

**GENDER RELATIONS IN TRADITIONAL ADMINISTRATION:
THE CASE OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN**

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Introduction

This paper seeks to demonstrate the extent to which the male rulers generally regard the female leadership. As the female segment of the population clamour for empowerment, it should start from the natural leaders. If this cannot be achieved, then one should forget about any strong female leadership in the communities, especially rural communities where the concept of natural leadership could be seen as real.

For lack of more suitable way of distinguishing the various traditional areas the author sought to use the language factor (Fig. 1). This is not to show how fragmented the country is, since these languages lend themselves to larger groupings such as Oti-Volta, Grushi etc. within which smaller groups speak dialects which are mutually intelligible to one another. In the context of our subject matter one way of looking at this problem is to divide the country broadly into two major categories, Akan and non-Akan. The Akan forms nearly two thirds of the country's population, while the non-Akan of the South such as the Ewe and the Ga-Adangbe and the non-Akan of the North, that is the Gur speaking groups take up the next one-third.

While the traditional system of governance recognise the female authority in the centralized system of the Akan to a more generalized female authority of the non-Akan of the South, there appears to be a complete lack of female authority among the Northern ethnic groups. This study seeks to address the weaknesses in the female governance of the people in areas where the traditional female authority exists and to bring out the problems the female population faces in areas where there is absolute absence of female leadership. These problems will be discussed in the general context of discrimination against women.

The operational words in the topic itself must be clearly defined. These are: (1) traditional administration, (2) discrimination and (3) female as it is understood in gender. Traditional administration refers to the indigenous system of socio-politico-economic control (all rolled into one) of a given community which hierarchically goes up to form an ethnic group - a state. Therefore, the centralised states are those with ethnically recognised leadership (Busia, 1961; Danquah 1968; Aghin 1985; Abayie Boateng 1993; Meyerowitz 1951). There are other groups whose leadership role is played by the head of the family who controls the socio-economic life

of the people. The only recognised central figure among these people being the priest of the earth-god (the Tindana) whose main concern for the group is their spiritual well-being. In both cases there is a body of recognised code of conduct supervised by either the central political head, in this case known as chief/king or the small-unit family head.

2) The new Webster Dictionary of the English language (1965) defines the term discrimination as "to distinguish with minute distinction". The word minute shows the fine detail of distinguishing role of women as against that of men, with the latter setting up the rules of the game, so to speak. In this context there are certain privileges which the women leaders are denied. In other areas the female species are found to be incapable of taking part in any decision making process not even those pertaining to the welfare of themselves as (women).

3) Females here refers to the biological female as against that of male as against that of male. It is the belief of some traditional men that women have a low capacity of intelligence. They would say openly: "as for a woman what does she know." Some people go to the extent of comparing this human type to a sheep; often they say "women are like sheep". I have gone to this extent to show how the women are regarded in certain circles. It is remarkable to observe such attitude even among those societies which are supposed to have a recognised female leadership such as the Akan¹.

An interplay of these operational terms in the topic sets the tone for the discussion in this paper. What we have to consider is whether it is true that in the decision making processes in the traditional set-up, women are discriminated against. If the answer is in the affirmative, then what forms do the discrimination take? Lastly, how are we going to correct these lapses so as to bring about harmonious balance in gender relations especially after Beijing?

Hypothesis and Methodology

This study seeks to explore new grounds in gender studies, since the subject of female traditional authority in West Africa, especially Ghana, has not been looked at in any detail. A few writers have only cursorily discussed it alongside the general topic of chieftaincy. This study therefore postulates that (a) more confusion in the traditional set up, especially rural Ghana, may be averted if the female traditional authority will be fully recognised by the patriarchy (Abayie Boateng 1992); (b) that the perpetual inferior position of the women of Northern Ghana is the result of the absence of female traditional authority in those areas.

