme Court chief. The growing number of gender-parity cabinets points to a large difference between executives (cabinets) and legislatures (parliaments): cabinet (and other) ministers are appointed and MPs are elected. As Adams et al (2016: 146–7) empirically demonstrate in their study of executives and legislatures in Africa: ‘women can make progress in the cabinet even when levels of women’s legislative representation are stagnant or declining … [and] factors obstructing women’s entry into the parliament do not necessarily obstruct women’s path to the cabinet’.

Women in electoral politics in Ghana

Ghana uses a SMD electoral system for its unicameral Parliament, with 275 members elected from the same number of constituencies, and no electoral gender quota, in marked contrast to dozens of other African countries that use proportional
Table 1: Women in Parliaments and cabinets, Ghana, 1956–2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Election year</th>
<th>Party/president (PM)</th>
<th>Women/total MPs</th>
<th>Percent women MPs</th>
<th>Women/total cabinet ministers</th>
<th>Percent women cabinet ministers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>CPP/(Nkrumah)</td>
<td>0/104</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1960)</td>
<td>CPP/Nkrumah</td>
<td>(10/114)</td>
<td>(8.8)</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>CPP/Nkrumah</td>
<td>18/198</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>PP/Busia</td>
<td>2/40</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>PNP/Limann</td>
<td>5/140</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>NDC/Rawlings</td>
<td>16/200</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2/19</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>NDC/Rawlings</td>
<td>18/200</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3/19</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>NPP/Kufuor</td>
<td>19/200</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>2/19</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>NPP/Kufuor</td>
<td>25/230</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>2/19</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>NDC/Mills</td>
<td>20/230</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>4/19</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>NDC/Mahama</td>
<td>30/275</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>6/19</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>NPP/Akufo-Addo</td>
<td>36/275</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>4/19</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Military regimes of 1966–69, 1971–79 and 1981–92 are excluded. Cabinet ministers are those appointed at the beginning of a new presidential term, not taking into account subsequent shuffles. There may well be more women ministers in an administration; this table refers to cabinet ministers. There is some discrepancy among sources on some of these numbers (including with: www.ipu.org).

representation electoral systems and/or electoral gender quotas for Parliament and are world leaders in women’s representation in Parliament. Since the transition from decades of military rule in 1992, the percentage of women in Ghana’s Parliament has grown steadily but at a very slow pace (see Table 1). During general elections, women candidates win in proportion to their candidacies, suggesting that Ghanaian voters do not discriminate against women candidates, but that the number of women aspirants and candidates remains exceedingly low.

With Ghana’s woman-unfriendly and quota-unfriendly electoral system, there have historically been few specific calls for affirmative actions to bring more women into Parliament (for recent exceptions, see Awuah, 2017; Oquaye, 2017). Nor has more women in Parliament been a singular priority for women’s organisations, though this changed somewhat in late 2019. In Ghana, it is only during the last two decades that women’s organising has been free of the demands of single-party or military rule — as when President Nkrumah co-opted the National Federation of Gold Coast Women into the ruling CPP in the 1960s or Flight Lt Jerry Rawlings and First Lady Rawlings created the 31st December Women’s Movement as part of a Provisional National Defense Council patronage network in the 1980s (Manuh, 1991; Prah, 2007; Amoah-Boampong, 2018; Sackeyfio-Lenoch, 2018). The most significant women’s organisations to emerge during the ‘rebirth of women’s activism’ from the early 1990s onwards were a series of coalitions, including the Coalition on the Women’s Manifesto for Ghana (2004, 2016) that published The women’s manifesto for Ghana in 2004, with a second addition in 2016. The women’s manifesto resulted from broad-based national discussions among gender activists, policymakers, civil society stakeholders, members of the district assemblies and the political parties and their women’s wings. Amoah-Boampong (2018: 47) observes that more than a decade after the creation of The women’s manifesto (a ‘watershed moment’), many of the demands in the document have been addressed. At the end of the list of accomplishments, Amoah-Boampong (2018: 47–8) notes that one of the practical manifestations of The women’s manifesto has been the appointment of women into high-profile public leadership positions and goes on to name ten such appointments. However, no reference whatsoever is made to women in Parliament except to state, under challenges (Amoah-Boampong, 2018: 48), that ‘on the national level, Ghanaian women remained significantly under-represented at the highest level of political participation’.

