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Feminists' perspectives as transformative levers in Ghana

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Abbreviations

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CPP	Convention People's Party
CSO	civil society organisation
DOVVSU	Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit of the Police
DV	domestic violence
DWM	December Women's Movement
FGM	female genital mutilation
FIDA	International Federation of Women Lawyers
GBV	gender-based violence
GESI	gender equality and social inclusion
GNAT	Ghana National Association of Teachers
GRNA	Ghana Registered Nurses Association
GTA	gender-transformative approaches
ICPD	Cairo International Conference on Population and Development
LI	legislative instruments
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
NCGW	National Council of Ghana Women
NCWD	National Council for Women and Development
NETRIGHT	Network for Women's Rights in Ghana
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NPP	New Patriotic Party
NRC	National Redemption Council
PNDC	Provisional National Defence Council
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SGBV	sexual and gender-based violence
TOC	theory of change
TUC	Ghana Trades Union Congress
UGCC	United Gold Coast Convention
VAW	violence against women
VAWG	violence against women and girls
WILDAF	Women in Law and Development in Africa
WISE	Women's Initiative for Self Empowerment
WRO	women's rights organisation

Executive summary

Ghana is a multi-party, multi-ethnic and multi-religious state, which practices legal pluralism – a system which recognises customary law in addition to the constitution. Even though the constitution is superior to the customary law, most Ghanaians are subject to customary law, which discriminates against women. Women's rights activism has a long history in Ghana spanning over a century. While feminists' advocacy has made great gains, Ghana – like many other countries – is not likely to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, which is gender equality, by 2030. Gender inequality persists due to the coexistence of gender-inequitable norms and the lax enforcement of the existing laws that protect women. Social norms and behaviours continue to impact opportunities and human potential, affecting health, education and productivity.

There is little understanding of how local Ghanaian feminists have influenced past and recent transformative gender policies in Ghana. The goal of this study is to understand feminism in Ghana and how feminists' experiences could be harnessed to achieve more gender-transformative change. The study is part of the research project "Local Feminist Perspectives as Transformation Levers for Greater Gender Equality". In partnership with IDOS, the German Institute of Development and Sustainability, the project explores the potential of local feminist perspectives to act as levers for transformative change for greater gender equality in Ghana, India and Ukraine. The aim of the study in Ghana is to explore and analyse contemporary local feminist perspectives (organising) in Ghana to demonstrate how they can be used as levers for transformative change for greater equality and sustainable development.

The research questions that guided the study are:

- i. How do existing socio-cultural norms and practices and the prevailing systemic/structural conditions prevent sustainable, gender-transformative policies?
- ii. How have local feminist perspectives influenced past and recent gender-transformative policies in Ghana?
- iii. How can local perspectives be used as transformative levers for sustainable development?
- iv. Which alternative approaches to development processes can local feminist perspectives offer to target prevailing norms and practices?

The study was fully qualitative and cross-sectional involving 35 feminists and women's rights advocates between the ages of 37 and 80+ years, with the majority (n=25) having over 20 years of experience and relevant postgraduate degrees. The findings of the study very much aligned with the theoretical framework selected for the study, the gender at work framework, which considers gender inequity as a phenomenon that traverses from formal to informal spaces, as well as individual to systemic/structural domains.

Our results reveal a myriad of informal and exclusionary customary practices that infringe on the fundamental human rights of Ghanaian women. These practices are rooted in the patriarchal structures that normalise male dominance and control over women, shaping societal attitudes and behaviours toward women's rights and autonomy. These exclusionary customary practices include the practice of bride price, widowhood rites, child marriage, female genital mutilation, and witch-hunting. Apart from the informal laws that discriminate against women, there are also gender inequalities that manifest in formal spaces. These forms of inequality are systemic and structural in nature. Instances of these are the lack of political will and delays in legislative instruments; the high turnover of responsible leaders; a lack of resources and state infrastructure to support women at the workplace; sexual harassment; labour discrimination due to women's reproductive roles; the gender wage gap; and gender-blind policies and laws. Other

discriminatory practices that are apparent at the level of individual practices are those connected to inadequate access to resources and conscientisation.

Further, the study revealed that feminists in Ghana utilise several strategies to improve gender equality. These include advocacy and lobbying; collaboration and coalition-building; enlisting non-feminist allies; generation of research and evidence; consultative meetings and dialogues; support for the drafting and review of instruments; monitoring the implementation of existing laws, and the subsequent review of passed laws. Some of the landmark achievements resulting from feminists' work include the passage of the Domestic Violence Act (DV Act), the Land Act, and the Affirmative Action Gender Equity Act. Our results showed that feminists and women's rights advocates were in general satisfied with the effectiveness of their outlined strategies and that they hoped to maintain them in the future.

Feminists have encountered several challenges including declining funding, lack of support from political actors, and backlash. To sustain the work of feminists they call for the institutionalisation of intergenerational dialogues on gender and women's issues, along with the intensification of the recruitment of non-feminist allies. They believe that these strategies would ensure both the continuity and effectiveness of the movement in driving change.

The following policy recommendations are made based on the insights of this study:

- i. A key challenge reported by participants was the waning funding for feminists/CSO (civil society organisation) activities. Considering that the advocacy activities of feminists such as lobbying, capacity-building, meetings and sensitisation measures require logistics, it is important that the state commits funds to their activities in a sustainable way. The government should set up a research fund where a percentage of the country's GDP will be deposited: Feminists could apply for available funding to conduct research into women's inequality issues. Findings from these studies could in turn inform policy on women's inequality issues.
- ii. Advocacy by feminists in Ghana for local gender-transformative policies and laws is based on the realisation of international human rights provisions. The evidence shows that success requires persistence and the constant rallying of feminists around specific bills and policies over many years. Hence, development partners should support the core funding for women's rights organisations as well as creating a funding cycle to support women's rights organising and activities surrounding specific bills or policies. In this way, energy and advocacy for specific bills/policies will be sustained.
- iii. A major bottleneck to the timely processing of gender-related policies is the high ministerial rotations in relevant ministries. It is therefore important to institute a permanent policy desk at the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection. This would ensure stability and continuity in the development of policies during changes in ministers and governments.
- iv. Ignorance and a lack of awareness and capabilities on the part of individuals regarding gender inequity is widespread in Ghana leading to the perpetration of gender inequities. It is recommended that "gender", as a cross-cutting phenomenon, be introduced into educational curricula at various levels of education. The feminists believe that early and timely education on gender will increase gender consciousness and equity among the younger generation to break the cycles of gender-inequitable attitudes and beliefs passed on through customs and cultures.

Feminists in Ghana have made great strides in fighting for the cause of women. They have been successful in pushing for the passage of formal laws and policies that protect the rights of women. However, considering the persistence of patriarchal norms in Ghana, the laws and policies are not enough to bring about gender-transformative change in everyday lives. A change in gender attitudes requires a consistent and resilient effort, especially in the areas of

awareness creation and empowerment. Outcomes will include an improvement in individual knowledge and awareness of their constitutional rights and privileges, what constitutes abuse, and access to legal and support services. Meanwhile, there is a lack of political will on the side of duty bearers to adopt gender-transformative policies. This calls for a non-state “conscience” on gender to drive change by closing the gap between formal laws and policies and the lived experiences of women by increasing individual and grassroots demand for gender equality, while measures are taken to deal with the systemic factors. The lack of core funding for feminist and women’s rights organisations over the decades, therefore, will attenuate this otherwise great synergistic impact of driving change through the push for formal laws and policies alongside sensitisation measures and support. Support from government and key development partners for activities in support of feminism in Ghana will be crucial in bringing about the transformative change.

1 Introduction

Ghana is a multi-party, multi-ethnic and multi-religious state, with a dominant influence of socio-cultural norms and practices that may negatively impact on women in their everyday lives. Most Ghanaians are subject to customary law (Addey, 2023), which is drawn from patriarchal tenets that often discriminate against women. Each ethnic group in Ghana has its own laws and customs which are binding on its members and are recognised as part of the laws of Ghana, although subservient to constitution and state laws (Addey, 2023). It is important to note that cultural norms are not readily synonymous to customary law in this context. Though Ghanaian women have made great strides, inequalities still exist in the society. Women's representation in public life is still dismal. Women constitute only 15 per cent of the seats in parliament (Awusi, Addae, & Kwapong, 2023). Cultural and social norms see women in their reproductive and caregiving roles. Their productive roles are understood as being supportive to their husbands and partners in their economic activities (Nartey, Bahar, & Nabunya, 2023). Women's economic activities are mostly in the informal sector, which is characterised by low wages and low capital, and are not able to withstand shocks (Wrigley-Asante & Frimpong, 2024). When women are employed in the formal sector, they are mostly found in the bottom rungs of the employment ladder, with men occupying the top positions (Darkwah, 2010).

Article 17 of the 1992 Ghana Constitution gives equal rights to women and men in all aspects of civil, political, economic and social life. Ghana has also signed and ratified several human rights instruments, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Despite this, Ghanaian women still experience discrimination in many fields, including access to justice. Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is a major human rights, public health and social issue in Ghana (Coker-Appiah & Cusack, 1999; GSS [Ghana Statistical Service], GHS [Ghana Health Service], & ICF Macro, 2009). VAWG is influenced by multiple social factors, culture and religion, marriage and the family with their hierarchies and inequalities sustaining VAWG (Tenkorang & Owusu, 2018). The patriarchal norms of male superiority and female inferiority are the lived realities of women and girls from an early age. Poverty and economic dependency are additional factors sustaining violence against women and girls, forcing women to stay in abusive relationships.

Despite the constitutional guarantees, women still play subservient roles to men in society. This is due in part to the operation of customary laws which is essentially discriminatory towards women and partly to the lax enforcement of the existing laws protecting women. Social norms and behaviours continue to impact opportunities and human potential, affecting health, education and productivity. Critical gender gaps and disparities remain in the labour force and employment opportunities, as well as access to quality education and levels of educational attainment, access to and use of health services, control over and access to productive resources including land (Atta-Ankomah, Asante-Poku, & Agyei-Holmes, 2024; Dery, 2015; Ganle et al., 2015; Lambrecht, 2016). In the majority Akan matrilineal society, women have relatively high economic autonomy and independence compared to women in patrilineal societies such as the Ga-Adamgbe, Ewe, Kokomba, Gonja, Dagomba. The Akan is the largest ethnic group in Ghana constituting about 45 per cent of the population (GSS, 2021). According to Needham & Aidoo (1995) women in patrilineal ethnic groups such as Nzema, Ga, Dagomba, and Aowin also have control over some ritual practices, medicines, royal regalia, which gives them considerable power.

The constitution forbids cultural practices that impact negatively on the physical and mental wellbeing of a person. Unfortunately, when it comes to discriminatory cultural practices, the plight of women in Ghana continues unabated (Bastine, 2010; Owusu, 2023). This testifies to the fact that doing away with such practices requires a multifaceted approach involving not only legal prohibitions but also social interventions. In Ghana, there are three types of marriage: marriage under customary law; marriage under Islamic Law; and, marriage under the Ordinance,

which is statutory law. Customary marriage is a marriage contracted on the basis of customs and traditions of the ethnic groups, while Islamic marriage is marriage contracted under Islamic laws. Both customary and Islamic marriages are recognised by the constitution of Ghana. The customary marriage and Islamic marriage are both potentially polygynous in nature, while marriage under the Ordinance is monogamous. Thus, under customary marriage, unlike marriage under the Ordinance, the identities of both the man and the woman are not joined but separate, hence property acquired by either party belongs to them individually and not shared. This situation has been identified as a problem which Article 27 of the Constitution has sought to address by the passage of a law towards the equitable distribution of property acquired during marriage on the dissolution of the marriage. Despite persistent efforts by women's rights organisations, parliament is yet to pass this law.

Over the years, women's rights activists have been advocating for the rights of women in Ghana. Since the 2000s, women's activism in Ghana has been more vibrant and is spearheaded by women professionals mainly from law and academia (Mama, 2020). Feminists' advocacy in Ghana have made great gains, such as the passage of the Domestic Violence Act in 2007 and, recently, the passage of the Affirmative Action Gender Equity Act 2024 on 30 July 2024. In spite of this, Ghana, like other countries, is not likely to achieve SDG 5, which is gender equality, by 2030. However, questions remain on how local Ghanaian feminists have influenced past and recent transformative gender policies in Ghana. The goal of this study is to understand feminism in Ghana and how the experiences of these feminists could be harnessed to achieve gender-transformative change in Ghana.

This study is part of the research project "Local Feminist Perspectives as Transformation Levers for Greater Gender Equality". The project seeks to contribute to filling existing gaps in knowledge on local feminist perspectives in partner countries. IDOS is working together with three partner organisations in Ghana, India and Ukraine. In cooperation with the Gender Studies and Human Rights Documentation Centre; the Goa Institute of Management; and Gender in Detail, the project explores the potential of local feminist perspectives to act as levers for transformative change towards greater gender equality in Ghana, India and Ukraine. The outputs of this project are three studies on local feminist perspectives in Ghana, India and Ukraine as well as one study that synthesises the results and recommendations from the partner studies against the background of feminist development and foreign policies (Götze, Klingebiel, & Khalid, 2025).

1.1 Objective of the study

The aim of the study in Ghana is to explore and analyse contemporary local feminist perspectives (organising) in Ghana to demonstrate how they can be used as levers for transformative change for greater equality and sustainable development.

Specific aims of the study:

- i. Explore the effects of existing socio-cultural norms and practices that lead to the subjugation of women in Ghana.
- ii. Explore the prevailing systemic/structural conditions that prevent sustainable, gender-transformative policies in Ghana.
- iii. Examine how local feminists' perspectives (activism/organising) have been, and can be, used to influence policies and actions for greater gender equality and sustainable development in Ghana.
- iv. Develop policy recommendations to increase awareness and stimulate dialogue on feminist perspectives in the Ghanaian policy context.

1.2 Research questions

- i. How do existing socio-cultural norms and practices and the prevailing systemic/structural conditions prevent sustainable, gender-transformative policies?
- ii. How have local feminist perspectives influenced past and recent gender-transformative policies in Ghana?
- iii. How can local perspectives be used as transformative levers for sustainable development?
- iv. Which alternative approaches to development processes can local feminist perspectives offer to target prevailing norms and practices?

2 Women's organising in Ghana

Women's organising in Ghana has a long history and dates to pre-independence times. The history of women's organising in Ghana can be traced from pre-colonial times to contemporary times (Britwum, 2017; Manuh, 1991; Prah, 2003; Tsikata, 1989). In traditional Ghana, women were not alien to the public sphere. Prah (2003) explains that the role women played in society in pre-colonial Ghana was determined by their social organisation and the historical contexts of their society. As is the case in other parts of Africa, women's access to resources, status, power and inheritance depends on the descent system, inheritance and succession, paternity, and economic potential.

Consequently, it was easy for women in Ghana to transition into the public and join the nationalist movement in the fight against colonialism, which was synonymous with a fight against male dominance. Explaining the context within which women joined the nationalist movement, Manuh (1991) cites the superimposition of Victorian (British) values which set men above women and gave them little room to manoeuvre. This was especially true for women in urban areas. Thus Ghanaian women, especially market traders, organised themselves and joined the United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC) in the fight for independence. Later, when Kwame Nkrumah established the Convention People's Party (CPP) to press on the demand for independence, he received massive support from the women traders (Prah, 2003; Tsikata, 1989).

