Socio-Cultural Dynamics of Women Participation in Socio-Economic Development: Experiences of Women in The Bongo Traditional Area of the Upper East Region

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ABSTRACT

Empowering women to contribute their quota to community and national development has become a contemporary issue embraced worldwide. Despite the fact that women’s political participation right has been enshrined in international law, little is known about the struggles and experiences women in Africa face in their quest to participate in the development of their respective communities and the country at large. This study examined the socio-cultural factors affecting the participation of women in socio-economic development in Bongo Traditional Area of the Upper East Region of Ghana. The study adopted the descriptive survey research design. Questionnaires were adopted in soliciting responses from 123 respondents. Qualitative data was also obtained by conducting unstructured interviews with the District Chief Executive of the Bongo District, a former Assembly Woman, a Community Based Organization Manager, a reformed Deviant, and the Tindana. Three focus group discussions (FGDs) were also held with men and women groups with the aid of FGD guide. The study revealed that the patrilineal system, extended family system, early marriage, land ownership, ownership of valuable properties, seeking of permission from husbands before accessing credit and kind of animals to rear negatively affects the participation of women in the development of the Bongo traditional area. The study thus recommended that, the National Commission for Civic Education, media, district assembly and traditional authority should collaborate in educating and sensitizing people as well as adopt custodian reforms of cultural values that have negative influence on women while emphasizing the important role women play in socio-economic development.

Keywords: Culture, Socio-Economic Development, Values, Women.

I. INTRODUCTION

The role women play in nation building through development programmes advocacy has dominated international discourses in the last three decades. Women are at the center of development and constitute one half of the world’s population (Warth & Koparanova, 2012). Yawa (1995) evinced that, women are in charge of the non-monetary economic activities at the household level including agriculture, child bearing and domestic activities such as cooking, fetching water and nursing children while also contributing greatly to the monetary and income generating activities in the household including trade, wage labour and employment. Globally, women participation in political activities as well as their representation in parliament is insignificant thereby reducing their influence and participation in the manner in which societal resources generated by both men and women are utilized (Barry, 2005). Hamah et al. (2015) citing Sossou (2010) highlighted that, there is under representation of women in Ghana as few women occupy political positions or participate in formal political discourses. Jekayinfa (1999) contends that, the role of women in the upbringing of children cannot be downplayed due to the multiplicity of roles they play including maintaining the home, teaching children, making peace and molding the character of children. Women in this regard can therefore be conveniently regarded as mothers of the human race.

Women have been the agents of reproduction of life; thereby placing them in the position of the life blood of the entire humanity. Jekayinfa (1999) maintained that, the multiplicity role of the woman in respect of being a teacher, maintainer of the home, peace maker, symbol of beauty and major molder of the
character of the child could not be overemphasized. In general terms, the woman could conveniently be considered the mother of the human race. Women play a crucial role in the productivity of male workers given the duality of their roles as economic agents and keepers of the home. The role of women as economic agents and domestic governors can therefore not merely be reduced to supportive and complementary roles, but as workers in their own right (Jeminiwa, 1995).

Women empowerment emerged in the last few decades as a topical issue in international discourses with the United Nation and other international organization advocating the need for equality and opportunities for women due to the contribution of women to economic productivity as well as the social and cultural roles they play in every society (Ashford 2002). Harriet et al. (2014) asserted that, in the efforts to reduce global poverty, women paid labor should be given critical attention through exploring innovative ways of reducing the economic, social and political barriers to women empowerment.

In Africa, women make an enormous contribution to national development through the multiple roles they play as wage workers, domestic workers and welfare managers (Ellis et al., 2006). These contributions are often however neglected in the compilation of national statistics (World Bank, 2005). African governments have made various strides aimed at empowering women to stimulate their economic contribution to growth which will consequently help in poverty reduction. For, example, the Ugandan government created the Ministry of Women in 1988, which emancipated women groups thereby strengthening their advocacy roles and activism in discourses aimed at their liberation and empowerment (Tripp, 2000). Similarly, the government of Ghana in 2001 for the first time established a distinct Ministry for Women and Children Affairs (MOWAC) to cater to the welfare of women and children who are seen as a vulnerable group in society (Opoku- Ware, 2014). All these are aimed at empowering and strengthening women to enhance their participation and contribution to national development.