Making electoral politics and elected office unattractive

We have identified the (financial) ‘cost of politics’ as one of the major disincentives for female aspirants and candidates for Parliament in Ghana (Bauer and Darkwah, 2019; see also WFD, 2018), with the costs accruing as soon as an individual indicates an interest to stand in a party primary and continuing after one wins the election. As one of our interviewees observed, MPs may well forget about their constituents once they are elected into office; as such, requiring personal assistance from the citizens who elected them to office is one way for citizens to “claim their pound of flesh” while it is still available (Dede, NDC aspirant for the 2012 election and candidate in the 2016 election).
“People have been polluted by all those who hand out money, food and so on”, said Sherifatu, an NDC aspirant in the 2016 election. The ‘social welfare provisioning’ expected of aspirants may include the payment of school fees and medical bills, as well as donations towards weddings and funerals, and often extends beyond the campaign (whether one wins or not). NDC aspirant Dede shared that a voter had named her two children after her knowing that in Ghana, it would mean that Dede would be partly responsible for the welfare of those two children into adulthood. Lindberg (2010: 124) confirms the long-lasting obligations incurred by many MPs in Ghana: ‘The personal assistance/benefits type of accountability relationship is the most common in MPs’ relationships with their constituents, and the one that puts the most pressure on MPs.’

These ‘social welfare’ costs (both before and after elections) are in addition to the costs associated with running primary or general election campaigns, including publicity costs (posters, T-shirts), meeting costs (rental space, refreshments) and transportation and communication costs, with the prices of these services rising during an election year as vendors capitalise on the increased demand. On average, it cost our interviewees who stood in the primary elections for the 2016 election cycle the equivalent of between US $38,000 and $100,000 to vie for their party’s nomination (Bauer and Darkwah, 2019). Moreover, with each election cycle, the cost of politics may rise. The Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD, 2018: 5) notes a 59 per cent increase in the cost of standing between the 2012 and 2016 elections, with most candidates relying heavily on their personal incomes. According to the WFD (2018: 17), those who stand for office in ‘municipal areas’ spend more than those who run in cities or rural areas; the WFD explains this by the fact that municipal areas ‘fall between more developed areas (cities) – that boast a more vibrant economy, better educated residents and are already home to a level of quality social services – and rural areas (districts) – where the cost of living and therefore campaigning is cheaper’. At the end of a campaign season, many candidates, regardless of where they have stood, are “broke” in the words of Yaa (NPP aspirant in 2012 and 2016), or “financially decimated” in the words of Nancy (CPP candidate in 2012).

The cost of politics is gendered in Ghana – and many other places as well. Clientelist or patronage politics makes already costly campaigns even more expensive. Around the world, women have fewer resources – in terms of wealth and assets – and less access to resources than do men. As Oduro et al (2011: 34) note, based on a 2010 household survey in Ghana, ‘women own [only] 30.2 percent of total gross physical wealth’ in the country. On the one hand, this lack of resources places women at a disadvantage relative to men in financing a political campaign. On the other hand, women are also at a disadvantage in seeking access to resources. Fundraising for a campaign is not a simple alternative to depleting one’s own resources, especially for female aspirants and candidates. Sulley, a male NPP candidate in the 2016 election, explained this challenge: when a woman candidate seeks to raise money from a man, there is an assumption from the man, or the perception from others, that the woman may have to provide sexual favours in return for a campaign donation. Indeed, Dede suggested that about 60 per cent of potential male donors to her campaign sought sexual favours in return for a contribution. Nancy also decried the “real threat of sexual harassment” in seeking financial contributions from men. Overall, our female informants perceived the monetised nature of Ghana’s elections as, in principle, unfair and off-putting. Yaa, who stood twice in NPP party primaries for Parliament and
lost both times, explained her disinterest in standing: “I don’t think the system for selecting a parliamentary candidate is fair, so I would not run again.” In discussing the injustice of the system, our female respondents focused not only on their relative lack of funds and relative inability to raise funds, but also on the principle undergirding an election system that relies so heavily on money.