These women effectively became the women's wing of the CPP known as the CPP Women's League in 1951. Prah (2003) notes that the CPP women's wing was not formed around any specific gender issue: their task was to organise parties, fanfares, dances, and a special day was set aside for women, known as the Ghana Women's Day. In 1960, Dr Kwame Nkrumah inaugurated the National Council of Ghana Women (NCGW), which was an amalgamation of the CPP Women's League and other smaller women's groups. The CPP government recognised the contribution of women in the fight for independence and their low participation in politics and proceeded to reserve 10 seats for them in parliament. Further, a few women were also appointed to public office. In addition, the government responded to the demands of women for more marriage rights by passing the Maintenance of Children Law (Act 297, 1965); but a second one on the Uniform Marriage, Divorce and Inheritance Bill (May 1961) did not pass through parliament. As noted by Prah (2003), though the CPP government was sympathetic to women, the level of gender consciousness was low so women could not advocate for gender issues more broadly. Also, the few successes chalked up by women followed a top-down approach. The fact that many of the members of the women's group were market women meant they used their connections with the government to advance their economic fortunes, as many of those who joined the group did so because of the benefits they would gain. Invariably, the women's groups existed due to the benevolence of President Dr Kwame Nkrumah. Hence, when the CPP government was overthrown in 1966, the NCGW collapsed.

The period between 1966 and 1981 was considered the “apolitical” phase of women’s activism in Ghana” (Tsikata, 1989, pp. 80-81). This period was characterised by military coups, interspersed with brief democratically elected governments. Even then, the participation of women in politics was muted. For instance, there were only 2 women out of the 140 parliamentarians in the 2nd Republic between 1969 and 1972, and 5 in the 3rd Republic from 1979 to December 1981 (Prah, 2003). There was no government support for women’s organising during this period. The few women’s groups that existed were non-political, most of them being professional groups. Prah (2003) suggests that, without state support, Ghanaian women survived by capitalising on the ties of patronage, social networking, and femininity to get ahead in their trading activities to the extent of becoming dominant in the distribution sector of the economy. Prah (2003), citing Manuh (1993), observed that the military government of the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) in January 1982 viewed women’s economic activities with resentment. This sentiment was borne out of the patriarchal belief that proposes that women stay at home and perform domestic chores. Thus, women became the scapegoats and were blamed for the economic hardships that were prevalent at that time. This “culminated in the brutal assault, vilification and degradation of women” at the beginning of the Rawlings’ era (Prah, 2003, p. 32).

Despite the cold relationship between military governments and women, a major development in those years was the establishment of the National Council for Women and Development (NCWD) in 1975 by the National Redemption Council (NRC) in response to the UN Decade for Women. The military at the time had to establish the NCWD to show it was interested in the welfare of women. In the 1960s and 1970s, there was a wave of women’s movements, especially in the West. To qualify for financial aid, governments had to show that they cared about the welfare of their women. In 1976, the NCWD commissioned some studies on certain aspects of Ghanaian women’s life, such as education, family, laws and marriage. The NCWD proposed certain changes to the legislation based on the findings of these studies (Prah, 2003). The groundwork for the implementation of the proposed legislation had thus been laid and aimed at improving the income of women.

For two decades, over the 1980s and 1990s, the landscape was dominated by the 31st December Women’s Movement (DWM). Similar to the CPP Women’s League before it, the DWM was affiliated to the government of the day: the PNDC/NDC. Led by Nana Konadu Agyemang Rawlings, the wife of President Rawlings, the DWM enjoyed certain privileges such as access to land and financial resources, both home and abroad (Prah, 2003). Due to its affinity with the ruling government, the DWM squeezed out other women’s groups. As observed by Clark and Manuh (1991) though the DWM had a lot of following among women, it could not be considered a feminist group because it did not make any substantial changes to the status of women in Ghana. Nevertheless, some successes were achieved, such as the “ratification of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the passing of the Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Law, and the Law on Intestate Succession” (Prah, 2003, p. 36).

The 2000s were very exciting times for women’s organising in Ghana. In the run-up to the general elections in 2000, several women were murdered in Ghana in what appeared to be serial/ritual killings (Browne, 2000). Women’s rights activists, led by the Gender Centre, the Ark Foundation, the Women’s Initiative for Self Empowerment (WISE), and the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA Ghana), organised themselves, mobilised other groups, and protested against the killings, calling on the government to arrest the perpetrators. They organised protest marches and had a sit-down in front of the Police Headquarters to press home the demand for police action in investigating the cases. The opposition party took advantage of the general dissatisfaction in the country and pressed the ruling government of President Rawlings to act. When the New Patriotic Party (NPP) government, led by President John Agyekum Kuffuor, won the elections after a second round of voting, he thanked the women for the role they had played and promised to set up the Ministry of Women and Children’s Affairs.

In the early 2000s, three important coalitions were set up to advocate for specific gender issues. These were the establishment of the Network for Women's Rights in Ghana (NETRIGHT), the Women's Manifesto Coalition for Ghana, and the Domestic Violence Bill Coalition. NETRIGHT is a coalition of several women's organisations and individuals established in 1999 (Tsikata, 2009). It has focal persons in all the regions in Ghana. At the core of establishing NETRIGHT was to give a stronger voice to women and having a united front to fight against the injustices against women. The major focus of NETRIGHT was for economic justice for women, gender and natural resources and movement-building (Britwum, 2017). Later, ABANTU for Development was very instrumental in the writing of the Women's Manifesto. The Women's Manifesto is a document that contains the areas of inequality of Ghanaian women. The Women's Manifesto was a testament to the mobilisation of women in Ghana. A lot of women's organisations and groups were mobilised for the project. This included the Ghana Trades Union Congress (TUC), the Ghana Registered Nurses Association (GRNA), and the Ghana National Association of Teachers (GNAT). Following the publication of the findings of research on violence against women and children by the Gender Studies and Human Rights Documentation Centre, a draft Domestic Violence Bill was developed by a group of women's rights organisations and submitted to the attorney general. Subsequently, a Domestic Violence Bill Coalition was formed to advocate for the passage of the bill. It took six years of advocacy to have the bill passed into law by the Parliament of Ghana. Some women's rights organisations made a presentation to the CEDAW Committee when Ghana presented its report in 2006, asking the Committee to urge the Government to ensure the law was assented to by the president. Two months after the CEDAW Committee's recommendation, the president assented to the law in 2007 (Mama, 2014). An Affirmative Action Gender Equity Act has been recently passed in July 2024 after more than eleven years of advocacy by women's rights activists led by the Affirmative Action Coalition.

From the foregoing, it is evident that Ghanaian women had been organising even before independence. Ghanaian women have found different ways of mobilising and advocating for change in their material and social status. From taking advantage of political parties through their women's wings to building coalitions, they have made their voices heard and have achieved some successes. At the turn of the Millennium, female intellectuals (lawyers and academics) mobilised support through their organisations and led advocacy activities to promote women's rights issues.

The government's laws and policies on gender inequality

To address gender inequalities in Ghana, major policies were adopted by successive governments. Two of these were formulated by the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection (the National Gender Policy, 2015, and the Ghana National Social Protection Policy, 2015). Another policy was adopted by the Ministry of Health (the Health Sector Gender Policy, 2009). These policies provide a robust implementation framework for Ghana.

The 1992 Constitution of Ghana stipulates that all persons are equal before the law, a principle that has underpinned the development of the National Gender Policy (Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, Ghana 2015a). Furthermore, the Fourth Republican Constitution (1992) provides a foundation for human protection by emphasising the need for just and reasonable access for all people in Ghana to public facilities and services; respect for fundamental human rights and freedoms; and the prohibition of discrimination and prejudice based on place of origin, birth circumstances, ethnic origin, gender, religion, creed, and other beliefs. This served as the bedrock for the National Social Protection policy (Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, 2015b). Additionally, Chapter Five of the Constitution makes provisions for the equitable engagement of both women and men, addressing existing imbalances in areas such as health accessibility, quality care, and decision-making and this served as the foundation for the health sector gender policy (Ministry of Health, Ghana, 2009).

Article 17, Clause 17(4) of the 1992 Constitution of Ghana permits affirmative action as a measure to end discrimination (Ghana, 1992). This constitutional provision served as a foundational basis for the passage of the Affirmative Action Act reinforcing the government's commitment to promoting equality and addressing historical injustices faced by marginalised groups.

Table 1: List of gender-relevant laws and policies of the Government of Ghana

Issue date	Document title	Institution/source	Gender-related aims
2007	Domestic Violence Act	Government of Ghana	Domestic violence and victim support.
2009	Health Sector Gender Policy	Ministry of Health	To contribute to better health for both women and men, through health research, policies and programmes which give due attention to gender considerations and promote equity and equality between women and men.
2015	National Gender Policy	Ministry of Gender and Social Protection	To mainstream gender equality and women's empowerment concerns into the national development process and promote commitment throughout the government to empowering women
2015	Ghana National Social Protection Policy	Ministry of Gender and Social Protection	The social protection policy aimed at improving women's empowerment and livelihoods; women's rights and access to justice; women's leadership and accountable governance; promoting gender equality in trade and industry; and gender roles and relations.
2024	Affirmative Action Act (recently passed in July 2024)	Government of Ghana	To ensure 30 per cent representation of women at all levels from the passage of the law to 50 per cent by 2030.

Source: Authors

International treaties and instruments

Most of these gender-related policies were implemented in support of international instruments and frameworks. These include:

- The provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)
- The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966)
- The International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (1976)
- The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW; 1979)
- 1994 Cairo International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD)

- The 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action
- The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs 2000-2015)
- The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights on the Rights of Women (Maputo Protocol 2003)
- The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 2016-2030).

3 Theoretical framework for gender transformation

The theoretical framework underpinning our study's approach is the gender-transformative approach (GTA). Gender-transformative approaches are programmes that seek to bring about lasting change and transformation while adhering to feminist ideals (MacArthur et al., 2022). The GTA can be used both as a theoretical framework and as a programme and practical intervention tool. When used as a research paradigm, it considers a process where analysis and practice go together. When used as a programme, the focus is not just on identifying the norms and barriers to gender inequality but on bringing about long-term transformation. GTA focuses on the causes or systems underlying gender inequality. It requires a multi-level and systemic approach to address deeply rooted inequalities. These include legislative policies, patriarchy, norms and practices, stereotypes, harmful cultural practices, and insufficient support for women's agency and rights (MacArthur et al., 2022; UNFPA [United Nations Population Fund], 2023). The GTA sits at the end of the gender integration continuum that consists of gender-exploitative, gender-blind, gender-sensitive, and gender-responsive. Gender-transformative programmes place the rights of women and girls at the forefront, while involving men in bringing about change. In reviewing the literature on GTA, MacArthur et al. (2022) identified five guiding principles: The GTA must i) be motivated towards profound transformation; ii) be focused on the system that perpetuates inequalities; iii) be grounded in strategic gender interests; iv) recognise and value gender identities; and must v) embrace transformative methodologies. The methodologies identified by MacArthur et al. (2022) include reflexive, participatory, action-oriented, and collaborative integration of research and practice. The guiding principles of the GTA allows a scrutiny of approaches used by feminists and how these lead to desired change. GTA best fits our study because we seek to achieve gender equality in Ghana that is sustainable and long-term (see operationalisation for current study below).

4 Methodology

This section describes the methods used in obtaining perspectives of local feminists in Ghana and how these perspectives have and can be used as transformative levers for achieving gender equality. It further describes the study design, population, sample selection, sources of data, type of data collected, analytical framework, and the theory of change.

4.1 Study design, population and data collection

This study was cross-sectional and used a qualitative approach to data collection. The inquiry involved a total of 35 feminist and women's rights activists and advocates who gave responses as individuals or representatives of relevant institutions associated with the Network for Women's Rights in Ghana (NETRIGHT) given the importance of the network in influencing more gender-transformative policies.

Five of the participants were initially selected for piloting the study tool. However, their responses were included in the final analysis due to the richness and the potential of their accounts to bring clarity to some other facts echoed by participants of the main interviews. Some of the participants were also members of the Ghana Domestic Violence Coalition; Women in Law and Development in Africa (WILDAF); and the International Federation of Women Lawyers. The full list of participating organisations is provided in Appendix 1.

Participants of this study were purposefully selected to allow a good representation of organisations across focus/mandates and Ghana's three main geographical zones - Savanna, forest, and coastal. The focus of individuals and organisations spanned advocacy; response to gender-based violence (GBV) (legal, psychosocial, financial, etc.); women's empowerment; implementation of women-sensitive interventions; and broad women's rights activism. We could not successfully eliminate overlaps between organisation mandate/focus areas across the different zones, yet we were able to ensure a good mix of participants representative of the area(s) of operation and years of engagement in the feminism space. It was common for the individuals interviewed to belong to multiple advocacy groups/networks at different time points or to have had previous engagements with other women's rights organisations.

4.2 Data sources

Data for this study was gathered through the following activities: i) desk review of available information on women's activism in Ghana; gender-related and gender-transformative laws and policies in Ghana over the past two decades; ii) individual interviews; and iii) a validation workshop.

The goal of the desk review was to obtain general insights into women's organising and the role of advocacy and activism in improving gender-transformative development in Ghana through policies and laws. It also sought to gather evidence on the progress made, laying more emphasis on the past two decades. Data sources for the review are included.

Individuals identifying as women's rights activists and advocates, as well as representatives of selected women's rights organisations, were booked for one-on-one interviews which were held in-person or on a virtual basis, depending on their availability during the data-collection period (13 to 30 May 2024). In-person meetings were conducted at participants' preferred location, which was mostly their offices, while virtual interviews were conducted via Zoom. All interviews were conducted in English with the occasional use of local expressions in examples or adages given by respondents.

A semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix 2) was used to gather data on participant perspectives on gender norms, their influence on women and society, and how they (individual participants) or their organisations have worked towards driving transformational change through various policies and laws. The interview guide was broadly divided into four sections and covered the following: participant background characteristics; their advocacy work (individuals and organisation); socio-cultural norms; and laws and policies.

Information was gathered on background characteristics included participants' highest level of education, whether they had had relevant training in relation to gender or advocacy work, religious affiliation, ethnicity, and age, if they were willing to disclose this. We collected this data to help situate some of the study's findings as we anticipated that these factors could influence gender awareness, sensitivity, and response approaches in various contexts.

We asked participants to describe their organisations or individual advocacy journey in terms of when and how they got involved, their focus area and motivation, and the prominent gender issues they had been involved with in the past two decades. Study participants were asked

about key socio-cultural norms and practices that discriminated against women and girls in Ghana in both formal and informal spaces; the intersectionality of vulnerabilities/discrimination; women's agency and pushback; access to resources; possible solutions to harmful socio-cultural norms; and their own (feminist) experiences of influential socio-cultural norms that had pushed back on their work.