The two hypotheses posed could be explained. (a) The first hypothesis presupposes that there are several confused situations in some traditional areas. This assumption may be true. Now that some individual female traditional leaders are claiming their traditional rights which they think have been usurped by the male leaders there are a lot of confused situations, often leading to loss of human lives, in some areas in Ghana. In such areas the economic and social development often come to a halt. This study would conclude that if there is harmony between the male and the female leadership in a traditional area, there is bound to prevail peace, tran-

quillity and development.

(b) The second hypothesis is claiming that the apparent severe inferior position of the women in those parts of the country is because they do not have traditional representation at the traditional courts of the chiefs, meaning that female issues are discussed by men who do not have the same feelings, as the females. This assumption supports the view that no matter how genuine a male feminist agitator is, his inner feelings cannot be the same as a woman. This means that the female issues, problems, aspirations etc., must be handled by the female leaders themselves, thus confirming an adage that "the one who sleeps near a fire is the only individual who knows how hot the fire is". It means that if the women are given the chance their subservience to the male, which sometimes borders on near slavery and dehumanisation, may stop. The hypothesis does not envisage any social upheaval in those areas with the change, rather harmony based on mutual respect.

The issues involved in the topic are social and to get to their roots one needs to investigate by talking to both men and women. Thus individual and group discussions of the issues involved were used to come out with some facts. Again since this is a social problem which will need a completely changed social status of a big chunk of the population, the researcher had to use participatory and observation methods before he came to those conclusions which are clearly set out in this paper. Social change, except in political revolutions, usually comes about in a gradual evolution. Therefore, the conclusions reached in this essay are expected to take effect in a rather gradual manner.

The Historical Processes of the Female Authority

Rattray (1923) claimed that women in Akan areas (especially Twi speakers) were more important than men. Abayie Boaten (1992) went further to discuss specific incidents of women who founded settlements; today those settlements are firmly in the hands of men, the chiefs and their elders - the patriarchy. With this change of control in the female traditional leadership known as *Ohemaa* - (the mother of a chief) or *Mama* - (the mother of the community) came with "fixed" traditional roles. The patriarchy continued to amend the rules to suit their interests to the general disadvantage of the female leaders.

In the Akan areas where the queenmotherhood has a long history, the male dominated society came to fix the roles of the female leaders (a) As the counsellor of the chief and his elders. She could openly rebuke the chief (b) As the *Obapanyin* (the female head) of the royal clan, it was her duty to ensure that the royal lineage remained intact. This aspect of her role was extremely important since a particular royal lineage remained so long as female progeny existed in the family (Abayie Boaten 1992). This was because when the female progeny of a royal house became extinct that was the end of that lineage. For this reason, deities were often consulted before young women, in the royal houses, were given out into marriage². (The story of the first great king of the Asante Empire was a child bought (*Ntoba*) from The deity Tutu of Akwamu hence his name *Osei Tutu*). (c) It was her duty to control and advise the female population. She

was the custodian of the initiation rites of virgins into adulthood - the nubility rites. (d) Perhaps the most significant role of the Akan queenmother was the part she played during the enstoolment of a chief. As Abayie Boateng (1992) wrote:

It was her singular prerogative to select or nominate a candidate to be made a chief. As the head of the matrilineal group she knew those who had pure royal blood.

In the olden days the Queenmother's nominee usually became the chief. (e) She was obliged to attend all durbars as well as the court of the chief and his elders. At the court if she spoke her word was final³. (Typical example was when in 1900 Yaa Asantewaa a female leader was able to declare war against the British. This war was fought by the men without questioning. (f) In time of war she held the home front and organised the women to pray and keep vigil while the men were away fighting.

These roles obviously put the queenmother under the chief. In other words, the male ruler's power subsumed all other traditional powers. However, in terms of importance she appeared to be second in command. For example, apart from the chief she could declare war (as we have seen), set a prisoner free and suspend proceedings at court.

Over the years the traditional male rulers surrounded themselves with several male courtiers and elders. This made the position of the queenmother inferior in actuality, as she became relegated to the background. Again over the years elderly chiefs have deliberately installed minors as Queenmothers. Until such a person became matured her role as an adviser was very little or non-existent. These minute manoeuvres have contributed in a large measure to weaken the formerly strong position of the queenmother.