The political parties themselves have recognised the ‘cost of politics’ in Ghana as a problem, and at least one of them attempted to ameliorate the situation in the 2016 election (Ichino and Nathan, 2016). In the primary elections leading up to the 2016 election, the NDC expanded its electoral college on the assumption, among others things, that this would encourage aspirants to sell their message to voters instead of buying the support of delegates because it would be impossible to buy all the votes of an expanded electoral college. However, the majority of our NDC interviewees felt that this strategy had not worked and may rather have exacerbated the situation. Marie, an NDC aspirant in 2016, argued that “even though in the new system, one could not buy votes, the costs of running a campaign were still high”. Yvette, the wife of an NDC candidate and herself an aspirant for the position of women’s organiser, noted that “now instead of providing T-shirts for 600 people, you had to provide them for 6,000”. NDC aspirant in 2016 Kevin concurred: “I think that the fallouts from opening up the electoral system were [far] more negative than positive.”

The WFD (2018: 19) confirms that overall in 2016, NDC candidates spent more on ‘campaigns’ and ‘party workers’ than did NPP candidates, and that both NDC and NPP candidates far outspent candidates from the two smaller parties.

The politics of insult

In addition to the problems posed by the cost of politics, women face other challenges, referred to by one of our respondents, Korkor, a female CPP candidate in 2012 and selectorate in 2016, as the “politics of insult” (Bauer and Darkwah, 2019). Musah and Gariba (2013: 466) have argued that aspersions are likely to be cast on women who run for political office in Ghana, for example, that they may be ‘suspected as flirts and prostitutes’. NDC aspirant Marie noted how people lied about her in all sorts of ways: “the president was her boyfriend”, “she was a prostitute” and on and on. The insults and lies directed at women aspirants and candidates do not only come from opponents; they may even come from one’s own party members, as noted by more than one of our informants.

On top of insults being hurled at women aspirants and candidates, women who choose to run find that their bodies are scrutinised and they are penalised for not conforming to conventional norms about women’s appearance and behaviour. NDC aspirant Marie recounted the policing that women faced: “no dyeing of hair, no painting of nails different colours, no wearing trousers for women aspirants and candidates!” In addition, in a country where marriage and motherhood are prized, being single and/or not having children might be causes for further insults, as Marie and NPP aspirant Yaa discovered. Moreover, the politics of insult can carry over to the halls of Parliament as well. NPP MP Yvonne reported being referred to as “my wife”, “my sister” or “my mother” by male colleagues in Parliament. Indeed, women political appointees may also find themselves the objects of insult and innuendo, as was the case with former Chairperson of the Electoral Commission Charlotte Osei, among others. However, potential innuendo at the time of appointment, in the absence of
costly and insulting campaigns and serving in the weakest branch of government, is unlikely to act as a deterrent to accepting a political appointment for most women.

At the same time, we did not encounter reports of physical violence against women who stand for Parliament in Ghana, in contrast to ‘the troubling rise in reports of assault, intimidation and threat against politically active women’ around the world (Krook, 2018: 673). Rather, our informants, such as NDC aspirant Marie and NPP aspirant Yaa, were more likely to confront what Krook and Restrepo Sanin (2019: 5) describe as psychological violence, namely, violence that ‘inflicts trauma on individuals’ mental state or emotional well-being’.