Pertaining to laws and policies, the participants' perspectives on how gender inequality manifests in formal spaces in Ghana were sought. This included their subjective scrutiny of the significance, content and impacts of existing laws and policies on women's development, and the role of participants in driving change. Participants highlighted specific policies and laws that had been enacted in the past two decades and their individual and collective member involvement in shaping the content as well as the related advocacy for enactment, adoption or implementation. They also highlighted the challenges encountered and successes made within the different strategies they employed to demand an improvement in women's rights and development. Finally, the participants were asked about the status of feminism in Ghana; outstanding gender-related issues; and how their experiences could be leveraged upon to achieve greater gender equality in Ghana.

We conducted a validation workshop in Accra (11 September 2024) involving 30 of the study participants who were able to attend. The workshop was held in a hybrid format and had 25 in-person and 5 online attendances. Key findings of the earlier interviews were presented for discussion, and we took note of the key points of convergence and divergence based on their focus/institutional mandate as well as the strategies used to achieve the anticipated results. The participants made recommendations on the next steps, as gleaned from the main interviews, but also had the opportunity to provide a more comprehensive list of policies and laws they had been involved with, as well as those still outstanding.

4.3 Data management and ethical considerations

All data obtained during the desk study and the extensive literature review were analysed for content and mainly used to provide the context within which this study was conceptualised, conducted, analysed, and discussed.

Data from participant interviews (de-identified) were transcribed verbatim and imported into the NVIVO software for analysis. An initial coding tree, based on the study's objectives and the line of questioning, was agreed upon by the research team (see Appendix 3). Two members of the team coded the contents of all transcripts based on the coding tree using both deductive and inductive coding methods. Both a priori- and a posteriori-generated themes were discussed and agreed upon by the bigger research team iteratively.

The study involved five experienced qualitative research assistants who were carefully trained by the research team for three days prior to data collection. The trainees were well grounded in the study's objectives, ethical considerations, the important interviewing skills required for the targeted participants, rationale for specific questions, and familiarisation with the interview guide. The interview guide was pretested on five experienced feminist/women's rights advocates to check for clarity, consistency, ordering and scope of questions in the interview guide as well as recruitment procedures. Participant feedback did not vary whether the interviews were conducted virtually or in-person. In addition, as mentioned above, the validation workshop was carried out to authenticate the study's findings.

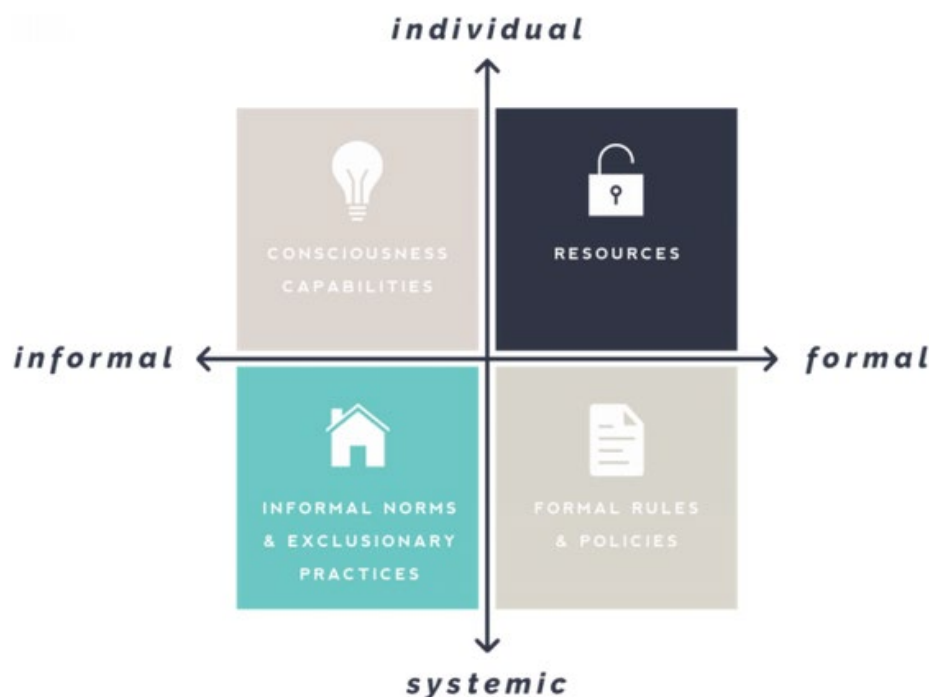
The study was approved by the University of Ghana Ethics Review Committee for the Humanities (Clearance number ECH- 272/23-24). All participants signed an informed consent form before inclusion in the study.

4.4 Analytical framework and theory of change

The theory being considered for the study is the gender at work framework (Harvey & Safier, 2021). This framework is often used to create a theory of change. The framework has four quadrants generally split into formal (right side) versus informal (left side), and then individual (top half) versus systemic (bottom half) (see Figure 1).

The top right-hand of the quadrant refers to how people of different genders can access resources differently. For instance, do men and women, boys and girls, have the same access to the resources in society? The top-left quadrant looks at the individual aspects of inequality, for instance how people perceive gender inequality, and the capacity to deal with those issues. The bottom right-hand refers to formal rules and policies, such as laws, the constitution, and institutional policies that may work against women, girls, and non-binary people in accessing resources, infrastructure, and denying people their basic rights. The bottom left quadrant looks at systemic and informal change. This refers to the cultural norms, beliefs and practices that are discriminatory and deeply ingrained in the society.

Figure 1: Gender at work framework



Source: Gender At Work, 2018

The gender at work framework is relevant in the context of Ghana due to its pluralistic legal system. According to Article 11(1) of the 1992 Constitution, the laws of Ghana comprise the following: i) the (1992) Constitution; ii) enactments made by or under the authority of the parliament established by the 1992 Constitution; iii) any Orders, Rules, and Regulations made by any person or authority under a power conferred by this Constitution; iv) the existing law; and v) the common law which includes “the doctrines of equity and the rules of customary law including those determined by the Superior Court of Judicature”.

Further, Article 11(3) of the 1992 Constitution defines “customary law” as “the rules of law which by custom are applicable to particular communities in Ghana”. The state’s recognition of customary law, amidst other laws creates a very fluid society in which different “rules” and “expectations” or “power” may be prescribed for groups or persons as deemed “reasonable” by

the society. Change, therefore, is only possible when gender inequity is viewed and addressed not in silos but rather as a phenomenon that occurs across different divides: formal-informal and individual-systemic.

The theory of change model for this study is based on the gender at work framework, which highlights the interrelatedness of gender equality across different dimensions – whether formal or informal. In accordance with the framework, the manifestation of gender inequities and, for that matter, desired change should target all the “rules” governing human relations and access to resources in formal and informal spaces. One key assumption in this model is that the “rules” and powers surrounding gender inequity can influence organisations and societies’ ability to be inclusive and equitable. Thus, a thorough understanding of the different spheres in which power imbalances exist is crucial to inform actions to remedy them. For instance, the gender-inequitable socio-cultural norms and beliefs held by individuals and societies may inform individuals’ access to resources and the “allowable” governing policies and laws. Similarly, available resources and formal rules and policies can impact on the everyday practices of inequality in informal spaces.

Thus, feminists, acting individually or as members of CSOs and networks, undertake different advocacy activities/initiatives to improve gender equality across all spheres. Specific actions taken by feminists in order to build a formidable force for more impact beyond individual feminist or CSO mandates include collaboration and collective action, consultative meetings and dialogues, generation of research and evidence, recruitment of new members, and capacity-building of key allies. They also commonly lobby key stakeholders at all levels of a desired action to drive change.

The advocacy aims at influencing change by targeting the key actors, influential structures or institutions operating within each of the quadrants. The key inputs of feminists are three-pronged: provision of support; public education; and advocacy for relevant laws and policies. Activities such as sensitisation on what constitutes gender-based violence and highlighting gender inequalities across formal and informal spheres lead to improved awareness on the part of the general populace as well as the key stakeholders who can institute the change(s). For instance, community-level stakeholders such as traditional and religious leaders who are sensitised about the negative impacts of child marriages can implement measures to stop the menace. Also, the general population who may otherwise be unaware of the law against child marriages will be empowered to resist it or seek redress when violated. With respect to policy- and lawmakers, enlightenment has the potential to improve political will towards the required action. Also, grassroots pressure, demanding political action and/or accountability on specific gender issues can positively impact political action to improve gender equality when perceived to possess voter impact.

Feminist support takes the form of direct provision of victim support and empowerment, facilitating access to resources and services such as legal, etc., technical expertise for the drafting of new and revised policies, laws and development initiatives, policing the implementation of existing laws and policies, calling out and building the capacities of poorly functioning state institutions, and general support for gender equality in all matters. The third input by feminists to promote greater gender equality is the separate focus on the creating of policies and laws. Even though feminists provide technical support for policies and laws, they also act as the “state’s conscience”, calling for relevant gender-transforming laws and policies. This is crucial because Ghana operates a pluralistic legal system, which embodies common law but in a hierarchy that places the constitution above all others. Hence, the provisions of customary law, which draw heavily on customary practices and their inherent gender-inequitable norms and exclusionary practices, need to be deliberately overridden by relevant constitutional laws and policies to improve gender equality. Figure 2 below shows the theory of change (TOC) as conceptualised in this study.

Figure 2: Theory of change



Source: Authors

5 Study results

This section reports on participant characteristics and the manifestation of gender inequity across formal and informal spaces, ranging from individual through to systemic spaces, as described by the gender at work framework. We further present the strategies employed by local feminists to bring about gender-transformative change generally and through laws and policies. We conclude this section with feminist reflections on effective strategies, challenges, and the future of feminism in Ghana.

5.1 Participants' characteristics

The age of study participants was skewed towards older years and was distributed as follows: <40 years (37 years; n=1); 40-49 years (n=8); 50-59 years (n= 11); 60-69 years (n=10); 70+ years (n=5). Similarly, participants had practised as gender advocates between 7 and 56+ years. The majority (n=23) had practised for 20 to 30 years, while few (5 and 7) had practised for over 30 years, and under 10 years. Regarding levels of education, all participants, except for 2, had post-graduate degrees. Their educational backgrounds included human rights and law (n=12); gender, international policy or development studies (n=9); and other areas such as social work, business management and sociology (n=12).

5.2 Informal norms and exclusionary practices

Our study revealed a complex mix of deeply ingrained cultural, social and institutional factors that often lead to violence against women and girls in Ghana. Domestic or gender-based violence in Ghana manifests in various forms, including physical, sexual, emotional, and economic abuse. It is rooted in patriarchal structures that normalise male dominance and control over women, shaping societal attitudes and behaviours toward women's rights and autonomy. Hence, there is normalisation of violence against women within intimate and non-intimate relationships. The socially sanctioned subordination of women and girls often leads to the commodification of women; disregard of their autonomy; denial of access to family resources; women as a medium of exchanges; and the exclusion of women from decision-making. Women from all social status are subject to these practices, even though there may be exceptions to the rule, just as in other country contexts.

Denial of autonomy of women

Participants highlighted a myriad of ways in which women and girls' autonomy are denied. These ranged from prescriptive restrictive cultural norms (taboos on menstruation, marriage and fertility, unpaid care work, women's supportive roles, etc.) to more covert forms such as belittling women's legitimacy in the political and economic spaces. This overt and covert control of women's freedom occurs both in formal and informal spaces, stifling their full participation in decision-making processes and spaces, and sustainable development. For instance, participants gave examples of how some customs lead to a lack of bodily autonomy as well as the sexual abuse of women and girls under unacceptable circumstances, perpetuating cycles of violence and discrimination.

There are still women who say that when a girl menstruates, a man in the house would have to sleep with her. Yes, we confronted that one too, you know, they said it is meant to open eyes [enlighten]. (017)

We also noted that there is a town in Northern Ghana where the custom is that if a girl gets raped in the field, she and the perpetrator are made to re-enact the act publicly to “purify” the land, even if it was not her fault. (018)

Beyond overt customary practices endorsing the worthlessness of women, the participants highlighted how women have been portrayed as inferior in numerous proverbs and wise sayings, and even folk songs across ethnicities and languages in the country, subconsciously influencing behaviour of, and towards women. A typical example of these “wise sayings” cited include: “Even if a woman buys a gun, it stays in a man’s room”. Several studies have investigated Ghanaian proverbs and the construction of gender identities. These proverbs create and perpetuate gender inequalities in the society (Diabah & Appiah Amfo, 2015; Mariwah et al., 2023).

The lower status of women is also manifested in the cultural practice of denying women direct access to inheritable land and property and, in some cases, to farmlands without proof of a male trustee. The denial of access is often explained using marriage as the reason for exclusion both by her own family and the new family. In that, a woman cannot own land or is herself a “man’s belonging”. Thus, giving her land from her own family means another man will possess the family’s possession, and on the flip side, she is seen as a visitor who should not have access to another family’s assets.

Relatedly, women, who form the larger proportion of the informal economic sector, do not have access to pensions and financial resources available to formal sector workers. The participants mentioned that women who dwell in rural areas faced more financial exclusion due to their economic disempowerment imposed by traditions and cultural norms, also denying them education. They noted that economic disempowerment often led to women’s lack of capacity to be assertive or to insist on their rights. The cycle of women’s economic exclusion and disempowerment could be attributed to the lack of women’s representation and voices in economic governance.

In some communities, women don’t have rights to own land or inherit property. Even if they work and earn money, they have little control over their finances because of traditional norms. (018)

Economic dependency plays a significant role in women’s vulnerability to violence. Study participants were fully aware of the structural and cultural barriers that prevented women’s right to and control of property and wealth. A participant expressed their frustration as follows:

[...] Even boys expect that their mothers will submit to them. That one [expectation], even gets under my skin. (017).

Another recurring manifestation of patriarchy is the payment of dowries and bride prices, which further endorse the commodification of women and disregard their autonomy. This low status imposed on women further drives their exploitation within the confines of the home and in society at large. The woman’s value lies in her reproductive role and her productive roles are generally disregarded.

You know, because of our system of dowry. So, because they feel like they’ve bought her, the way they treat her is still in that sense. So, based on that, even when the man that “bought” her dies, she remains the property of the deceased family, [...], she is seen as property and so if you are property how can you take decisions on other property you know? Even issues around sexual reproductive health rights? Yeah. So, because she is seen as property that has been bought or brought into the family, her duty is to come and give birth for the man and his family. (013)

Other overt and easily recognisable forms of VAWG mentioned by study participants include – but are not limited to – the following:

Widowhood rites and denial of access to property

Widowhood rites were mentioned by all study participants, and this cut across all regions of Ghana, even though there is variation across cultures. These rites, often rooted in traditional religious beliefs and superstition, dictate dehumanising expectations on women and inflict unnecessary pain on the already grieving woman. Typically, the rationale behind most activities performed during the rites is to prove her innocence, show her love for the deceased man, and be dispossessed of some “resources/property” believed to have been obtained by virtue of marriage to the deceased. The rites often impose various restrictions ranging from diets, through restrictions in movement and even the ability to engage in income-generating activities. Aspects of the rite, therefore, are believed to “purify” her and rid her of the impending “spiritual” danger she might be in for losing the spouse whether implicated in his death or not. The popular belief is that these rites serve as a deterrent lesson to other women who might be implicated in the death of their spouses. The irony is that there are no complementing rites performed for men who lose their spouses; clearly indicating that men and women are unequal in all spheres of human existence, even in death.