Despite these efforts, women in most parts of Ghana are usually relegated to the background when it comes to decision making processes with women usually discriminated and not getting equal opportunities vis-à-vis their male counterparts. This situation is a reflection of what prevails in the northern part of Ghana. This situation is further worsened by the patrilineal succession commonly practiced among the tribes in northern parts of Ghana. Under the Patrilineal succession system, property devolves only through male lines (from father to son of father to brothers), but wives and daughters have no inheritance rights to land and other properties (Kpieta & Bonye, 2012).

Bongo District, which is located in the Upper East Region of Ghana, is predominantly a patrilineal society. Just as any other patrilineal society, the general reason for not making adequate provision for a woman is that she (as a wife) is expected to be maintained and supported by her husband. This coupled with religion and culture bares women from participating in development activities which limits their ability to optimally contribute to local community development and national development.

II. THEORETICAL BASIS

The feminist theory guided this study. This was deemed relevant stemming from its interdisciplinary focus in the study of women's issues. A myriad of feminist perspectives arose to aid in addressing the oppression of women in society. Cornwall (2005, p. 39) defines feminism as women’s engagement in demanding and creating an equitable society. According to Moore (1988, p. 10) feminism refers to the awareness of women’s oppression and exploitation at work, in the home, and in society as well as to the conscious political action taken by women to change this situation. Women empowerment is a central theme in the feminist doctrine. The perspective thus advocates for equality in treatment for all members of the community, including equal rights and access to the necessary resources. The feminist theory concerns itself with the rights and interests of women and also the equal distribution of power among women and men in society or any other place. According to the feminist perspective, women, are the same as men, therefore, they have a right to equal treatment (Hughes 2002, p. 13). Feminist theory encourages women to assume autonomy in their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers. The present study was conducted in the Bongo traditional area in the Upper East Region of Ghana. The Bongo traditional area is still anchored in and still abides by the rules of tradition and culture. Through the feminist approach, the study was used to help address the position of women in society and also highlight the influence of tradition and culture in limiting women’s participation in socio-economic development, as the approach prescribes that all members of the society be treated equally with respect and dignity and that equal distribution of resources is practiced. The equal distribution of resources and equal treatment of women in society will encourage them to engage in developmental activities.
III. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the descriptive design. Descriptive designs are useful for examining “what is going on or what exist” (Turguet & Shaman 2008). Kothari et al. (2005) describes descriptive research as including survey and facts finding inquiries adding that the major purpose of descriptive research is a description of affairs as it exists at present. The objectives of the research necessitated the adoption of this design as it is consistent with the objectives of the study.

The study was conducted in the Bongo district of the Upper East Region. The district is boarded with Burkina Faso to the North and East, Kassena-Nankana District to the West and Bolgatanga municipality to the South. It lies between Longitudes 0.45° W and Longitudes 10.50°N and has an area of 459.5 square kilometers (Bongo District Assembly, 2006). The socio-economic characteristics of the area are based mainly on a very complex network of cultural systems and extractive activities based on land. In regards to socio-economic activities, about 59.5% of the population 15 years and older are self-employed without employees; 31.0% are contributing family workers and 0.8% are casual workers. The private informal sector is the largest employer in the district, employing 95.5% of the population followed by the public sector with 3.2%. Agriculture is the dominant occupation of the people, accounting for about 57.9% of employment (Ghana Statistical Service, 2005).