Weak legislatures and MPs

Another strong disincentive for women considering standing for Parliament in Ghana is a concern about what they will – or more likely will not – be able to do once they get there. For example, the ‘cost of politics’ described earlier can carry over to Parliament, distracting MPs from their real work and seemingly leading to a misunderstanding about what the role of an MP is. Our interviewees noted that the need to raise funds to repay debts incurred during the campaign or to secure funding for the next election cycle diverted the attention of MPs from the real work of legislation, one of their central functions. There is also the problem of patronage politics – legislators’ fifth function, as identified by Lindberg (2010) and mentioned earlier. Civil society activist Eva lamented that much of an MP’s energy is wasted on things that have nothing to do with being an MP: “It is possible to make a difference in Parliament, but MPs have to spend so much time sorting out things that have nothing to do with their mandate; one dare not refuse a constituent [money] or [one] will never hear the end of it.” This then made Eva completely uninterested in vying for elected office. NPP MP Yvonne concurred that much of her time was spent on activities that should be outside the purview of an MP: “people need to be sensitised to understand what an MP does; [instead,] people are constantly at your doorstep wanting things from you”.

Furthermore, fewer women in Parliament means that it is even more difficult to represent women’s interests – something that women MPs in those African countries with large numbers of women MPs have been able to do (Barnes and Burchard, 2013, Bauer, 2019, Muriaas et al, 2016). Not surprisingly, with the low representation of women in Ghana’s Parliament, moving women-friendly laws through Parliament is much more challenging. NPP MP Yvonne explains:

“Unfortunately, when it comes to women-friendly legislation, it hits a snag in the House because we don’t have the critical mass of women or gender-sensitive men to push through those pieces of legislation. So, you are talking about the Affirmative Action Bill, the Property Right of Spouses Bill and Intestate Succession Law Amendment Bill which have all been quarantined more or less, or thrown into Siberia…. We tried but we don’t have the numbers; that is what makes it so critical.”

Another part of the problem, according to NPP MP Yvonne, is that Parliament does not have the respect and power it should have vis-a-vis the other two branches in Ghana. In her words:
“I think that until Parliament recognises or comes into its own and actually performs its constitutional duties the way it should, we will always be treated as the poor cousin of the executive and the judiciary. And it will devalue our democracy; and it has, it is devaluing our democracy too and so Parliament itself needs to pick itself up by its bootstrap!”

As Prempeh (2008) has observed, national legislatures in Africa remain the weakest branch of government despite being more than two decades beyond the political transitions that reinstated them. In Ghana, some years into its political transition, Lindberg and Zhou (2009: 148) found that Parliament was not ‘flourishing’ due to limited resources for the legislature, the weak capacity of the parliamentary service, a high turnover among MPs and demands for constituency services (see also Boafo-Arthur, 2005, Gyampo, 2015). As we learned from NPP MP Yvonne, this can also dampen women’s interest in standing.

In sum, women in Ghana have been deterred from contesting for Parliament not just by the nature of electoral politics (marked by the high cost of politics and an insidious politics of insult), which greatly diminishes the appeal of standing for office, but also by the nature of elected political office. Many Ghanaian women have little incentive to stand for an office (MP) that is poorly understood and generally misused, in a body (Parliament) that is anyway weak and has limited powers vis-a-vis the other branches of government, and in which with so few numbers, they are likely to be able to accomplish very few legislative or other goals.

We would rather be leaders than parliamentarians

There are many reasons why women may not stand for elective office, but may seek appointed office. Indeed, although the current number of women in Parliament in Ghana is low, Ghanaian women have historically held significant leadership positions. The most celebrated of these figures is Nana Yaa Asantewaa, the Queenmother of Ejisu, who is famous for taking on the British during the last Anglo-Asante War in 1900. Other Queenmothers of repute during the pre-colonial period include Adoma Akosua, Akyawaa Oyiakwan, Nana Afua Kobi and Nana Dwaben Serwaa, who performed a variety of important roles, including officiating at religious festivals, presiding over their own courts, guiding councillors in government, leading their citizens out of exile and meeting with foreign dignitaries to sign treaties or discuss the potential for missionary work in their communities (Aidoo, 1985; Manuh, 1988; Boahen, 2000; Brempong, 2000).