When a man's wife dies, he is only house-bound for about a week or two. When a woman's husband dies, she is house-bound for almost a year. And I did not see the reason why it should be that way. (023)

Participants highlighted the contrast between the legal protection available to women and access to these liberties and called for reforms to address the gap between legal provisions and societal beliefs and practices. Widow inheritance was brought up by some participants as demonstrated in the quote below:

Even in the patriarchal society it is like this: a man dies and the person who inherits that man will have to inherit their wife. (015)

In other cases, the widow, after the abuse of confinement and acts inflicting emotional harm, is ousted from the matrimonial home on grounds as flimsy as “being a stranger to the family of the deceased”, in spite of the Intestate Succession Law, which makes it an offence to eject the widow from the matrimonial home. Advocacy has been directed at improving the rights and status of women by challenging and questioning these cultural practices and by criminalising harmful acts. Nevertheless, fear of community reprisals and individual beliefs in the same, drive many women to succumb to these abusive rites.

Child marriage

Child marriage was identified by some participants as another practice that is rooted in religious beliefs and culture. Marriage is believed to be ordained by God and individuals are expected to adhere to this (Gemignani & Wodon, 2015; Sarfo, Yendork, & Naidoo, 2021). In some traditional societies, some girls are believed to be destined to be married to gods or traditional priests. Religiously and culturally, virginity signifies purity and thus girls are expected to remain virgins before they marry. This leads to the normalisation of infant betrothal, support for early marriage and servitude. The participants bemoaned the negative impact that child marriage, in all its forms, have on the advancement of girls and women in Ghana. While those perpetuating the practice believe that their actions preserve cultural identities, religious prescriptions or fear of harsh spiritual consequences, there remains an unbalanced tension in favour of customs amidst the legal prohibitions of the same (Afranie, Gyan, & Tsiboe-Darko, 2019). Participants directly working in the child rights' space bemoaned the weak state structures/actions to protect children, especially when it involves religion, citing the recent marriage of a girl to a traditional priest as part of Ga traditional religious customs. While key stakeholders clearly identified the practice as a violation of children's rights, the reluctance to intrude in the cultural and religious practices of the Ga ethnic group came to play, especially when incessant warnings were given by the

traditionalists. Furthermore, the general population, even with the knowledge of applicable laws, chose to uphold culture and escape the “anger of the gods” because the chief priest and traditional leaders remained an enigma to them, compared to the laws of the state that can be violated but whose consequences are “manageable”. Below is a quotation from a participant in the human rights and development services:

Look at recently what we all observed, the child marriage thing you know, it's a culture, it's a custom and it is very difficult to protect the people from their culture. Even when they know well, very well, that it's against [their] right, but because it's their culture, they would rather go through it so that they don't incur the “wrath of the gods” than to uphold mere laws that [have] been enacted by human beings that if you have money, you can just go and pay your way out. (020)

Recently, in Nungua [a suburb of Accra], a 63-year-old fetish priest [married] a 13-years old girl who was supposed to have been betrothed to the gods when she was born. They [fetish priests and natives] have some weird explanation for everything that they do. Some of our cultural practices do not stand to reason. The constitution is the one that should rule us but still, people are attached to customary laws and practices which do not really make us democratic. (019)

Another cultural practice that leads to the perpetuation of child sexual and physical abuse is the *trokosi*, a ritual servitude by young girls to a particular shrine to atone for misdeeds committed by a relative. This practice is common among the Ewe ethnic group in Ghana (Asomah, 2015). Study participants reported that it has been very difficult to eradicate the practice because of the ingrained cultural belief, the fear of repercussions, and the prevalence of the practice in neighbouring countries.

Another one that I did advocacy on is the *trokosi* system which you know about and we did a lot of work but since it's a socio-cultural issue [...] And then it involves a whole lot of different groups, the chiefs, the priests, the communities itself and the way that people think, you have to tackle all those levels before you can succeed. Today we have not succeeded because it's a trans-border [issue]. It happens in Togo, it happens in Benin too so they move the girls to various cities to do it [...]. (019)

While women's and child rights' organisations are able to intervene and “rescue” some of these victims from the bondage, the stigma experienced by survivors is severe with lasting negative impacts on their psychosocial health and economic lives (Botchway, 2007). Through the sustained efforts by human rights activists and feminists, *trokosi* was officially abolished in Ghana and over 59 per cent of the victims released (Ameh, 2001). However, the practice still persists due to stigmatisation and the fear of repercussions from the gods.

The *trokosi* system, it means that a virgin is enslaved for life, even if we try like we did to get them out of that bondage, and when they come to do anything [economic activity], people don't buy these things. She will not get a husband. You are an outcast for life; no man will marry you. Like if you've learned to bake bread like we trained some of them, no one will buy from a *trokosi*. (019)

Female genital mutilation (FGM)

FGM is another cultural practice that was mentioned among the influential norms that abused the rights of women and girls. This practice, involving the partial or complete removal of the external female genitalia, was rooted in cultural prescriptions of purity, chastity and social acceptance. Refusal or abstinence from the practice often led to social marginalisation and oppression. The participants reported that the practice and its perpetuation were complex, requiring very comprehensive strategies encompassing community engagement, education,

legal reforms, support for survivors, and amplifying survivor voices on the consequences. FGM is prevalent in the northern section of Ghana. While the national prevalence rate is 4 per cent, the Upper East region has a prevalence rate of 38 per cent and a district (Bawku municipality) within the region has a prevalence rate of 82 per cent (Alhassan & Anyinzaam-Adolipore, 2021). Similar to the *trokosi*, FGM has been criminalised, but the practice still persists.

Witchcraft and witch-hunting

Accounts from study participants showed that accusations of witchcraft directed at women, especially the elderly, often led to them being ostracised from their families and communities, causing profound social and economic marginalisation. They are subjected to physical assaults, verbal abuse, and forced labour in witch camps, where they live under deplorable conditions. This not only subjects women to physical harm but also strips them of their dignity and social standing within their communities. Even though efforts have been made by advocacy groups and human rights organisations to address the issue, it is still prevalent in some communities.

The witchcraft camps in northern Ghana are seen as a source of community pride. However, these camps perpetuate stigmatisation and isolation of women accused of witchcraft, leading to their marginalisation and vulnerability. (020)

Witchcraft accusations lead to severe forms of violence against women. Accused women are often ostracised from their communities, subjected to physical abuse, and denied basic rights. (016)

Inheritance systems in some ethnic groups in Ghana can be harsh on women accused of witchcraft. They are often deprived of their inheritance rights, further exacerbating their vulnerability. (015)

The narratives above describe how gender inequalities are perpetuated informally through socio-cultural systems such as patriarchy, social norms and values, religious beliefs and practices. The inequalities that women in Ghana experience manifest in several forms such as child marriages, FGM, *trokosi*, widowhood rites and denial of access to property, and witchcraft accusations. The submissions of the participants provide a good overview of the discrimination and injustices women in Ghana generally experience.

5.3 Gender inequality in formal spaces

This subsection sheds light on the structural issues that hinder women from seeking justice or support when they experience violence. Some legal frameworks and policies exist, but they are often inadequate or poorly enforced, leaving women vulnerable to ongoing challenges even in the formal space. Gender mainstreaming at all levels of human participation and employment was proposed by participants as a means to ensure that women's interests are adequately addressed. Study participants identified the underlying factor for the structural factors in formal spaces as the lack of political will to improve the status of women. Inadequate financing was a frequently occurring theme across all sub-themes pointing to structural factors. Below are broad categorisations of the key manifestations of systemic/structural gender challenges.

Lack of political will and delays in legislative processes

Some systemic factors identified as having negative impacts on women's rights include the relative disinterest of responsible actors in moving gender-sensitive processes forward. For instance, the DV law was successfully passed in 2007, but it took close to a decade for the legislative instrument (LI) to be drafted and put to use (2016). The process was slow even with

the advocacy surrounding it. It took political will on the part of the incumbent Minister of Women and Children, to facilitate the passage of the LI. There is a strong belief among study participants that there is a weak or no political will to address gender issues compared to other political interests such as “economically vested” laws and policies. Gender-related laws and policies are not seen as politically advantageous, especially within a gender inequitable societal context, and are often of low priority compared to more politically gratifying interests.

We are still where we are. So, I don't know how to assess that because in the country Ghana that we are, irrespective of the advocacy that you carry out, there are powers that decide whether they will pass, or they will not pass. So, you can do all that you want to do but if they decide that they are not going to pass it, all that you can do is to continue advocacy. But really, I don't know what else can be done. (012)

We face resistance from lawmakers who see gender issues as less important compared to other legislative priorities. (017)

The lack of political will is what is killing us. Right now, we are going to pass Affirmative Action. Do you know why? Because the World Bank says if they don't pass it they will not give them money. It's not because they love women. (019)

The lack of political will caused by the lower representation of women in leadership roles could also be an influential factor. Alongside the lack of political will is the long duration of the legislative processes. They mentioned that the delays often arise from bureaucratic inefficiencies, political opposition, or a lack of prioritisation in legislative agendas, resulting in missed opportunities to address urgent gender-equality issues promptly. The advocates believed that the processes, although long, could be improved with high political will as witnessed in the passing of other laws.

Another challenge feminists encounter is the high turnover of responsible officers and ministers of relevant ministries. In Ghana government appointees tend to be changed frequently. This fluidity often led to delays in progression of a proposed bill into law.

It is [...] The story is the same thing for the Affirmative Action Bill [...] we have done everything we did for the ones that were passed but the same story goes almost to the end of the parliament, the four years pass, it has to start all over again. (008)

We have gone to meet parliament. We first met the majority leader, who at that time was Mensa Bonsu. We have also met the Speaker of Parliament, Alban Bagbin. We have gone to meet the Committee on Children and Gender, three times. And I have been in all these delegations. And everybody is giving an excuse. So, I don't know whether it can be passed before the elections. (022)

Lack of resources and state infrastructure to support women at the workplace

The advocates highlighted the absence of gender-sensitive policies, resources and support systems for women in formal settings. These included the subjectivity of maternal leave processes, inadequate childcare facilities for women and inadequate hygiene facilities, and insufficient protection against discrimination, leaving women vulnerable to inequitable institutional culture and practices. Even though the labour law has a provision for women to be given maternity leave, some institutions deny female employees this right by making no internal provision for beneficiaries. Such stiff policies often lead to a compromise in women's wellbeing and that of their offspring, or loss of employment and/or income. Below are some accounts on the same to buttress their observed discrimination of women due to their reproductive roles.

We lack basic facilities like childcare at the workplace, making it difficult for mothers to balance work and family responsibilities. (024)

The company policies are not supportive of women; there's no provision for maternity leave or flexible working hours. (020)

When I asked about breastfeeding breaks, they looked at me like I was asking for something unreasonable. (014)

There's no HR [human resources] policy to address gender discrimination or harassment. We're left to fend for ourselves. (017)

Another key issue highlighted by the interviewees was the sub-optimal treatment of women by state agencies mandated to handle cases of violence, especially regarding law enforcement agencies. They observed that most of the police staff are not trained on how to handle cases of violence against women and girls. Hence, they use their own culturally informed discretion which often perpetuates the abuse(s). These range from the way victims are received when making the report, through victim blaming, belittling the abuse, offering no protection for the victims, to police-perpetrated violence against women (VAW). Aside from the police attitude, they mentioned the high costs associated with securing a medical examination for victims especially in cases of sexual violence, without which it is largely impossible to receive justice in court. They reported that such costs, which could have been funded by the DV fund, are denied the victims and require urgent state action.

Also related to the poor functioning of state machinery is the issue of general institutional (employer) opposition to the victim externally reporting abuses committed internally to the police without a recommendation from the institution or internal mediation. Thus, the long and predictable procedural paths, fraught with inaction, lead to the non-reporting of cases when survivors foresee a gender-inequitable redress.

Sexual harassment

This was highlighted as a very significant challenge in formal spaces that hinders women's full participation in economic development. This is manifested in explicit advances, inappropriate behaviour and comments that create a hostile environment for women. The advocates noted that the weak institutional framework, coupled with the prevailing gender-inequitable cultural norms that tolerate such behaviours and belittle the offence, often lead to the culture of fear and silence among victims. The advocates gave several accounts of sexual harassment experienced by themselves or among their clients and believed that there is no political will whatsoever to address the issue, as it requires acting against men who form the majority of leadership and perpetrators. Thus, study participants believed that the "male-dominated" policymaking space will need the maximum pressure from activists and advocates before progress can be made. A key suggestion to promote this change was the need to push for more women to serve in leadership positions at all levels, giving them the opportunity to influence institutional policies on the same. They noted that, although some institutions have an anti-sexual harassment policy in place as recommended, it is often inadequate to address the canker, especially when penalties are either not given nor enforced. This is in clear contradiction to the ILO Convention C190 (Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019) which is supposed to be in its third stage and yet to be ratified.

Labour discrimination against women due to reproductive roles

The issue of discrimination against women during recruitment and/or after recruitment to organisations because of their reproductive role was also highlighted by the interviewees. The discrimination ranged from denial of jobs due to suspected or actual need for maternity leave in the course of work, women losing income because they were forced to work part-time during maternity leave, women having delayed promotion because they had to take breaks, to women being denied leadership positions with the excuse of women's tendency to be away performing

reproductive roles when the institutions need them. They indicated that these were definitely not backed by any written policy of any organisation but a clear manifestation of cultural norms regarding women's reproductive roles and decision-making. Below are some accounts:

I was denied a promotion because they assumed I would soon start a family and couldn't handle the responsibilities. (017)

The interviewer asked me about my plans for children, and when I said I wanted to focus on my career, they seemed unconvinced. (018)

They told me I couldn't get the job because they needed someone who wouldn't take maternity leave anytime soon. (020)

There's an unspoken bias against women with children. It is assumed we are less committed or reliable. (013)

Gender gap in leadership positions and earnings

The feminists highlighted their dissatisfaction towards the marked gap between women and men when it comes to leadership positions and decision-making roles. They believe that this gap often explains why women's issues are overlooked or improperly addressed by institutional policies and actions. Some advocates argued that women were intentionally excluded from leadership positions by the male-dominated leadership, mirroring the cultural norms that expect women to play supporting, but not leadership roles. They shared their own experience of such discrimination in various instances:

Most of the top management positions are occupied by men. Women are relegated to junior roles despite their qualifications. (024)

The boardroom is male-dominated; decisions are made without considering the perspectives of women. (018)

There's a glass ceiling for women in our organisation. No matter how hard we work, we don't get promoted to senior positions. (022)

Women are overlooked for leadership roles, even though we have the skills and experience. (013)

Related to the observed gender gaps in employment and positions is the issue of the gender pay gap. The feminists reported that this gap could be attributed to the equivalent salaries of the positions left for women to occupy within hierarchies (e.g., managerial positions versus secretarial) or the undervaluing of predominantly female jobs (e.g., early childhood development teachers, domestic workers, etc.) The study participants called for gender parity in leadership roles as well as policies to close the gender pay gap and ensure that people are paid for the work done.