Today, her position is so weak that all former roles are virtually non-existent. Her control over the female population such as the custodian of puberty or nubility rites has been taken over by the Christian churches, her advisory role is whittled down to occasional encounters, when a chief may reluctantly consult a queenmother on an issue which by tradition she should be consulted for an advice⁴.

Her most fundamental role as the nominator of a royal to be made a chief is now hedged in some clauses which has weakened that position further. (a) The first clause is that the candidate nominated by the queenmother must be presented to the kingmakers through the Gyaaschene (the chief of the royal household). These are the clan heads who have been elevated to chiefly positions in the community by the chief (ostensibly with the consent of his mother, that is, the queenmother). These clan heads are the elders who help the chief to rule. At the period of enstoolment of a chief they sit as concave of elders to accept and enstool a queenmother's nominee. The first limitation to the power of the queenmother is that she is not a member of this concave. The male leaders always insist that her role is only to nominate a candidate, but not to make a chief.

(b) The other clause which seeks to weaken the queenmother's position is that she has three chances to nominate and introduce a royal to the elders to be made a chief. This clause thus strengthens the position of the elders, since if they are able to reject the nominee of the queenmother for three consecutive times, then they have the option to select and install their own choice from the same royal clan. If a queenmother's choice does not satisfy the kingmakers they are likely to reject her choice three times, after which they could nominate their own likeable candidate and proceed to make him a chief.

Practical Examples of Discriminatory Measures Against the Female Leaders

The advisory role of the queenmother used to be a reality in the olden days; for the men had to physically consult the queenmother on issues which they found difficult to reach consensus. Today, the men consult among themselves in-camera and claim to have seen the old lady. Sometimes such cases could involve females. In such situations, the women are denied access to the process of decision making on issues which affect them in the society. We have to emphasize that this is an unfortunate situation since tradition gives women leaders such powers. What makes the situation worse is the fact that the female leaders have no way of seeking redress to this unfortunate situation.

b) The other development is the traditional discrimination the male leaders exhibit against their female counterparts. Again, this development has undermined the traditional position of the female leaders in that their traditional role of making sure that they have a strong say in the enstoolment of a chief is virtually lost. This is due to the clause which stipulates that the queenmother has three chances to nominate a candidate. Her singular position as the mother of the royal house/clan is weakened when the stool elders/kingmakers arrogate unto themselves the roles of selecting, vetting and enstooling of a chief.

There are several instances where misunderstanding leading to break of the peace has prevailed because the queenmother has ignored the so-called three chances clause and has asserted herself as the rightful owner of the blackstools on which the new chief is supposed to "sit". In some instances a queenmother has kept the blackstool in her custody, thereby denying the new chief access to this sacred object which confirms his position as a chief/traditional ruler.

c) Lastly, today the queenmother has lost her traditional role in the puberty rites of girls. Therefore girls become pregnant these days without any traditional sanctions. This has further weakened the position of the female leaders in the control mechanism of the female segment of the population. While the male leaders have jealously held up their role, little have they done to protect the roles of their female leaders. We consider this development as discriminatory if we accept the fact that it was the female leaders who once held sway over the population.

Female Chiefs

Some men argue that in some communities there are female chiefs in their own rights. This argument is to counter the accusation of discrimination against women leaders. Yet, in some traditional areas such as among the Dagomba and Mamprusi (Fig. 1) there exist stools (stools in the Northern part of Ghana) or chiefships which are reserved for female royal. Also in Akan areas when the male line of a stool became either extinct or highly disputed, a strong queenmother could turn her position into a chief in her own right. Examples are there to be cited: Currently, the paramount chief of Dixcove in Ahanta area in the Western Region is a female. In the early sixties the powerful state of Dwaben in Asante was ruled by Nana Dwaben Serwaa, a female. These examples are given here to differentiate between female chiefship and queenmotherhood. The queenmother is to assist the chief to rule so as to ensure the participation of the women in traditional administration. Therefore, if the position of the queenmother becomes only an object of adornment, then one is right to describe such development as discriminatory.