During the colonial period, other women of renown included: Mabel Dove Danquah, the first African woman elected to a national legislative body by popular vote (Denzer, 2005, Gadzekpo, 2005); Hannah Cudjoe, party organiser and propaganda secretary, who played a pivotal role in the work that led to Ghana’s independence from the British; and, finally, Evelyn Amarteifio, who created the National Federation of Gold Coast Women in 1953, one of Ghana’s first women’s organisations (Sackeyfio-Lenoch, 2018). Other influential Ghanaian women during the 1950s were Sophia Doku, Margaret Martei, Susanna Al-Hassan and Annie Jiagge – all of whom Sackeyfio-Lenoch (2018: 29) describes as influential in ‘local, regional and transnational dialogues’ about the place of women in the context of nation-building.

However, in contemporary times, the number of women in political office belies the long history of women in leadership positions. Yet, there is no question that in Ghana,
there are more than enough talented and capable women available to be appointed to political office. Adams et al (2016: 158) report that: “In December 2012, immediately after the elections, WiLDAF [Women in Law and Development in Africa] presented a petition to [President] Mahama that included the names of 65 women who could be considered for government posts and called on the parliamentary appointment committee to reject any list of appointments that did not include 40 percent women.” Similarly, Darkwa (2015: 246), in her study of women in Parliament in Ghana, refers to a ‘directory of qualified and available women, ready to participate in the political decision making process’ as a resource for her study, noting further:

    since one of the often cited reasons for the low numbers of appointment of women into key decision making processes had been the unavailability of women to participate in politics, the objective of the study was to obtain and collate information on women who were willing and available to be appointed by government should there be a need.

For a time, leading civil society organisations flush with donor funding sought to convince the main political parties to bring more women into Parliament, as well as to train potential women candidates, according to Joan, the director of one such organisation. However, given the challenges of standing for Parliament and the likelihood of being able to exert little impact once there, some highly accomplished and talented women show a complete disinterest even though friends, family and/or others may have encouraged them. Some women who have stood in primaries and the general election have lost interest now that they have a fuller understanding of the electoral system and elected office. It is true that in Ghana, at least half of ministers must come from Parliament, providing a potential additional incentive to become an MP. However, women ministers may just as easily be appointed from outside Parliament, as was the case with six of seven of John Mahama’s women ministers (Adams et al, 2016).

Sarah, one of the women ministers appointed by President Mahama in 2013 but who was not already an MP, remembers that it never “crossed her mind” to become involved in “mainstream politics” during the time of the 2012 election even though she was a lawyer who did pro bono work for her political party and was from a prominent political family. However, when she was tapped to be minister, “everyone in the world” told her she must take the position, and so she did, despite being pregnant with twins. After the NDC lost the next election in 2016, she was widely counselled to consider standing in the 2020 election but was put off by the cost of running and the way that “people understand their MP”. One is much better placed as a minister than as an MP to get things done, she concludes. That sentiment was echoed by the much younger Rita, who also thought that she would accomplish much more as a minister than an MP, but who may run for Parliament one day after she is a well-established farmer (then she will be appreciated for ‘what she has done’ rather than ‘who she is’).

Deborah, the PPP vice presidential candidate in 2016, assumes that she was asked to join the PPP ticket because she was an activist in civil society and vocal on social media, calling for change in the country. She says that both she and her running mate knew that they would not win the election, but she stood to send a message to other women: “we need to speak up … we cannot leave politics to men … the
country would do so much better with more women in government”. However, too often, she observed, women believe that they would be “wasting their time” in electoral politics. Rather than stand for an election or even hold appointed office, some women show more interest in demonstrating leadership in other ways. Public service work was identified by some as a more alluring option. Afriyie, a university lecturer with a background in public administration, discusses her specific interests:

“I have never considered running for office, but I would take a position in the public service. I have studied public administration and feel like I have something to contribute. An elected political office like president, MP, are ‘front-facing’ positions; I am not interested in that. I am more interested in those positions where I can address the suffering of people because the systems don’t work; so public sector work where one can make a tangible difference, that has more value than a position that is ‘about the optics’. Indeed, I really feel like I can do more from the ground level…. I would be happy to run an agency or do something in the public sector…. [and] there is a lack of faith in Parliament; the current setup is not as effective as it could be.”