Gender-blind policies and laws

While the women's rights activists demonstrated awareness of existing policies and laws that were meant to address the issue of gender inequality in formal spaces, they referred to some specific policies as "gender-blind". They mentioned that most of the institutional policies which were made when only men were employed in formal spaces have not witnessed significant change to address specific issues that women are likely to face. These include promotions in both formal and informal sectors. They indicated that no provisions are made to accommodate women's reproductive roles and care workloads, job security and women's physical safety. Below are a few accounts:

Safety policies are not gender-sensitive; women's safety concerns are often ignored or downplayed. (022)

There's no policy to ensure equal pay for equal work. Women are paid less for doing the same jobs as men. (014)

5.4 Individual influences and gender inequality

The individual conditions are in two parts: access to resources and consciousness. An individual's access to resources includes possessing adequate skills, access to health and education, and having a political consciousness. The participants highlighted the barriers in access to the justice system for some Ghanaian women. They indicated that it was not very easy for women especially to access justice because they were unable to access legal services. Limited access is shown in their inability to afford legal fees, their inability to afford transportation as well as the logistics involved in gathering evidence in support of their case(s) or participating in the entire process. The majority of police stations (DOVVSU) and courts are located in urban areas making them difficult to access without adequate resources. Lack of knowledge about laws and policies also contributes to the inability of women to achieve justice.

We have highlighted the contribution of systemic factors to gender inequality in Ghana. The systemic factors emanate from both formal and informal structures. The formal structures discussed include sexual harassment, gender-blind policies, the gender gap in leadership, and a lack of resources in support of women. Also, the contribution of individual characteristics to gender inequality has been discussed. In the next subsection, we analyse the strategies feminists in Ghana have utilised to advocate for the rights of women.

5.5 Strategies used by local feminists to influence change

One of the goals of this study was to understand the strategies feminists in Ghana have used to fight for gender equality in Ghana. Our interviews revealed a wide range of strategies employed by feminists and women's rights activists to advance gender-sensitive, and gender equity-promoting policies and laws in Ghana. These ranged from general awareness creation, through lobbying, writing and reviewing of content for policies and laws, creating visibility of bills, to picketing to ensure passage and implementation of applicable laws or policies (see the case study in Box 1).

Advocacy and lobbying

Advocacy is a set of activities that is aimed at changing policies and laws or introducing new ones, influencing opinions and public education. In this paper we use advocacy to denote activities such as increasing awareness and encouraging dialogue on gender-sensitive issues. The advocacy was mostly carried out jointly by individuals and various women's rights organisations in a well-coordinated manner, especially among members of NETRIGHT. The participants believed that no single gender-transformative policy or law in Ghana was passed without some work from feminists in different capacities. The sensitisation activities included radio programmes, workshops, community dialogues, prime TV discussions and press releases. These activities were meant to foster a deeper understanding of the systemic issues that perpetuate gender inequality. Public engagements foster discussions that challenge prevailing gender norms and injustices.

First, we have to say that women's rights activists, for every law that was passed, they [women's activists] were at the forefront and at the centre of it. I think for our country,

none of these laws just woke up and came about because the people have realised that equality is important, it has to be fought for by women. They have to lobby in the background, forefront, side, centre, play all parts of it to get it to go through. So, we will have to give credit to them. (002)

I spoke a lot about advocacy through different strategies. Sometimes, we wrote memos to the relevant ministries [...], we also wrote memos to parliament, particularly when a bill [had] already been introduced. We would engage parliament through memos to put our point across in terms of what we want to see, you know, in that particular law. (024)

Awareness creation formed an important aspect of the advocacy work done by feminists. These were mainly targeted at women at the grassroots and in the general population as well as key response stakeholders such as ministries, departments and agencies, including law enforcement and media. The rationale shared by respondents on this strategy to create awareness through various training programmes and workshops was to ensure that participants understood the gender-equity narrative well enough to positively contribute as different stakeholder groups to ongoing discourse and response pertaining to specific gender-related issues and actions. Below is a quote from one participant in relation to the Affirmative Action Law which had not been passed at the time the interviews were being conducted.

I facilitated lots of workshops explaining why we're doing it, what we were aiming at, coming up with reasons, justifications for wanting [the] Affirmative Action Law to be passed because it's become difficult and the figures [women's representation in Government] were still looking bad. That's why I said that it's sad to see that story.

The sensitisation was also typically increased alongside specific bills being proposed to the government. Hence, the education campaigns both increased knowledge and created a visibility of the bills. A key example where this strategy was used was in relation to the Land Act. The campaigns were organised in conjunction with the Widows and Orphans Movement. On this issue special sensitisation campaigns were targeted at traditional authorities/leaders and the parliamentarians, among other stakeholders. Further, the sensitisation of the general population (mostly of women) was for them to hold their parliamentarians responsible if the bill was not passed into law.

The Widows and Orphans Movement was part of the advocacy work towards the passage of the Land Act. We did most of the engagements especially with the traditional authorities, the paramount chiefs, towards the passage of the bill into a law. We also did a lot of the initial sensitisation of the women groups to hold their parliamentarians accountable, to ensure that it was passed. (013)

We did a lot of workshops to sensitise people, the various segments and parliamentarians and chiefs. We have various stakeholders. I took the parliamentarians, and we had to let them understand why they have to back us. The various organisations were assigned to various stakeholders to really let them understand. (019)

Another influential tool used for mass sensitisation was press releases and the issuing of positional statements on pertinent issues. These statements were often used by feminist groups to assert their agency in shaping national agendas and challenge societal norms that perpetuate gender inequality. For instance, statements from organisations like WILDAF Ghana and NETRIGHT provided clear directives on the policy changes needed to advance women's rights, such as the passage of the Affirmative Action Bill. These declarations hold authorities accountable for fulfilling their commitments to gender equality.

The Woman's Manifesto, I did mention that it was the first time women were coming together to develop their own manifesto, and it is still relevant to this day, because the issues that are in the manifesto are still relevant. (012)

Beyond the general improvement in knowledge and awareness of key stakeholders was the need for the targeted lobbying of influential stakeholders to facilitate gender-transformative change in Ghana and beyond. Direct lobbying of relevant stakeholders involves the strategic framing of contentious issues as well as continuous advocacy on known policies and laws in direct meetings. Some participants reported that they had had to lobby parliamentarians and ministers, especially individually (sector ministers; chairs of relevant parliamentary committees) or in groups depending on what they judged would be effective. Lobbying was not limited to politicians and the responsible government officials; it also involved other stakeholders such as trade unions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and other non-state actors, including development partners.

We also engaged the committee, the Select Committee on Land, and we attended all meetings. We also did capacity-building training. We even developed a manual on the bill for people to understand the bill. And then, after developing the manual, we train[ed] people on the manual, okay. Then [...] I think we also did a publication breaking the bill into pieces for people to understand. (012)

Collaboration and coalition-building

The chief cornerstone of the feminist movement in Ghana is collaboration among themselves and building coalitions. These alliances and networks, reflecting a unified front, amplify their voices and the subsequent desired impact. Individuals and members of various feminist organisations operate from across the nation even though there seems to be a higher concentration in the Greater Accra region. There is a significant presence of relatively small implementing organisations and NGOs outside the city centres, which are linked/connected to different networks within the gender space. The connectedness among the various organisations is further explained by existing and previous partnerships for project implementation, and activities related to the feminist movement in Ghana. Irrespective of the geographical locations, members or member organisations are galvanised to respond to pertinent issues by forming movements. These movements exemplify the concerted efforts to unify diverse stakeholders behind common goals that are powerful enough to challenge existing power structures and create the momentum for legislative reforms and societal change.

We did a lot of networking and information-sharing. We did a lot of work with like-minded organisations, NGOs; those days we worked with donor agencies for example. (016)

In fact, we now have quite a number of groups springing up [...]. I remember working with this group called the Young Urban Women's Movement, and this is a group of young women who have been trained; and they are developing the agency of young women to challenge inequality. So, wherever they are, they challenge inequality at the workplace. So, I think we need more of such groups. (015)

Women's rights organisations normally built coalitions around certain issues. The coalitions consisted of members of organisations and individuals, and they became the focal group leading the advocacy work on the specific issue. The three important coalitions in the feminist space are the Women's Manifesto Coalition; the DV Coalition; and the Affirmative Action Coalition. For instance, the DV Coalition mobilised stakeholders and created public discourse around the related bill or policy. Activities carried out by these coalitions included media engagements, roundtable discussions, public fora, and galvanising support for public accountability on the appropriate issue. Essentially, the coalitions become the face of the specific issue being advocated for. Organising around the coalition allows for better coordination among the feminists, enables them to work together to channel their resources on a particular issue and provides them with one voice, while minimising the backlash targeted at an individual/organisation.

Before the Affirmative Action Coalition was formed, I worked extensively. Our organisation worked extensively for development, you know, that's the host organisation for the Affirmative Action Bill. (016)

For the Domestic Violence Act for instance, I would say that when you come to the CSO space, it was the women's rights organisations that made it known and pushed for its passage, even when they were facing all the backlash, the back and forth and so on, they stood their grounds and made sure that it was passed. When I take the Land Act for instance, for the gender [...] for the GESI (gender equality and social inclusion) provisions to be in there, it was NETRIGHT and other women's rights organisations that pushed to ensure that it was there. (012)

Knowledge-sharing and exchange was also a key strategy reported by the study participants, where more experienced organisations and individuals transferred knowledge to relatively newer members either through collaborations or dedicated training sessions. The harmonisation of feminist ideologists to direct energies to common goals were achieved through the umbrella networks of women's rights organisations such as NETRIGHT and by nominating responsible coordinating/spearheading organisations towards specific tasks. This made it possible for the required expertise and other resources to be pooled together to address common challenges. The willingness of organisations and individual feminists to support a worthy cause could not have been overemphasised by the participants.

We can also network with other women's rights organisations to facilitate information exchange, mutual support and collective action. For example, we are part of NETRIGHT and we are also doing some of these things. (016)

We need both generations to push the feminist agenda forward [...] if you are working on welfare issues, if you are looking at policy advocacy, if you are looking at changing the system, the status quo, you are all working towards promoting women and girls' rights and promoting gender equality. (012)

Enlisting non-feminist allies

In as much as mobilisation of feminists at all levels proved influential in the advocacy for gender-sensitive policies and laws, alliances with relevant persons outside their own networks also proved beneficial. These allies included men who were experienced legal practitioners, parliamentarians or civil servants. Below are some participant accounts:

If you don't have male allies sometimes some of the things would be difficult to do. Like I said we saw males talk about domestic violence [...] So, it is good that we can get male allies and then use the male allies as champions to really address some of these issues. It's just like you get a male parliamentarian who is for affirmative action and can really rally support from the parliamentarians to really get it passed. (003)

Even for NETRIGHT, aside from the consultations and the inputs, we also got a legal person to look at the bill and provide inputs, and we put all those together. We submitted it to parliament. (012)

Not simply women but also men. You've had an engagement with civil servants. So we have a mix of policymakers, civil servants, activists and people at the grassroots level to understand so that they understand what the bill is. (035)

The use of male allies is to both gain access to platforms where women would otherwise not be allowed to advance the agenda, as well as to assist the movement with more "sensitive messaging" in the fight for women's rights. Having male allies advocating for women's rights is generally better received compared to women, who may be easily ignored and classified as

“deviants”, acting contrary to the patriarchal provisions in society. The few men involved in this study also felt that the involvement of more men would be beneficial to the success of the movement. This is also in recognition that society is made up of different genders, and that to achieve societal change all genders must be included. Thus, intentionally targeting different groups such as civil servants or policymakers during planned engagement with activists leads to more equitable attitudinal shifts as compared to a non-targeted general population of men. The general belief is that men feel “attacked” or guilt-tripped by feminist calls for women’s empowerment, especially when the communication messages are not sensitively drafted. Study participants called for the elimination of language suggestive of female aggression aimed at making women superior to men but, rather, that all persons benefit equally from constitutional provisions irrespective of their gender. This call was an admission that some feminist in the early stages of the movement may have given the impression that women were out to take men’s places in society. Below is a quote from a participant.

You see, no, this was my belief. More than 20 years back, I had insisted that until we change our approach and our posturing and all that, this is how the men are going to see it. And this is the pushback. But the leaders thought otherwise. (032)

Research and evidence-generation

Very closely associated with advocacy is research and evidence-generation, which has been the backbone of all advocacy-related activities. Study participants described how they participated in data-gathering and analyses to generate the necessary evidence to inform their advocacy approaches. The evidence also informed the crafting of their educational and sensitisation messages to the public. They mentioned that the research took different forms depending on the intended use. In that, an organisation can undertake either a desk review or pilot studies to investigate an issue within their area of interest. An organisation can also undertake a large-scale survey such as was conducted by the Gender Centre in 1998 to gather evidence on DV. That evidence formed the basis for advocating for the need for a DV bill to be passed. Irrespective of the scope of evidence, the advocates believed that evidence was crucial in the advocacy space, especially within the culture of silence and trivialisation of women’s issues.

We work with women on the ground so, like I said earlier, when we generate data we can give it to our national leads and, like NETRIGHT, they use it to do more of the engagement on our [feminist movement] behalf and also at our level, we use some of our data for policy influencing and policy advocacy and implementation levels. (028)

So some of the strategies were, I mean, conducting research to gather evidence. First of all, of the need for that particular law in this country. So, we did some of that. (024)

Participating in research either directly or commissioning research led to evidence-based advocacy which becomes too difficult to be ignored compared to anecdotal evidence. Furthermore, the evidence informs intervention programming and an opportunity to also assess the impact of existing actions.

Consultative meetings and dialogues

Our study participants indicated that the early stages of any advocacy or agitation for improved gender equality was preceded by wide consultations which could be among themselves (feminists) in or outside the country, as well as with other key stakeholders such as traditional and religious leaders. These interactions served as platforms for discussing challenges faced by women, for the identification of solutions, and for mobilising support for gender-related policies and interventions. For instance, their engagement with religious leaders often aimed at

aligning the provisions of the act with religious provisions. When it comes to traditional leaders, the discussion seeks to highlight the negative impacts of gender inequality (including misconceptions about women) and demonstrates how the improvement in the status and rights of women will promote peace, development and the revered family values.

Then there was also consultation across the country. Every region [at the time the country had 10 regions] was visited by the feminist/women's rights groups and engaging all because people were saying it's [the DV Bill] against our traditional beliefs and our family systems; so they took their laws, simplified it, and I think it was even translated into different and simple languages. They published all of it in hard copies. We sat down with the women's group, the men's group and all. So, while parliament and cabinet were playing whatever games they had to do, there was engagement on the field. (002)

Then engagement with stakeholders, the religious authorities, aligning the provision of the act with religious provisions [...], the traditional authorities; the mapping out of the critical stakeholders and the engagement with them. Yes, it took a long time and I was engaged in all of these processes, very, very, very much throughout the Volta region, in fact all over Ghana [...] and dispelled them [myths about domestic violence], yes it was very, very effective [...]. (008)

For instance, we have previously engaged in the constitutional and legal affairs of parliament. In regard to, for example, the Land Act that was passed; [we] engaged them for example also on amendments that are being proposed to the Intestate Succession Law. (024)

The consultative meetings were used to garner the broader support of different stakeholders in the society. It was also used to create awareness about the gender-inequitable issue being worked on at any particular moment.