Purposive sampling was first used to select four (4) communities out of twenty-one communities in the study area for the study. These communities include; Via, Balungo, Gorogoro, Namoo. Respondents aged 18 to 60 years were targeted for the study. The total population for these groups for the four selected communities (sample frame) was 572 from which 123 respondents were chosen for the study. Proportionate sampling was adopted to apportion the sample size of 123 among the four communities as shown in Table I.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Community</th>
<th>Total Household Population</th>
<th>Sample Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Via</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balungo</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gorogoro</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Namoo</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Sampled Population</td>
<td>572</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s own computation 2017

From Table I, four (4) communities were selected for the study with proportionate sample sizes from these communities summing up to 123 households. Additionally, Purposive sampling technique was also employed to select key informants for the study. The Key Informants included the District Chief Executive, Assembly Woman, the Tindana, a Positive Deviant and CBO Manager. The Researcher used purposive sampling to enable her use her judgement to select respondents that will best meet the objectives of the study.

The researcher employed both probability and non-probability sampling techniques in advancing the study. As regards probability sampling, simple random sampling was adopted while judgmental (purposive) sampling was employed as a non-probability sampling technique.

In applying simple random sampling, numbers were assigned to all respondents (men and women) who were above 18 years and of sound mind and health in the communities under study on pieces of papers and placed in a bowl and mixed by shaking. Then without looking into the bowl, a paper (respondent) was picked from the bowl at random and after that was replaced and mixed before picking the next respondent. This continues until the sample size (respondents) for each community was ascertained. This strategy was employed to avoid bias by giving equal opportunity to all members in the sampling frame, equal chances of being selected to participate in the study.

The researcher for the purpose of collecting quantitative data adopted a survey questionnaire in collecting data on the socio-cultural factors influencing women participation in socio-economic development in Bongo. This data collection instrument captured both open ended and close ended questions. For purposes of validity and reliability, the questionnaire was submitted to the student’s supervisor which was then vetted and approved. The usage of the questionnaire granted the researcher the opportunity to synergize qualitative and quantitative data in a manner that was cost efficient.

In collecting qualitative data, an interview schedule was used in conducting unstructured interviews with the District Chief Executive of the Bongo District, a former Assembly Woman, a Community Based Organization Manager, a Positive Deviant, and the Tindana. Also, a Focus Group Discussion Guide was employed in conducting focus group discussions with men and women groups on the socio-cultural factors militating against the participation of women in socio-economic development. In all the three focused group discussions well held with six (6) participants each and the discussions lasted for about 1-2 hours. This resulted in a total number of eighteen (18) participants for the focus group discussion.
Quantitative data was coded and entered into the Statistical Package for Social Scientist which was analyzed afterwards. Basic descriptive statistics was employed in analyzing the study results due to the descriptive nature of the data gathered. This method does not typically require complex statistical analysis. The descriptive statistics were summarized into frequencies and percentages and the results presented with the help of tables. Qualitative data was also analyzed using narratives and quotations.

IV. DISCUSSIONS OF MAJOR FINDINGS

A. Socio-Cultural Constraints Faced by Women Participating in Socio-Economic Development in Bongo Traditional Area

In analyzing the socio-cultural factors influencing women participation in socio-economic development, respondents were asked to either affirm or not whether the socio-cultural factors contained in the questionnaire influence their participation in development activities and to also ascertain how these factors influence their participation. As such, respondents were first asked if the patrilineal system of inheritance practiced in any way affect women. Majority (74.0%) answered in the affirmative while 26.0% said no. Probing to ascertain how the patrilineal system affect women economic activities, 66.2% of the respondents mentioned that, patrilineal system deny women right to inheritance, and ownership of valuable properties, 33.8% of them said patrilineal system excludes them from decision making, 33.0% said it brings about abuse in different forms including emotional, psychological and sexual abuses, 24.3% said it brings psychological problems, depression and neglection, 19.3% said it increase poverty of women, and 17.6% indicated the system encourage women to be dependent on men. One of the female discussants in a focus group lamented as follows;

*Patrilineal system deprives us of everything. We are considered as strangers in our husbands’ house and are also considered as temporary members of the family in our fathers’ houses. We do not belong wherever we find ourselves and you don’t have a say at where you don’t belong neither can you inherit from where you don’t belong* (FFGD Bongo District, August 2016)

This finding confirms Wanyeki (2003) assertion who opined that in Africa, customarily and/or traditionally, men manage land. Women only come to the fore in exceptional cases, depending not on custom and/or tradition, but on individual families who try to be reasonable in granting positions to their sisters or mothers. Women are disqualified from the management of land because of the gender-based division of labour that exists in customary and/or traditional communities. In such communities’ women’s land rights are limited to user rights. This means that women are allowed to use their fathers’ or spouses’ land but not to own it.