The Situation in the Northern Traditional Areas

The situation in the Northern Ghana is quite different from the South. In the North there is no female counterpart of a male ruler. However, there is an interesting development of female chiefship among the Mamprusi and the Dagomba (Fig. 1).

In Mamprusi a chief's senior sister, aunt or the most senior woman from the chief's family called Pua-Kpeim acts as the leader of the women. Her roles are: (a) to help during ceremonies when sacrifices are made to the ancestors, (b) she mediates whenever there is a misunderstanding between or among the chiefs wives; (c) she leads the women to prepare food for the funeral rituals.

The paramount chief of Mamprusi has his first wife as the queenmother or the head of the women. It is her duty to take custody of the skin regalia of a deceased divisional chief during the period of enskinment of a new divisional chief. (b) she arranges the order in which the chief's wives routinely spend the night with him.

These women are referred to as queenmothers, yet their positions do not confer on them any authority over the women folk, as it is found among the Southern communities be they Akan or non-Akan. The same situation prevails in the Dagbon area where Ya-Na is the over all ruler. In this area there is an elaborate system of female chiefship; the Gundo-Naa who is usually the biological daughter of Ya-Na is a territorial ruler with full administrative authority. Here she is not a champion of the women in the society, rather she exercises her authority as a chief. There is yet another set of female chiefships in Dagbon, this time involving the wives of the incumbent Ya-Na. The senior wife up to the sixth wife are all enskined as chiefs. They do not have territorial jurisdiction except the senior wife with the title Gbangzaling.

There is an interesting political role which these chiefs play at Ya-Na's court. They serve as matrons-at-court to a number of villages. In other words, they look after the interests of the chiefs of those villages which are assigned to them, at Ya-Na's court. If any of such sub-chiefs happened to be in trouble at the Ya-Na's court it was the duty of the designated matron-at-court who would plead on his behalf. The female chieftship does enhance the positions of such personalities but for this particular discussion the questions are how far are these female chiefs effective as points of mobilisation of women? Do they have a say on issues which affect the women population? Why have these female chiefs failed to influence the stoppage of female circumcision in the North? Why is it that an uncircumcised woman is regarded as a misfit in the society? These questions show the hopeless situation which these female chiefs find themselves as far as their influence on the society is concerned.

If this is the case of those societies where there are female chieftship, what about those areas where the history of even the male chieftship is quite recent. In these areas chieftaincy is as recent as colonialism which was established at the turn of this century. Generally the women in the North have no say in their own affairs. By tradition they are completely marginalised while the respect they are expected to give to their husbands or their male counterparts has no resemblance in the South.

Further Examples of Discrimination Against Women

This discussion so far has clearly shown the discriminatory measures the male leaders have instituted for the female population. Where there exists female traditional authority their powers have gradually over the years been taken away from them; while in those societies which do not have female traditional leadership, the men are not prepared to allow such female power to exist. Even after Beijing no attempt has been made to carry the processes of empowerment of women to the North as it is being done in the South. The male leaders do not see this as a problem. That is the position.

Attempts at Redressing the Problem of Discrimination Against Women in Ghana

Since 1983 female leaders have awoken to face the challenge of discrimination against them as far as governance is concerned. This is demonstrated by the formation of Queenmothers' Associations. The first one was formed in Cape Coast by the Queenmothers who came from outside Cape Coast (in central Region of Ghana) but resided in the Municipality. It started as a welfare club with a strong slant towards the protection of their traditional rights. (Abyie Boston 1992). The founder talked about the frustrations which she encountered before the group she called Queenmothers' Council, could be inaugurated at Cape Coast in 1983. Today, all Regions in Southern Ghana, namely Greater Accra, Eastern, Central, Western, Volta, Ashanti and Brong Ahafo have Queenmother's Associations. These associations in their current forms are being championed by the First Lady, Nana Konadu Agyeman Rawlings as a way of conscientising and empowering the female leaders. However, because of her obvious compro-

misled position as a political figure, people see these developments as politically motivated. Whatever the argument for or against such developments we want to make it clear that the female traditional leaders need some kind of motivated leadership to be able to come together to fight for their rights. It is this role which the first Lady is providing.