Compromise, or accepting incremental progress by feminists, was a key characteristic when it came to specific laws or policies that shifted the power balance beyond that which existing patriarchal norms could accommodate. An example of a landmark law where a compromise was necessary was the Domestic Violence Bill. According to the participants, the originally proposed bill contained the repeal of a provision in the Criminal Code that assumed automatic consent by the parties in marriage to sex (meaning a man could not be charged with marital rape), which was considered incomprehensible by the responsible "government actors". The standard feedback that gender advocates and activists received at the time was that "the law cannot be passed in its current state [criminalising marital rape]". Upon further consultations, the section repealing the provision of the Criminal Code was dropped and the law was successfully passed, almost six years after the bill had first been introduced by the attorney general's department for consideration. Obviously, this win was not what was expected by the feminists but embodied a great achievement after a long struggle.

Well, I know the Domestic Violence Act. That went through a lot of processes. It took more than seven years. And as a result, they even formed a coalition. Domestic violence, all of us were involved. So, it took so many years. Seven years. They watered it down; they removed so many things. And I remember when we started the bill, there was a section on marital rape. It was taken out. Because they felt that in African society, there can't be anything like marital rape. Because a man cannot rape [his] wife. So, because it is a right for the man to always demand sex. So, they took it out. (031)

Inherent in the compromise was also the flexibility and the capacity (mostly legal) to produce necessary content and requested revisions for the bills. Similar to what happened with the DV law, the Affirmative Action Bill also underwent several revisions from the proposed draft to the final draft which was accepted.

It is the Affirmative Action Bill [...] right from the background paper to the Affirmative Action Bill, I wrote. I was commissioned to write a background paper and the many things from that paper are in the law, the drafting instruction we gave to the attorney general; many engagements, oh yes! (008)

So we supported the attorney general's department in drafting the bills. Of course, they have meetings with us. We say A, B, and C. They say go and put it together in their own language because they know the language that will pass [legally appropriate] [...] And then of course, [mentions names], and all those people were very active in those places, because they are the legal people. So those of us who are into service provision, we are looking at, okay, so what will help the service delivery and those things. (017)

Support for drafting and review of instruments

Women's rights advocates felt it was their responsibility to constantly review the contents of existing laws and make inputs to new bills to ensure their fidelity in responding to women's rights issues. They played significant roles in shaping the legislative framework for advancing gender equality. They often worked together with policymakers and legal experts and mostly put the legal experts and legally oriented organisations working within the feminist space out in the front, such as WILDAF Ghana. The landmark law which was widely cited was the DV law. Local feminists were involved right from the drafting stage of the bill, made revisions and pushed for the passing into law. However, the group did not stop once it was passed but continued with support in developing and pushing for the draft/passing of the legal instrument for its implementation, among other things. Below is a quote from one of the participants who was involved in the process from inception to what we have today:

Playing the role of getting the reports written, synthesising all the findings from the reports and drafting it into a cabinet memo when it went to cabinet. And it went to parliament, you know, like I said, working also with the police at the time, WAJU [Women & Juveniles Unit of the Ghana Police Service] and civil society, the DV coalition. So yes, this is how it was done. It was done with the DV coalition, the Ghana Police Service specifically, WAJU at the time now DOVVSU [Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit of the Police]. So that is the role that we played before it went to parliament and was passed into a law and assented to by the president. And then also set up the DV secretariat. And then [we] also had the DV plan of action [...] drafted. Yes, so these are some of the things that I and my organisation was involved with. (021)

In terms of the legislative instrument, yes, we were part of some of the dialogues and then the reviews of the drafts that led to the passage of the LI. (013)

When laws are passed by parliament, policies are formulated to operationalise the laws. The policies are drafted by the sector minister and approved by the cabinet. Thus, the work of feminists does not necessarily end with the passage of a bill. In terms of policies, local feminists have been at the forefront calling for reforms especially to address gender inequities in formal spaces such as education and labour. They have often served on technical committees in relation to gender-sensitive or -transforming policies and laws. A landmark policy within the education sector was the "back to school after pregnancy" provision across all levels of the Ghanaian education system. Previously, pregnant adolescents and pre-university students were dismissed from school for being pregnant and had significant difficulties in re-enrolment within the same school. Local feminists worked closely with the sector ministry to draft the policy disallowing the practice and ensuring that girls had access to formal education irrespective of pregnancy/birth status. Within the labour space, the former structural barrier in the labour law which disallowed women from working in male-dominated areas such as mining and petroleum has been eliminated by feminist advocacy on the same. Advocacy in these

areas and in others, such as agriculture, they believe, has contributed to increased economic empowerment for women.

Monitoring the implementation of existing laws and policies

Policing and demanding the full implementation of enacted laws that affect women's rights formed part of the routine tasks of individual advocates and women's rights organisations. The key strategy was to "know the law and advocate for when to push for a policy". Proactiveness was another strategy that was listed by participants at the validation workshop. They believed that this role was necessary to safeguard women's rights especially within the prevailing patriarchal and gender-inequitable context. The focus has mainly been on whether and how the state agencies mandated to address issues of women's right abuses are capacitated to function. An example of this "policing" role was demonstrated in the pressure mounted by local feminists for the legislative instrument needed for the implementation for the DV law to be passed. Following the passage of the LI in 2016, the new pressure being mounted on the government and the relevant ministry was in relation to the management of the DV fund, without which much state protection and the support of victims would be impossible. The gaps identified by local feminists in the implementation of specific laws often drove the necessary action taken by them to salvage the situation. Still in relation to the DV law, advocates decried the very limited number of DOVVSU centres around the country, particularly in the rural areas which had a relatively higher incidence of VAWG. This has led to infrastructural provisions as well as internal arrangements within the police service to find ways of addressing issues of VAW that should be handled by the DOVVSU. Another gap identified is in relation to the capacity of the police either placed within the DOVVSU unit or in police stations without the units to manage abuse of women's rights. This led to widespread and consistent training sessions organised for the police by the various different organisations either collectively or along their scope of work. Meanwhile, advocacy is still ongoing for other response actions such as the building of shelters for victims and the elimination of structural hindrances to women accessing justice such as payment for medical reports, and so on.

We've also done some research to actually document, you know, the implementation of the law and the challenges that the institutions that are implementing it or mandated to implement it are facing which is affecting the effectiveness of the law. (024)

Another action highlighted by the study participants was the push for local policies emanating from the United Nations conventions or other international conventions ratified by the country. Thus, they keep track of international human rights provisions that Ghana is a signatory to and keep up pressure for these to be adopted into Ghanaian legislation or for them to be incorporated into relevant policies and laws. Local feminists pick each of these issues of international interest and rally support for the necessary processes towards realisation in Ghana to be fast-tracked. An example was the Human Trafficking Act.

The Human Trafficking Act. You know, all these acts are obligations that arise from the UN resolutions or the acts that we [as a country] go and we go and assent to. So, when you go to the UN and you sign up to any resolution or any act, you are supposed to come back and implement it. So that's the resolution [...] so, most of these acts, most of these bills were championed by civil society organisations. And of course, we have to work with the government because it's the attorney general's duty. (017)

Subsequent review of passed laws

The participants mentioned the domestic violence (DV) law in particular as one for which a call to review was made by the feminist movements to address some inherent issues fuelled by vague clauses. The requested review brought to light the need to clarify the classification of

violence to include emotional types, and the fact that DV is not just a “women’s issue” which increases gender equality for women. The requested review also aimed at addressing some omissions and/or ambiguities that were found in existing acts by including and/or correcting them in the new ones. For example, the Criminal Offences Act which existed before the DV Act touches on misdemeanour such as physical abuse; however, other aspects of domestic violence (for instance, psychological abuse and aspects of economic abuse) were not addressed by that act. Aside from the DV Act, the Affirmative Action Bill was widely mentioned as another that had gone through a series of reviews right from the background paper to the final version that was passed by parliament barely two weeks after the interviews for this study were conducted. (It was also known as the Gender Equity Act and was passed on 31 July 2024).

Local feminists have also successfully pushed for the review of the Land Act to eliminate the vagueness inherent in previous clauses, leading to exclusion of some women or the denial of benefits during unforeseen circumstances such as divorce. Regarding rights to property, they indicated that the definition of “household chattel” in PNDC law 111 was unclear and subject to misapplication. This was particularly critical because the customary law in Ghana supports polygamy yet makes no clear provision for women in such marriages regarding the share of properties, and more so, when they co-own or made significant contribution to the estate. They (the advocates) have also worked with groups such as the Ghana Federation of Disabilities to address the intersectionality with disability which is also unclear in existing bills.

For the Land Act, I know that the women’s movement was involved throughout the processes, and it was the women’s movement that in fact made sure that some of the gender provisions we have currently in there came into being. So, for instance, the Land Act talks about the Land Commission [registering] lands in the full name of the parties, so they should no longer say Mr. and Mrs. [surname]; they should bear the full name of the woman and the man. You know, so that in case of divorce and a new spouse, they don’t come and say that “I’m now the new Mrs. I am now entitled to this property”, though somebody else sweated for it and so the women’s movement was crucial in ensuring that these gender provisions were incorporated. (013)

Study participants noted that the strategies adopted for bills are different from what they employed for policies. The key difference is with the persons/stakeholders targeted with advocacy. For example, policies typically involve the sector ministry, cabinet and development partners (where applicable), whereas laws involve a wider group of stakeholders, including parliament, traditional leaders, religious leaders and the general public.

Box 1: Case study

In 1997, the Gender Studies and Human Rights Documentation Centre (Gender Centre) decided to undertake a nationwide study on violence against women and children. As a relatively young organisation with very few staff, it decided to bring on board other organisations that were working in different parts of the country. These organisations were the Bawku East Women's Development Association, BEWDA; Action Aid Ghana; Amasachina; Maata-N-Tudu; Associates in Development, ASSID; the Centre for Sustainable Development Initiatives, CENSUDI; the Centre for Development of People, CEDEP; and the General Agricultural Workers Union, GAWU of the Trades Union Congress, TUC. These organisations were not necessary women's rights organisations but their work involved working with women as well. They were encouraged to see work around VAW as important to promoting women's rights in every field. The staff of the organisations were trained to undertake the data collection under the supervision of experienced researchers from the University of Ghana. The methodology was in three parts: Review of court and police records; focus group discussions and in-depth interviews; and a quantitative survey.

After the publication of the research findings in 2000, the Gender Centre undertook a wide dissemination of the findings among NGOs and women's rights organisations as well as the capacity-building of these organisations and their members to encourage mainstreaming of VAW within their activities.

In 2001, a group of women lawyers who had each undertaken master's degrees at Georgetown University had set up an organisation called Leadership and Advocacy for Women in Africa, LAWA Ghana. As their project work, they had decided to advocate for the passage of a domestic violence law as the existing Criminal Code did not address the issue of violence against women. With the research, it was agreed that the findings provided enough evidence to advocate for the law. LAWA prepared a draft law which was to be submitted to the attorney general. Fortunately, this was the period of the change in government and a member of FIDA had been appointed as an assistant to the new attorney general (AG), thus providing easy access to the AG. The AG accepted the draft and promised to work on it. In December 2001, the attorney general presented a new draft at a meeting at which the women's rights organisations (WROs) were invited. The draft was to be subject to nationwide consultation for comments by the general population. In 2002, a meeting was organised in Accra coordinated by the Gender Centre, the Ark Foundation, the Women's Initiative for Self-Empowerment, WISE and others to introduce the bill to a wider WRO group. At this meeting, it was agreed to appoint organisations from the different regions to coordinate the sensitisation activities in all 10 regions. The initial funding for the sensitisation across the country was provided by the Gender Centre which had set aside funding for the advocacy work. This initial meeting was the beginning of the DV Bill Coalition which worked tirelessly for nearly seven years until the passage of the Domestic Violence Act in 2007.

Lessons learnt:

1. Partnership: This was a key strategy that was utilised at every stage, during the research and the advocacy through to the passage of the law. The partnership was made up of like-minded organisations whose members knew each other and belonged to some other organisations.
2. Capacity-building: It was recognised that, in order to undertake effective sensitisation and awareness-raising around the issue of violence against women, it was important to bring on-board other interested organisations that might not have knowledge around the issue. In this regard, several training programmes were held for staff of the organisations that had expressed interest in working on VAW.
3. Training programmes: These were also directed at not only increasing the capacity of implementing partners on the project, but also state agencies such as the police, health service staff and social workers, civil society organisations and individuals to be able to respond to reported and suspected cases of violence against women and children.

4. Joint leadership: Even though each organisation had its own structure and leadership, it was found necessary to share leadership among the various lead organisations, the Gender Centre, the Ark Foundation and WISE. This was to avoid a situation where there would be a conflict among the partners. A steering committee was set up and expanded to include some other organisations. Joint ownership of the coalition and its work was intended to ensure sustainability.
5. Public awareness-raising and sensitisation campaigns: These were undertaken, targeting women and children and all members of society vis-à-vis the issue of violence against women and children in order to break the cycle of violence and its social acceptance.
6. Utilising key national and international events: In 2006, when Ghana presented its periodic report to the CEDAW Committee, women's rights organisations presented a shadow report to the Committee urging the government to assent to the DV Act which had been passed by parliament but had not been assented to by the president. In its Concluding Observations, the Committee asked the president to assent to the bill and, within three months, he did so.

Source: Authors

5.6 Challenges to feminist and women's rights organising in Ghana

The main challenges identified by the study participants included declining core funding and support for their activities, backlash, and a general loss of momentum in feminist activities in Ghana.

Declining funding support from donors

One significant challenge confronting feminists in Ghana is the lack of adequate funding. The study participants reported that there had been a very significant reduction in funding support from donors and non-government agencies both within and outside of Ghana since Ghana was declared a country with middle-income status. The non-availability of funds for logistics often impeded the activities of these organisations such as staff development, mass mobilisations, lobbying, and so on. The participants reported that the relatively non-existent funding for the feminist movement itself, as well as for its projects, makes it difficult for them to even engage each other on various issues.

Backlash

Feminists in Ghana face significant opposition and societal backlash on their work emanating from the negative perceptions of "feminists and feminism" in general. The negative perceptions range from a defiance of the cultural norm to an actual rebellion or hostility towards men. While the majority of feminists are not deterred by the negative perceptions of them as individuals, working for and speaking on behalf of organisations and movements helped amplify their voices and also shielded them from direct personal attacks.

Needing to say that you are feminist in Ghana [...] people see you as an outcast, as somebody that doesn't fit. A lot of us would rather work within the structures of an organisation and speak through our organisations and movements in terms of women's rights. (024)

Relatedly, the participants reported that there is a general/widespread decline in feminist activities in Ghana. They complained that the burnout experienced by some members in the face of diminished organisational capacity for long-term planning is evident among their members. Some members were experiencing a burnout just because of the prolonged delays in the passing of important bills into law or adoption of gender-transformative policies, constantly deferring their hope for change.