Early marriage also emerged as a socio-cultural factor that inhibits women's engagement in economic activities as 84.0% of the respondents opined that early marriage affects their socio-economic engagements while 16.0% differed on the matter by answering no. Several reasons were given by respondents regarding how early marriage affects women's participation in socio-economic development. A significant number (78.4%) of the respondents indicated that early marriage led to the majority of girls dropping out of school and also terminating their vocational training, 36.4% indicated early marriages lead to health problems and increasing maternal and infant mortality, 33% indicated early marriages have emotional and psychological effects on women/girls, 19.3% said it leads to increased poverty levels among women, while 5.7% said it leads to increased immoral behaviors. An informant during a focus group discussion highlighted that “early marriage leads to school dropout, early parenting, emotional abuse and poverty and these have negative implications for women” (FKI Bongo District, August 2016).

The above finding confirms Tanye (2008) assertion that marriage suppresses the efforts of Ghanaian women to get higher education credentials. This result is also consistent with the view of Rena (2006) who noted that, socio-cultural factors also play a role in hindering women from accessing and furthering their educational interests. Early marriage can thus be said to have negative implication for female education as it places a greater burden on household labour while also suppressing the educational progress of women and girls.

Land ownership was as pointed out as a socio-cultural barrier hindering women participation in socio-economic development as an overwhelming 85.0% of respondents affirmed that land ownership affects women economic activities especially those engaged in agricultural activities while 15.0% dissented on the matter. When respondents were asked to express their opinions on how land ownership affects women engagement in agricultural activities, 74.2% of the respondents who opined with this statement expounds that women are denied of their economic rights, 21.6% said women feel marginalized and lose interest in engaging in agricultural activities and 18.9% said it brings about low productivity and poverty among women.
An interview with the Tindana made the following revelation.

“As for Land ownership, there is no way women can own land in this district and nothing can be done about it.” (MKI Bongo District August 2016) this is what another key informant have to say; “If you own the land and control it as a woman, you do everything you can to make the best out of the land but where you only have access but cannot control it you only do the little you can to survive.” (FFGD Bongo District 2016). Another discussant lamented as follows: “In the event of divorce or death of your husband, you will be left with nothing to farm on, I cannot put much effort in tilling a land I don’t own” (FFGD Bongo District, August 2016).

This finding affirms UNFPA (1995) finding which indicates agriculture appears to be the occupation of 70.0% of Ghanaian rural women, yet it is known that agriculture has the largest chunk of poor women. Their poverty is compounded by the fact that only 8.0% of women hold title to the land they work on (see Table II).

![Table II: Socio-Cultural Factors Influencing Women's Participation in Socio-Economic Development](https://example.com/table2.jpg)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Response (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patrilineal System of Inheritance</td>
<td>Yes 74.0% No 26.0% Total 100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Marriage</td>
<td>Yes 84.0% No 16.0% Total 100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land Ownership</td>
<td>Yes 85.0% No 15.0% Total 100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Restrictions on Livestock Rearing</td>
<td>Yes 75.0% No 25.0% Total 100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Restrictions on Crop Production</td>
<td>Yes 66.0% No 34.0% Total 100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended Family System</td>
<td>Yes 44.0% No 56.0% Total 100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restriction on Education</td>
<td>Yes 34.0% No 66.0% Total 100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restrictions on Property Ownership</td>
<td>Yes 91.0% No 9.0% Total 100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restriction on Accessing Credit Without Permission</td>
<td>Yes 85.0% No 15.0% Total 100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Regarding the question of whether women are restricted in the choice of livestock they can rear, 54.0% indicated no while 46.0% answered in the affirmative. For the respondents who answered yes on the issue of rearing livestock, 48.9% of them explained that women feel discriminated against, marginalized, victimized and neglected while 21.3% asserted that women are often bullied, 17% said women feel bad, sad and depressed, and 12.8% said women feel cheated and disrespected. As regards crop cultivation, 75.0% of the respondents indicated that they were not restricted from the cultivation of any crop while 25% indicated they were restricted by ticking yes. On further probe to ascertain the rationale behind the respondents who indicated women were restricted in the crop production activities, majority (46.2%) evinced that, women are weak to cultivate certain crops, 42.3% of them indicated it is a cultural norm, whiles 11.5% were indifferent on the matter.