Eva, the civil society activist who works in the private sector, shares a similar sentiment: she too would be interested in a “behind the scenes” political position in which she could “get the work done” rather than standing for political office.

What to do?

Are there interventions that can override the cost of standing for political office, the politics of insult and the limitations of being an MP, thus making elected office more attractive? As in the US, recruitment does matter. In Ghana too, political parties act as potentially negative gatekeepers. While party documents may state a modest commitment to more women in Parliament, party policies demonstrate no such commitment beyond reduced filing fees for women aspirants and candidates—a ‘drop in the bucket’ considering overall costs (Bauer and Darkwah, 2019). In Ghana, there is as yet no organisation like EMILY’s List among Democrats in the US with an explicit mandate of supporting and recruiting like-minded women candidates for political office (which has contributed to the significant rise in Democratic women’s presence in the US Congress over the last 30 years). CPP candidate in the 2012 election Nancy even considered forming her own political party as a way of overcoming negative gatekeeping. In addition, whereas women’s movement mobilisation has been critical to the adoption of electoral gender quotas and women’s increased presence in parliaments across Africa (Bauer and Britton, 2006; Bauer, 2019), women’s coalitions in Ghana have not been singularly focused on women in Parliament as they have been on other goals (Amoah-Boampong, 2018).

For example, the women’s movement, under the guidance of the Domestic Violence Coalition, was instrumental in passing (after many years of lobbying) a Domestic Violence Bill in 2007 (Ampofo, 2008). The women’s movement has also fought for many years for the adoption of an Affirmative Action Bill that may contain quota-like provisions for Parliament, which is yet to be adopted. However, the backdrop remains an SMD electoral system for which a reserved or special seat is the ‘best fit’ in terms of quota type and yet these are more likely to be adopted in less democratic, rather than more democratic, polities (Matland, 2006; Laserud and Taphorn, 2007).
However, it is not only political parties or women’s organisations that may recruit or encourage women to stand for Parliament or other political office (Carroll and Sanbonmatsu, 2013). In our interviews, we repeatedly heard what a difference it made for women to be urged to consider a run for political office by family, friends, churches and even, or especially, traditional leaders. Traditional leaders either encouraged some women to stand or took an active role in their campaigns. Even though Dede was emotionally drained from running in the 2012 primaries and averse to standing again, she stood in the 2016 primaries because the chief in her community prevailed upon her to do so. Marie, about whom lots of rumours were spread during her campaign, including that she had defied the chief’s orders not to stand, actually had the chief designate a spokesperson to accompany her on the campaign trail to dispel that particular rumour and show support for her candidacy.

A family history in politics may also make a difference. In a recent study of female presidents and prime ministers around the world from 1960 to 2010, Baturo and Gray (2018) find that although female heads of state are just as qualified as male heads of state, women may need to rely on family networks more than men do as many female leaders tend to acquire resources, support and name recognition through ‘political dynasties’. However, they also find that ‘the importance of such connections attenuates’ when women have had the vote longer and as citizens become more open to women in politics (Baturo and Gray, 2018: 695). In Ghana, where women and men have had the vote for the same amount of time, we found that women from political families (families with members who played an active role in politics or had a strong belief in the importance of holding political office) may well be more likely to enter politics than those whose families eschewed politics. Elizabeth, an NPP MP, acknowledged that she hailed from a long line of politicians going back to one of Ghana’s ‘founding fathers’ – the Big Six. Hanifa, an aspiring future CPP candidate and party leader, revealed that “my mother was a woman’s organiser… I come from a family of politicians, my uncle was staunch CPP; even my step-sisters are politicians.” Indeed, family members, especially fathers, may have shaped daughters’ interest in politics. The most moving of these is the case of Anna, a former NDC MP and former minister, whose father encouraged an interest in politics from a young age and even encouraged her to run for office, only to pass away just as she reached the final decision to stand for Parliament in the 2012 election cycle.