Advocates face burnout from prolonged battles for gender equality without adequate support. (014)

There's a lack of sustained commitment to gender issues due to organisational fatigue and competing priorities. (017)

Capacity-building efforts are undermined by high turnover and lack of resources for staff development. (024)

5.7 The future of feminism in Ghana

Study participants indicated that all the strategies they had used so far had worked very well and would be maintained in the future. However, key strategies that should be highlighted in order to transform the future of feminism/advocacy in Ghana include the institutionalisation of intergenerational dialogues on gender and women's issues; pushing for the introduction of gender into educational curricula; intensifying the recruitment of male allies; the use of social media; and, a review of the Women's Manifesto of 2004.

Institutionalisation of intergenerational dialogues on gender and women's issues. The participants iterated that the strength and sustainability of the feminist movement heavily depended on maintaining a great connection between different generations of feminists. We observed some generational gaps in information during our interviews, with relatively older feminists more easily charting the course of the struggle for improving gender equity through policies and law. The feminists that had worked in the space for over two decades called for a strengthening of the movement to make it as vibrant as it was in the very early days of their advocacy. They decried the current relatively more disjointed and weak nature of feminist mobilisation necessary to push for change. While the participants who were relatively new in the gender space (less than 10 years) also believed in strengthening the movement, they leaned more towards actions in their organisational focus (e.g., economic empowerment, support, awareness-creation, legal support, etc.) rather than towards a single agenda to promote women's rights in general as observed among the "older" groups. Active recruitment and training of younger feminist and women's rights advocates and activists was a high priority for both older and younger groups. Below are some quotes from these advocates:

We should keep on cultivating, bringing on board more young women and giving them confidence, training and supporting them; and then we'll soon have a core [group] of young women advocates all over the country, and I think the Gender Centre has done a good job doing that, working across the sectors and with all the women and women in the feminist Movements; [...] and I think they're doing a good job. (004)

The other thing has to do with intergenerational dialogues, and I know NETRIGHT has started doing that well to be able to sieve down [deal with] some of the topics [gender inequitable norms] that we have picked in our culture and even with our peers wrongly. We learn from the older generation and give them room to listen to new things. We are in the ICT [information and communication technology] era where the older people might not be very conversant with; but if we are able to do that, identify the gaps, we would be able to move on. (030)

Beyond the onboarding of younger women's rights advocates, there is also a shift to involve younger persons in gender rights improvement programming to increase awareness of gender inequity in the context and to decrease tolerance for violence. A participant described it as follows:

Yes, that's why I was saying that we are now doing transformative programming where we are looking at intergenerational dialogue and bringing younger people to the centre. We are also having programmes that are encouraging youth participation and active engagements. Because many times, just like the women, the youth too suffer within our context [...] And so now there's that thinking to bring younger people in programming so that they are able to also lead some of the discussions. (005)

Still within the strategy of educating the younger generations to bring long-term change in gender inequitable norms, local feminists hope to advance the **integration of basic gender studies into the educational system**. They believe that finding a way to include basic information in school curricula will go a long way to fostering societal change in attitudes and behaviour. It is expected that age-appropriate content will be provided at each stage, from basic school up to the high school level, equipping students with the tools to reduce their risk of experience of and perpetuating gender inequity. While this approach has promise, they noted that this will take massive advocacy efforts as curriculum-changing processes are often daunting, even if not impossible.

Another strategic plan of feminists is intensifying efforts at **recruiting male allies** as opposed to the broad enlisting of non-feminist allies in the past to fight for women's rights. They hope to involve (invite, recruit and train) more men into the various different women's right organisations and the wider movement.

A fourth strategy that local feminists hope to use in the future is to **run social media campaigns** on the need for new bills and a review of existing laws and policies and to bring visibility to their work in improving the lives of women. Participants believed that social media presents a special opportunity to attract, retain and involve the youth in championing gender equality and equity in Ghana. The utility of social media and digital solutions to galvanise support in different places in the country at the same time has been minimally utilised in the past compared to mainstream media presence, possibly due to a lack of capacity. Though the participants recognise the challenges of social media campaigns in terms of accessibility, hate speech, death threats, and so on, it is still a tool that has great potential in reaching a wider audience.

And social media is a place that is very hard to navigate, but probably is one of the options we have. (002)

Some of the strategies we employed were to use some of the youth wings that we have to advocate for their involvement in the review of these policies. So, some were on social media. We did a lot of social media campaigns and at some point, we also used some platforms where we were able to talk. (010)

Today social media, yes, will be very successful. But of course, the hard work on the ground too has to be done. People have to write their papers; people have to do their research. So, you know, when we look at anything that's been successful, all the elements need to be involved. (026)

Finally, another task they recognised needed action was a **review of the Women's Manifesto** (2004) to include new and emerging issues such as climate change and other environmental impacts. While participants called for increased momentum in relation to the Women's Manifesto group, they also believed that a scorecard measuring impact would be invaluable to influencing governments to act. The call for increased visibility and strengthening of their impact, they opined, was dependent on a well-tempered balance of a multifaceted approach which combines

lobbying, research, sensitisation, and collective action. There is a resounding positivity in the responses given by our study participants regarding how they can influence change. However, they also reiterated some overarching gaps in the Ghanaian context that stifle the collective push for gender-transformative change and sustainable development at large.

Participants mentioned a myriad of outstanding or pending gender-transformative policies and laws that were still of interest to feminists and advocates. These include the following: The Property Rights of Spouses Bill; the Amendment of the Criminal Offenses Bill to prohibit witchcraft (popularly referred to as the “anti-witch bill”); the Human Sexual Rights and Family Value Bill; the Marriages Act (consolidation of all marriage acts); the Review of the Intestate Succession Law (PNDC Law 111); the National Gender Policy (draft accepted but yet to be launched); the ILO Convention on Sexual Harassment at the Workplace (C190); and the Social Protection Bill.

6 Discussion

This study has sought to examine the systemic and structural conditions that prevent sustainable gender-transformative policies in Ghana. It also sought to investigate Ghanaian feminists’ experiences in advocating for the rights of women and how they can be used as levers for sustainable gender equality. The theoretical framework, on which the study is based, is the gender-transformative approach (MacArthur et al., 2022). This focuses on the systemic and structural factors that create and perpetuate gender inequity. The systemic roots of gender inequality are patriarchy, gender-inequitable norms, and religious beliefs and practices. To achieve gender equality, the systemic barriers must be removed, and women should have decision-making power. The findings from the study showed that feminists in Ghana have organised around achieving the rights of women and girls through laws and policy, awareness creation, and response.

Several discriminatory practices against women have been uncovered in the study including widowhood rites; female genital mutilation; denial of access to property; gender segregation of work; child marriage; and economic exclusion. According to a recent nationally representative study, almost 30 per cent of women in Ghana have experienced GBV (IDS [Institute of Development Studies], GSS, & Associates, 2016). These practices are informal and embedded in the structures of society. They manifest themselves in forms such as patriarchy, socio-cultural norms and religious beliefs and practices (Atta, 2015; Nartey et al., 2023; Sikweyiya et al., 2020; Ussher, Tsevi, & Boafo-Arthur, 2022). These discriminatory practices persist in spite of the presence of laws and policies that protect the rights of women and girls. The 1992 Constitution of Ghana, the Criminal Code (the Amendment Act) of 1998, as well as several conventions that have been ratified by the country seek to protect the rights of women and girls (Bastine, 2010). In addition to the persistence of patriarchal norms, Bastine (2010) argues that the secrecy of traditional religious rights, perhaps the irrelevance of international laws, and the dynamics of Ghanaian politics have contributed to the persistence of the discriminatory practices against women and girls. Hence, feminist approaches to social and behavioural change are crucial in improving the status of women in Ghana. Our study participants’ involvement in improving the status of women and girls include tackling specific socio-cultural issues through various programmes and interventions. These feminist actions range from awareness-creation at the level of the population, through education of key actors such as religious and traditional leaders and the provision of legal, material and counselling support to survivors and vulnerable women, to strengthening of community and state structures to prevent and address abuse (Essel & Essel, 2019; Ogum Alangea et al., 2020) as well as calling out responsible stakeholders who fail to act appropriately to protect women and girls.

Furthermore, some of the injustices are inherent in the formal systems and structures of society. These systemic and structural factors consist of flawed policies and laws, weak implementation of policies, inadequacies inherent in policy design, unbalanced resource allocation, inadequate funding of programmes, the unclear scope of laws, opposition from government agencies, and change in government. Other factors are the lack of political will, the male-dominated legislative system, and a high turnover in duty bearers. Often, duty bearers of institutions responsible for initiating laws and the government itself do not initiate laws that will protect the rights of women, likely because they are also unwilling to let go of the “male privileges”. Governments are often pressured to focus on laws that contribute to development and not on those that will bring about social change (Dowuona-Hammond, Atuguba, & Tuokuu, 2020). As noted by Dowuona-Hammond et al. (2020), often forces outside parliament have to initiate the laws and advocate for their passage through parliament. The lack of political will to pass certain laws which have been initiated by women’s rights activists means the waiting period is longer until they are passed into law. For instance, it took 6 years for the Domestic Violence Act, and 13 years (from 2011 to 2024) for the Affirmative Action Act to be passed by parliament. On the other hand, it took 3 years for the Proper Human Sexual Rights and Ghanaian Family Values Bill to pass: it was introduced into parliament in July 2021 and was passed in February 2024. It must be noted that this bill was introduced by a group of male parliamentarians who vehemently defended it, both within and outside parliament. They argued that LGBTQI+++ is unAfrican and threatens the family institution; however, when bills that seek to protect mainly women and girls are introduced it takes many years before they are passed. Dowuona-Hammond et al. (2020) have similarly noted that, when laws and policies are presented as women’s issues, the need for them is not recognised, but when they are presented as issues that affect the whole nation or a development matter, they get more support.

Apart from the reluctance of the government to initiate and support laws that seek to protect women, there is inadequate funding to operationalise those that have been passed (Allah-Mensah & Osei-Afful, 2019; Sedziafa & Tenkorang, 2024).

The work of women’s rights activists in securing the rights of women cannot be overestimated. Some of the notable milestones in the struggle for women’s rights in Ghana are the publication of the Women’s Manifesto in 2004; the passing of the Domestic Violence Act (2007); the Land Act (2020); and, more recently, the Affirmative Action Act (July 2024). Among other services, the feminists have been providing free legal aid to poor women and girls and providing shelter for battered women and girls. According to Dowuona-Hammond et al. (2020) the struggle for women’s rights in Ghana has adopted a politico-legal character. The strategy of the feminists was political as they sought to put pressure on political actors to pass laws to deal with discrimination against women. Legally, their assumption was that laws and policies could be used to end gender discrimination. The main strategy adopted for advocacy work on these bills included building coalitions and collaborating with other feminists within and outside Ghana. For instance, the Ghana Domestic Violence Coalition was formed specifically to advocate for the passage of the Domestic Violence Act. The coalition was initially hosted by the Gender Centre and included eight other women’s organisations along with the Trade Union Congress, as well as NETRIGHT (Allah-Mensah & Osei-Afful, 2019; Ampofo, 2008; Dowuona-Hammond et al., 2020; Mama, 2014). The coalition made it possible for the women activists to sustain their efforts and remain resilient in the face of challenges encountered during their activism. Other strategies the women’s rights activists employed include scrutinising existing drafts; lobbying parliamentarians and government officials; the mapping of critical stakeholders for engagement; technical support for drafting content for new bills; a critical review of existing laws and policies for gender relevant updates; and, last but not least, “policing” the implementation of policies and laws.

The successes of women’s advocates over the past two decades have been possible because these activists were independent of governments and the political parties in power. The women’s activists consisted of lawyers, academics, other professionals such as teachers and bankers, and ordinary citizens (Dowuona-Hammond et al., 2020; Mama, 2014). Also, they were

successful in garnering the support of ordinary people, traditional leaders, religious leaders, and even politicians. All the participants in our study had college degrees and were working. Thus – unlike the women's organisations such as the CPP Women's League and the 31st DWM that were affiliated to political parties and/or governments in power – members of the feminists' movements were not affiliated with any political party or government in power and had remained functional and worked with successive governments while the former organisations – because of their affiliation with governments – collapsed after those governments left power.

Our analysis shows that different strategies were adopted for different issues. For instance, the strategy adopted for influencing the passage of laws was different from when influencing policies. When advocating for the passage of laws, the target audience are mainly members of the legislature, the attorney general and cabinet ministers. The strategies utilised were lobbying of parliamentarians, demonstrations, and awareness-creation. Conversely, when advocating for legislative instruments or policies, the target audience is the sector minister and the cabinet. This is because an LI gives guidelines for the operationalisation of laws and requires the government to commit resources to the policy. Thus, if the government thinks that it does not have the resources for a particular policy, this will cause delays.

Further, feminists had to compromise in order to allow for laws to pass. For instance, feminists had to compromise on the issue of marital rape to allow the bill to pass. Lawmakers were concerned that marital sex could be criminalised if allowed into the domestic violence law. A similar issue has been reported in India with the government of India opposing calls for the repeal of a British era law that says that a man cannot be prosecuted for raping his wife. The government of India says that criminalising marital rape would be “excessively harsh” (Pandey, & Mollan, 2024). The lawmakers – the majority of them being men – viewed marital rape as an attempt by women to escape their marital duties. This could have passed if the majority of lawmakers were women.

One of the major challenges feminists encounter is dwindling funding for advocacy work. The women's rights organisations are self-funded and do not receive funding from the government. Previously, women's rights advocates and organisations were heavily funded by international organisations. Since Ghana was declared a middle-income country, funding support has declined. Furthermore, funders support specific projects and not general organisation activities. Also, rapid “NGOisation” of the activism space where funding is for specific projects and not long-term advocacy work (Mama, 2020) is at play. This has put a strain on the activities of feminists' organisations thereby affecting their ability to sustain their advocacy efforts for women's rights.

Another challenge confronting feminists is backlash. They experience verbal abuse, threats, and name-calling. Backlash against feminists is a common occurrence in many societies (Jung & Moon, 2024; Kenney, 2021). While, in response, some feminists may not wish to be known as feminists, others may call the bluff of perpetrators and continue with their work. While participants in this study did not stop their work because of backlash, it affected younger women's desire to become involved in women's rights advocacy. Many younger women in Ghana are not willing to identify as feminists, but as women's rights advocates or activists (Bawa, 2018). This could have implications for the future of feminism in Ghana.