In this direction, one significant move is the agitation to have representation at the National House of Chiefs, the highest concave of chiefs in the country. Obviously, this move is bound to face a stiff opposition from the males, who claim that as Chiefs they represent all citizens, including the female leaders. Besides, they claim if the females join them and deliberate with them then the women would be destroying their traditional role as advisors. In order to make the women part of decision making process, it has been suggested that a separate fora should be created for them starting from the Regional level to the National, to be known as: (a) Regional Houses of Queenmothers and National House of Queenmothers. In these capacities the female leaders can make their voices heard (Abayie Boateng 1995). Whether the women's move to be part of decision making process succeeds or not depends entirely on the men; some of whom have sworn never to support such a move.

While the fight for recognition by the Southern Queenmother is going on, one is seen among them to be fighting for the establishment of similar structures among the Northern communities. The women in the North are seen to be left to their fate. If the call, total liberation of female leadership from the yoke of male dominated society can be meaningful, there is the need to tackle the question of female leadership in the North. In this direction, the champion of women's emancipation, the First Lady seems to stay clear from it. It is seen to be politically suicidal to make such an attempt which will destroy the support her husband enjoys in the North. My question is: Do we have to sacrifice the welfare of these unfortunate folks on the altar of political expediency? Yes so intractable is the position of discrimination against women in the North. Whatever move that had been made was by a lone voice at a seminar organised by Chieftaincy Secretariat (Abayie Boateng 1995).^{6*} (The proceedings of the seminar are yet to be published). The general public has not been brought into the picture to see how marginalized female authority is. Some chiefs argue that their queenmothers attend and participate in the deliberations of the traditional courts. To take a cue from the Kumasi Traditional Council, the seat of the Monarch of Asante, there is no space for the queenmothers. The Asantehemaa only appear in person when there is a special occasion, such as swearing ceremonies of principal chiefs (she has her own court). Therefore, there is the need to address the issue of marginalization of these women who are supposed to rule with the men. At least, they should be empowered to play their traditional roles, which will be a sound beginning to restore the status quo.

Post Beijing Situation : The Way Forward

It was after the women's assembly in Beijing that the last two of the Regional Associations of Queenmothers were inaugurated by the First Lady. This made the full compliments of the associations for the female traditional leaders in Southern part of the country.

The Southern queenmothers have made their stand clear that they want representation at the National House of Chiefs. They are seeking a small number of representation at that forum for the time being; perhaps one person to represent each of the seven Associations. They have discounted the effectiveness of such a small number of representation at such a powerful house of males.

If political pressure is brought to bear on the members of the House, the female leaders may be admitted, but one would have to wait to see how effective they would be. While we are pessimistic about their influence in the National House of Chief, we have a counter suggestion and that is the establishment of National House of Queenmothers. This house would then be empowered to advise on issues from the House of Chiefs before final decisions are taken. On issues concerning females, the female house should have the final say. Such a development would confirm the females' traditional status as advisors.

We want to say here that if there is the goodwill to remove the act of discrimination of female leaders entirely from our traditional governance then there will be the need to fight for female representation in the traditional administration in the Northern communities. As things stand now this is a major gap that should be filled. We find it too presumptuous for the Southern Queenmothers to purport to be representing the female population in the North of Ghana. For example, the Intestate Succession Law which the Akan women are so much enthused about does not affect the women of the North. While female genital mutilation which the South regard as anti-human is regarded as prestigious, for both the men and the women in the North. We know that this practice will continue for a long time to come until we get innovators from within, possibly female traditional leaders. These examples show the amount of work the post-Bejin feminists face as far as traditional governance is concerned. We believe that as women group themselves to fight against discrimination generally, there is the need to invite men who have the same attitude as theirs to be their collaborators. Fighting alone as women will take a longer time for the achievement of their target. Men who understand women's problems may be accommodated by the women. We must know and appreciate the fact that women's problems are men's problems and vice versa.

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