**Conclusion**

We have argued that the cost of politics, the politics of insult and the weakness of the Parliament all coalesce to disincentivise women to stand for Parliament. While these may be factors that disincentivise men as well, we argue that women are more likely to be deterred because these factors are also highly gendered. For example, when women aspirants and candidates seek to raise money for their campaigns, there is a 60 per cent chance that they will be asked for ‘sexual favours’ in return, as we were repeatedly told even by our male informants. This is not a condition that will be extended to men aspirants and candidates. These factors affect women no matter which of the two major political parties they belong to and seek to represent. As we note, political parties have sought to address some of these factors that disadvantage women, but only in an ad hoc or piecemeal way. As everywhere, political parties are the gatekeepers in Ghana as well, and their role in recruiting and selecting women
candidates for Parliament (or not) calls for further research. Additionally, we have contributed one African case to the larger discussion in this special issue of the applicability of the concept of political ambition to cases around the world. Without suggesting that our findings are broadly necessarily generalisable, we anticipate that many patterns will be familiar, at least to other emerging democracies in Africa, especially with the SMD electoral system.

What does the case of Ghana tell us about the salience or versatility of the concept of political ambition? The mostly American literature on women and political ambition presupposes an institutionalised electoral system and effective national legislature in which women are simply reluctant to participate because of a lack of ambition. The case of Ghana suggests a slightly different explanation. Until new democracies with candidate-centred electoral systems are firmly established with systems that work – devoid of costly and insulting electoral politics and with elected political offices in which politically ambitious women may accomplish important goals – we cannot expect women to exhibit the political ambition to participate in those spaces. Addressing the distorted role of the MP and the weakness of the legislature – both of which are challenges that extend beyond Ghana and across the African continent – are formidable tasks. Attempting to control the politics of insult and to reform the cost of standing for political office may be less daunting places to start. Intensive recruitment from a range of actors has made a difference in women standing for elected political office around the world, as has extensive mobilisation and lobbying by women’s organisations. Electoral gender quotas have helped to mitigate the impact of the negative consequences of standing for office in dozens of African countries. Without them, for the foreseeable future, countries like Ghana will likely remain with fewer women willing to consider electoral politics, though noticeably more women interested in appointed office.

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Conflict of interest
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Notes
1 Of these SMD countries, Uganda is the only one with an electoral gender quota (reserved seats); while women may still contend with a politics of insult in constituency-based contests, they are less likely to do so in the women-only district contests.
We would rather be leaders than parliamentarians

Darwin’s (2017) study of local elections in North Aceh, Indonesia, is one of very few to find ‘female power brokers’ able to be active political agents rather than objects of exploitation in the context of clientelist electoral politics.

Creevey (2006: 169) suggested the same for Senegal in the early 2000s: that the National Assembly, perceived merely as ‘an audience for the decrees of the government’, was not an electoral priority for women or women’s organisations, though this changed about a decade later (Telingator and Weeks, 2019).

The Domestic Violence Bill 2007, the establishment of Domestic Violence and Victims Support Units in all ten regions, the Human and Children Trafficking Act 2005, the Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation in 2006, the expansion of regional houses of chiefs to include paramount queen mothers, a National Health Insurance Scheme in 2006, among many others.

In Senegal, by contrast, women’s groups did eventually advocate not only for greater women’s representation in the National Assembly, but also for gender parity, and by 2010, a Gender Parity Law was adopted. A first parity election was held in 2012, bringing 42 per cent women into the Chamber of Deputies (Telingator and Weeks, 2019).