7 Conclusions

The goal of this study has been to investigate the feminists' struggle for gender equality in Ghana. The study has revealed a myriad of discriminatory practices against Ghanaian women. This is in spite of laws and policies protecting the rights of women and girls. No doubt feminists have achieved great success in the struggle for justice. A combination of strategies has been

employed in women's advocacy. Collaboration and coalition-building have been some of the best strategies used. Greater successes are achieved when development partners and donors exert pressure on the government to pass certain laws. To sustain women's advocacy in Ghana, the consistent funding of CSOs is crucial. However, the findings have shown that the work of feminists is not over when a bill is passed by parliament. Feminists need to continue to engage the community members through education, sensitisation and awareness-creation on laws as well as putting pressure on the government to provide more resources for the policies. Thus, inadequate funding may be a hindrance to women's advocacy. To bring about a sustainable change will be to dismantle patriarchy, break gender stereotypes about women, and give women greater decision-making power. This could be achieved by recruiting more non-female allies in addition to younger feminists. As indicated above, there is an intergenerational gap in women's advocacy in Ghana. While the older feminists are quick to identify as feminists, the younger women prefer not to identify as such. This could cause a decline in advocacy work as the work of the older ones may be phased out. Also, it could lead to the loss of years of documentation on advocacy work.

8 Policy recommendations

The following policy recommendations can be derived on the basis of the insights of this study:

- i. A key challenge reported by participants was the waning funds for feminists/CSO activities. Considering that advocacy activities of feminists such as lobbying, capacity-building, meetings and sensitisations require logistics, it is important that the state commits funds to their activities in a sustainable way. **The government should set up a research fund where a percentage of the country's GDP will be deposited.** Feminists could apply for funding to conduct research into issues of women's inequality. Findings from these studies could inform policy on women's inequality issues.
- ii. Feminists' advocacy for local gender-transformative policies and laws hinge on the realisation of international human rights provisions. The evidence shows that success requires persistence and the constant rallying of feminists around specific bills and policies over many years. Hence, **development partners should support the core funding for women's rights organisations as well as create a funding cycle to support women's rights organising and activities surrounding specific bills or policies.** In this way, energy and advocacy for specific bills/policies will be sustained.
- iii. A major bottleneck to the timely processing of gender-related policies has been the high ministerial rotations in the relevant ministries. **It is therefore important to institute a permanent policy desk at the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection.** This would ensure stability and continuity in the development of policies during changes in ministers and governments.
- iv. Ignorance and low awareness and capabilities of individuals regarding gender inequity is widespread in Ghana, leading to the perpetuation and perpetration of gender inequities. **It is recommended that "gender" be introduced as a cross-cutting phenomenon in educational curricula at various levels of education.** Our study participants believe that early and timely education on gender will increase gender consciousness and equity among the younger generation in order to break the vicious circle of gender-inequitable attitudes and beliefs acquired through customs and cultures and passed on from generation to generation.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: List of participating organisations

Name of organisation	Focus area/mandate	No. of persons
Savannah Women Integrated Development Agency (SWIDA-GH)	Human rights, advocacy, empowerment of women, girls and youth.	
ABANTU for development	Strengthen the capacity of women to participate in decision-making at all levels, to influence policies from a gender perspective and to address inequalities and injustices in social relations through advocacy, training, research, institutional development and networking with other organisations committed to the same principles. Areas: governance, climate change and peace-building.	
WILDAF Ghana	Women's access to justice and combating sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV); women's participation representation in democratic governance; women and health; women's economic empowerment; gender equality; girls' empowerment and advocacy.	4
Human rights and development services (HURDS Foundation)	Protection of sexually abused girls in Ghana; empowerment of women and children, especially girls, by promoting gender equality and influencing change at the community level and ensuring that women and children's rights are protected in a safe environment for them to realise their full potential.	
Window of Hope Foundation	Transforms the lives of marginalised girls, orphans, widows, and single mothers within refugee and host communities.	
NORSAAC	Works in the areas of sexuality and reproductive health and rights, gender and inclusion, economic empowerment and human rights based social protection.	
NETRIGHT	Economic justice (how women's livelihoods are affected by economic policies and development interventions), natural resources (aimed at protecting women's livelihoods, women's land access and ownership) and movement building (organisational and mobilisation strategies to effect change) as well as advocacy.	2
International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) Ghana	Involved in the promotion, protection and preservation of the rights of women and children. These include their civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. They do this by creating and raising legal awareness of the rights as provided in the national laws as well as the international standards of equality. They use advocacy and lobbying and also through networking with other non-governmental organisations and co-operating with governmental organisations as the need arises.	
Songtaba	Strengthens resilient livelihoods and contribute to secure climate justice with a focus area of promoting women's secured access and control over land and other productive resources. Also addresses the root causes of violence against women and girls, reduces unpaid care work and promotes decent work with a focus area of enhancing redistribution of unpaid care work and access to decent work.	

Name of organisation	Focus area/mandate	No. of persons
Advocates and Trainers for Children and Women's Advancement and Rights (ATCWAR)	Advocacy and Empowerment. Focuses on issues related to women and children, including child marriage, teenage pregnancy, street children, children in conflict, and care for children without adequate parental care. ATCWAR uses the BELANDAN-BO Platform to bring issues to the attention of authorities. The platform involves queen mothers from the project areas to gather the views of marginalised people	
African Women Lawyers Association (AWLA)	Empowers African women in the legal profession and advocates for gender equality, promotes access to justice and supports the professional growth of women lawyers across Africa.	
The Ark Foundation	GBV response and prevention: provides compassionate care for the vulnerable, in particular, women and children from a Christian perspective. Also engages in Social Action initiatives to give voice to issues of vulnerability and distress.	
Leadership and Advocacy for Women in Africa (LAWA)	Made up of female lawyers who advocate on policy issues affecting the rights of women and children.	
Widows and Orphans movement (WOM)	Promotes, upholds and protects the rights and dignity of widows and orphans (advocacy against dehumanising widowhood rites; recognition, reduction and redistribution of unpaid care work; violence against women and girls and women's access and control over land and other productive resources), education and skills training, economic empowerment and climate change.	
Women's Initiative for Self Empowerment (WISE)	Provides education, advocacy and support to immigrant and refugee women, girls, and those on the feminine gender spectrum. WISE's mandate includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education: WISE offers culturally-responsive education to support the self-actualisation of its members. • Advocacy: WISE advocates for the rights of women and girls, and their ability to create change in their communities. • Systems change: WISE works to change systems to improve the lives of its members. • Resource development: WISE develops resources to support its members. • Counselling: WISE provides counselling services to survivors of violence. • Collaboration: WISE works with other agencies to provide integrated services. 	
ActionAid Ghana	Works to achieve social justice, gender equality and poverty eradication. In Ghana, AAG supports the basic needs and rights of the poor, with an emphasis on human rights, women's rights, land rights and the right to education.	
Advocates for Gender Equity (AGE)	Women's rights, research.	

Name of organisation	Focus area/mandate	No. of persons
West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI)	WACSI seeks to strengthen the capacity of CSOs in West Africa to be able to embrace and adapt to technological advancements in a way that will significantly and effectively contribute to their institutional and operational growth. This will contribute to better socio-economic dividends, essential to combating poverty and promoting good governance and social inclusion for a prosperous West Africa. The thematic areas are technology for development, civil society sustainability, women and youth leadership, and creating an enabling environment.	
Savannah Women Integrated Development Agency (SWIDA)	Gender equality, women and girls' empowerment, water, sanitation and hygiene, health and agriculture. Focus areas: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women's economic empowerment. • Women in leadership and governance. • Ending violence against women and girls. • Women in social enterprise, innovation and technology. • Women in peace building, security and disaster risk reduction. • Women and girls in agriculture, livelihoods and agribusiness development • Natural resource protection and management. 	
WomenStrong International	Philanthropy – CSO support: provides resources to and connects remarkable women leaders and their grassroots organisations.	
Women Media and Change (WOMEC)	Trains journalists in gender-sensitive reporting, women's rights, gender equality, gender research, media training and advocacy, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and women in leadership.	
Moremi Initiative for Women's Leadership in Africa	Pursues proactive strategies to develop and empower young women and girls to take on leadership roles in their communities. Programmes are aimed at identifying, engaging and equipping young African women and girls with the skills, support and networks, required to lead, advance the rights and interests of African women and girls, as well as social justice on the continent.	
Third World Network (TWN) Africa	Gender equality and equity, minerals and development, trade and development, finance and development.	
Individual advocates including academics/ responding on behalf of self	Rights	10

Note: Some participants belonged to more than one CSO, e.g., WILDAF and FIDA membership for lawyers and all were members of NETRIGHT.

Appendix 2: Interview guide

A Background characteristics

1. Kindly tell us a little about yourself:
 - a. Level of education of participant. (Probe for any special training related to advocacy work.)
 - b. Religion.
 - c. Ethnicity.
 - d. Age (below 40 years; 40-50 years; 50-60 years; 60+).

B Advocacy work (feminist perspectives)

For organisations

2. Name of organisation (or if independent activist); location of organisation, year organisation was incorporated.
3. Kindly tell us about the focus of your organisation's work.
 - a. What advocacy activities/work have you been involved in?

For an independent advocate

- b. What advocacy activities/work have you been involved in?

General

4. Kindly tell us how you (individual and organisation) got into gender advocacy work. (Probe for year participant started gender advocacy work, motivation, etc.)
5. Kindly share two prominent gender issues you (individual and organisation) have worked on in the past two decades. (Probe for what makes them prominent.)

C Socio-cultural norms

6. Which socio-cultural norms and practices discriminate against women and girls in Ghana? (informal barriers).
7. How do Ghanaians understand gender inequalities? (Probe for different groups: women/men; socioeconomic status; disability status; religious background; intergeneration, etc.)
 - a. Do you think the prevailing social norms allow Ghanaian women and girls to challenge gender discrimination/inequities?
 - b. Do you think that Ghanaian women and girls have the agency to challenge discrimination/ inequities?
 - c. How have Ghanaian women pushed back on gender inequalities?
8. How do socio-cultural norms and practices influence women and girls' access to resources? (Probe for norms on inheritance laws and land rights.)

9. What do you suggest could be done to target harmful socio-cultural practices harmful to women and girls in Ghana?
10. What are some of the cultural norms and attitudes that have pushed back the work you're doing or have done?

D Laws and policies

11. How have women and girls been discriminated against in formal spaces in Ghana?
 - a. Probe for gaps in the implementation of existing laws and policies.
 - b. Probe for institutional policies e.g., public and private institutions (education, security services, financial etc).
12. What specific policies and laws have been enacted in the last two decades. (Probe for specific policies or laws.)
 - a. Why were they conceived?
 - b. What role did women's rights activists and advocates play in this(these)?
 - c. Were you or your organisation involved in the advocacy? If yes, please describe.
 - d. What strategies were employed? How influential were these strategies in the passage of the laws/policies?
13. Are there any laws or policies you pursued that did not get passed or are yet to be passed?
 - a. What role did women's rights activists and advocates play in this (these)?
 - b. Were you or your organisation involved in the advocacy? If yes, please describe your role(s).
 - c. What strategies were employed? How influential were these strategies? Why do you think the law has not been passed? What do you think could have been done differently to have the law passed?
14. What have been the challenges/barriers to your advocacy work? (Probe for government/formal, societal, financial, etc.)
15. Have you experienced backlash in the course of your work? Kindly share the experience with us. How did you resolve it?
16. Are there other issues relating to women's rights that still need to be tackled?
17. How can we leverage on your experiences (individual and organisation) to achieve greater equality for women and girls in Ghana?
18. What do you think of the current situation of the "feminist/women's rights" movement in Ghana?
 - a. How can we make the "movement" more effective in bringing about the desired change towards gender equality for sustainable development?

Appendix 3: IDOS Interview Data Coding Tree

Aim

To explore and analyse contemporary local feminist perspectives in Ghana to demonstrate how they can be used as levers for transformative change for greater equality and sustainable development.

Key objectives

- a. Explore the effects of existing socio-cultural norms and practices in Ghana on Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG).
- b. Explore the prevailing systemic-structural framework conditions that prevent sustainable, gender-transformative policies in Ghana.
- c. Examine how local feminist's perspectives have been and can be used to influence policies and actions for greater gender equality and sustainable development in Ghana.
- d. Develop policy recommendations to increase awareness and stimulate dialogue on feminist perspectives in the Ghanaian policy context.

Profile

Type of stakeholders

- Local individual feminists (local individual women's rights' activists)
- Women's rights' organisations

Codes

1. Effects of existing socio-cultural norms and practices on VAWG

- i. Child marriage
 - Lack of enforcement of laws
 - Influence of poverty
 - Cultural practices sustaining child marriage
- ii. Female genital mutilation (FGM)
 - Persistence in some regions
 - Limited prosecution of perpetrators
- iii. Economic exclusion
 - Restricted access to inheritance and land rights
 - Limited educational opportunities
- iv. Domestic violence/GBV
 - Actions against witchcraft victims
 - Lack of legal protection for victims
- v. *Trokosi* [virgin servitude system]

- vi. Widowhood rights
 - Harmful traditional practices against widows
 - Economic exclusion of widows

2. Prevailing systemic-structural framework that prevents sustainable gender-transformative policies

- i. Discrimination due to biological orientation
 - Reproductive health discrimination
 - Gendered access to healthcare
- ii. Sexual harassment
 - Prevalence in workplaces and schools
 - Inadequate reporting mechanisms
- iii. Lack of structural support
 - Inadequate shelter and legal aid for victims
 - Absence of protective institutions in rural areas
- iv. Policy implementation gaps
 - Lack of clear penalties for breaking laws
 - Unclear scope of some laws
 - Archaic or unrevised laws
 - Inadequacies in policy design
 - Weak support systems
- v. Vertical segregation
 - Pay gaps in employment
 - Limited access to leadership roles
- vi. Many male-designed jobs/designated jobs for men
 - Stereotyping of professions
 - Limited representation of women in decision-making roles

3. The use of local feminists' perspectives to influence gender policies and actions for greater gender equality

- i. Increasing education or sensitisation on gender issues
- ii. Increasing advocacy work
 - Media campaigns for gender equality
 - Publishing evidence-based findings
- iii. Building a stronger and independent women's movement
 - Increasing coordination among women's rights groups
 - Establishing alliances with other advocacy groups
- iv. The existence of a vibrant Gender Ministry
 - Improved visibility of gender-related issues

- v. Liaising with directorates
 - Partnerships with district assemblies
 - Engagement with health and education directorates

4. Development of policy recommendations to increase awareness and stimulate dialogue via feminist perspectives

- i. Using creative approaches for advocacy
 - Increasing intergenerational conversations via media
 - Using an aggressive approach
 - Establishing facts and documentation
- ii. Intensive education and advocacy
 - Incorporating gender issues in school curricula
 - Training community leaders
- iii. Identifying problematic areas within government structures
 - Investigating gaps in implementation
 - Engaging parliamentarians
 - Misinterpretation of the term feminism
- iv. Researching for facts
 - Gathering data on gender-based inequalities
 - Highlighting case studies and best practices
- v. Push for structural systemic change
 - Legislation of gender-responsive laws
 - Clarification of scope in existing laws
- vi. Use of strategic approaches
 - Male allyship in advocacy efforts
 - Involving the community in policymaking

Free nodes

- Collaboration and collective action
- Challenges to advocacy work (e.g., fatigue, finance, opposition from communities)
- Strategies for resisting inequality (e.g., demonstrations, policy engagement, referencing high-profile allies)
- Gender disparities in resource access (e.g., inheritance, land rights, education)
- Fair representation of women at all decision-making levels (50-50).