Respondents were further asked whether women are constrained in terms of education resulting from cultural practices that pertained to the area. 66.0% confirmed the statement by answering yes while 34.0% held differing opinions. The respondents who opined that women were constrained in terms of education were further queried to ascertain how women were constrained. Majority (80.3%) of the respondents said the cultural practice that constrains women's education denies them education, 45.1% said women's education is limited due to their reproductive role, 39.4% said they are restricted to domestic chores and 36.6% said they are not valued or respected in society. This revelation corroborates Manuh (1998) assertion that the lack of education and training has been identified as a key barrier to women advancement in society. This revelation is also in line with the finding of Tanye (2008) whose study revealed that marriage suppresses the efforts of Ghanaian women to get higher education credentials resulting from the roles associated with their reproductive activities.

The extended family system was also discovered as a key influential socio-cultural factor limiting women ability to meaningfully participate in socio-economic development activities as good number (44.0%) upheld this view with 56.0% dissenting on the matter by opining that, the extended family system does not affect women economic activities. Respondents who were affirmative on this issue highlighted varied opinions. A significant number (54.7%) of the respondents indicated that, extended family members often interfere in their affairs, 52.8% of the respondents indicated that extended family put pressure on their little resources and 26.4% said external family pressures result in psychological traumas while also leading to the neglect and cheating of women. A discussant in a focus group stated that;

*It is burdensome, the woman is supposed to serve extended family which eats into her time for productive activities” (FFGD Bongo District 2016).*

This finding resonates Roy and Niranjan (2004) revelation who found that women who belong to the nuclear family were more empowered than those who belonged to joint (extended) families. The authors concluded that the presence of in-laws in a family lowers the level of a married woman’s autonomy. The
above revelation further affirms Macha (2011) assertion that in the area of education, women are not often given the chance as compared to their male counterparts. This corroborates the demographic data on education in the same study which revealed that (46.3%) of females worldwide are considered illiterates with a whopping 67.0% of women in Ghana being illiterates. As a result, the study thus agrees with Ara and Khan (2006) assertion that “Socio-economic development cannot be fully achieved without the active participation of women at the decision-making level in society”

On the question of property ownership, an overwhelming majority (91.0%) of the respondents asserted that women are restricted in the kind of properties they can own with only 9.0% indicating there are no restrictions on women property ownership. Upon further probe, the respondents who asserted that women are restricted in the kind of property women can own listed the properties women are restricted to own. Majority (88.3%) mentioned land and farms, 66% mentioned livestock (cattle, pigs, dogs, ducks, goats, sheep, guinea fowl, cats and donkey), 55.3% mentioned houses, 14.9% mentioned father’s properties, and 11.7% mentioned family gods. When respondents were queried on why they think women are restricted from owning some types of properties, 55.9% said it was because of fear of transfer of properties, 43.0% said it is a cultural requirement of the patrilineal system, 18.3% said women are weak to handle such properties, 9.7% said women are restricted because women belong to every family and 7.5% said women with assets and properties are difficult to control and therefore must be restricted. A male key informant asserted during an interview that,

Because the woman will leave the father’s house and join her husband, she cannot send what belongs to the father to the husband’s house and she cannot own properties because in case of death of the husband, the woman can remarry and cannot let the new husband enjoy the sweat of another man (MKI Bongo District August 2016).