We are aware that in the global women and politics literature, the ‘cost of politics’ is understood more broadly than just the financial or monetary cost of standing for political office. In this article, however, like the WFD (2018), we understand the cost of politics more narrowly as the financial cost of politics.

The names of all of our informants have been changed.

Allah-Mensah and Osei-Afful (2019), in their case study of the adoption of the 2007 Domestic Violence Act in Ghana, show how patronage politics has negatively impacted the quest for gender equity in a slightly different regard.

Female leaders who co-rule with chiefs, although the extent of their co-ruling powers varies across the various ethnic groups in Ghana (for more on Queenmothers in contemporary Ghana, see Stoeltje, 2003; Steegstra, 2009).

The 2016 Women’s manifesto for Ghana calls for a 50 per cent representation of women in appointed offices by 2020 and 30 per cent representation of women in parliament by 2020 (Coalition on the Women’s Manifesto for Ghana, 2016: 35).

References


Bauer, G. (2010) ‘Cows will lead the herd into a precipice’: where are the women MPs in Botswana?, Botswana Notes and Records, 42: 56–70.


Appendix 1: Interviewees cited in this article

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Position at interview</th>
<th>Date of interview</th>
<th>Location in Accra</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dede</td>
<td>Female NDC aspirant in 2012 and candidate in 2016</td>
<td>1 September 2017</td>
<td>Junction Mall, Teshie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>Female former NDC MP and minister</td>
<td>8 August 2017</td>
<td>Cuppa Cappuccino, Airport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yaa</td>
<td>Female NPP aspirant in 2012 and 2016</td>
<td>4 May 2016</td>
<td>Centre for Gender Studies and Advocacy (CEGENSA), University of Ghana (UG)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva</td>
<td>Female civil society activist</td>
<td>27 June 2018</td>
<td>Krua Thai Restaurant, East Legon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>Female CPP candidate in 2012</td>
<td>2 August 2017</td>
<td>Noguchi Memorial Research Institute, UG</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yvonne</td>
<td>Female NPP MP</td>
<td>24 May 2016</td>
<td>Parliament House, Accra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yvette</td>
<td>Female NDC regional women’s organiser candidate in 2014</td>
<td>14 August 2017</td>
<td>Department of Sociology, UG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korkor</td>
<td>Female CPP candidate 2012 and selectorate 2016</td>
<td>2 November 2016</td>
<td>Yiri Lodge, UG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afriyie</td>
<td>Female university lecturer and human resources business owner</td>
<td>2 July 2018</td>
<td>21 Legon Hill, UG</td>
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<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>Female NPP MP</td>
<td>24 May 2016</td>
<td>Parliament House, Accra</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hanifa</td>
<td>Female CPP party leader</td>
<td>15 August 2017</td>
<td>CPP headquarters</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sherifatu</td>
<td>Female NDC aspirant in 2016</td>
<td>19 August 2017</td>
<td>Spintex</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deborah</td>
<td>Female PPP vice presidential candidate in 2016</td>
<td>3 July 2018</td>
<td>University Guest Centre, UG</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>Female NDC aspirant in 2016</td>
<td>22 August 2017</td>
<td>Dansoman</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sulley</td>
<td>Male NPP candidate in 2016</td>
<td>19 May 2016</td>
<td>Department of Political Science, UG</td>
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<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Female former NDC minister</td>
<td>16 June 2018</td>
<td>Webster University, East Legon</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rita</td>
<td>Female administrative assistant</td>
<td>4 July 2018</td>
<td>Tayiba Restaurant, North Legon</td>
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<td>Dzodzi</td>
<td>Female former NDC deputy minister</td>
<td>3 July 2018</td>
<td>Department of Sociology, UG</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>Male NDC aspirant</td>
<td>16 August 2017</td>
<td>Institute of African Studies, UG</td>
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<tr>
<td>Joan</td>
<td>Female civil society organisation director</td>
<td>8 June 2018</td>
<td>Via telephone</td>
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