This finding affirms Kpieta and Bonye (2012) who indicated that in Northern Ghana, women are considered strangers in their husband’s home, thus disqualifying women from any form of inheritance and decision-making process. The study also confirms Fennrich & Higgings (2001) who indicated that the social practice that, men remain in the family and immortalize it and so they are supposed to own properties including land to enable them raise family for this immortalization means that a wife’s claim to her husband’s property is limited or non-existent. This revelation further corroborates Johnson (2005) study which revealed that, in many societies, women are portrayed as weak and incapable of making smart decisions. They have been depicted across generations to be only capable of trivial matters, constantly engaged in gossip and hearsay, utterly incompetent and less intelligent.

With regards to the question on whether women are permitted to access credit facilities to enable them to engage in any socio-economic activities without seeking permission from their husbands and other male counterparts, 85.0% of the respondents dissented on the matter with 15.0% responding in the affirmative. Probing further to ascertain why women need to seek permission from their male counterparts, 81.2% of the respondents mentioned that they do it due to respect for their husbands as heads of the family, 58.8% of them said women seek permission so in the event of debts or indebtedness their husbands can help absolve them, 28.2% said they seek permission because men have collateral to be used to access credit and 7.1% said women do that because they lack the requisite knowledge. When the respondents were asked how the act of women seeking permission from their husband before accessing credit affect women socio-economic activities, 67.0% of them said approval by husbands delays or denies women access to credit, 35.4% said it affects their business decision making, another 35.4% said their husbands deliberately deny them approval to access the credit and 12.7% said the fear of indebtedness makes them to seek the permission from their husbands. This confirms Macha (2011) assertion that, education brings benefits to the educated in the forms of access to information and more economic and political influence. Low education therefore was found generally to limit the upward mobility of Nigerian women. The act of seeking permission from the husband which is a cultural norm confirms the view of Tijani and Yano (2007) who evinced that, in spite of the fact that women are aware of their rights, it is still difficult for women to exercise their rights due to socio-cultural barriers. Beger and Buvinic (1990, p. 102) noted that there are various factors that limit women’s access to credit and socio-cultural factors can be a major limitation to women’s access to credit. They further noted that lack of collateral security, illiteracy, and gender discrimination all negatively influence women to access credit. Also, a study conducted by Baiyegunhi (2010, p. 23) reported that gender, ownership of land, the value of assets and repayment capacity is a statistically significant factors considered in determining whether a household credit is constrained or not.
V. CONCLUSION

Generally, socio-cultural factors that is the patrilineal system, extended family system, early marriage, early parenting, land ownership, ownership of valuable properties, seeking of permission from husbands before accessing credit, and the kind of animals to rear by women affect the participation of women in socio-economic development in Bongo Traditional Area of the Upper East Region of Ghana. In light of the findings revealed by the study, it can be concluded that socio-cultural factors have contributed negatively to the participation of women in the socio-economic development of women in Bongo district.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that, female education should be prioritized by parents with support from other stakeholders. Thus, the district assembly and NGOs operating in the Bongo traditional area should implement and intensify advocacy on the importance of female education and also implement scholarship schemes and other educative programs to promote girl-child education in the district. The study further recommends that, the National Commission for Civic Education and the media should lead campaigns on educating and sensitizing parents and young girls on the effects of early marriage and early parenting. The researcher further recommends that there should be legislation and enforcement of laws by the government on early marriages so that perpetrators of early marriages can be punished to deter others from engaging in the act. The Bongo District Assembly should collaborate with the traditional council to embark on custodian reforms of cultural values that have negative influence on women. The media should also take up a role by educating people to abolish all negative gendered notions that stigmatize women and also strengthen public sensitization on the vital role women can play in community development when given the chance to participate. Finally, on the issue of difficulties women face in accessing credit as one of the problems identified, the study recommends that financial Institutions, NGOs as well as Local government should provide affordable loans or non-monetary credit facilities to women in the district to support women to engage in small businesses in the district.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

REFERENCES


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