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Career Barriers in Ghana: Evidence from Female Civil Servants

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Abstract. Ghanaian civil service is a classic example of a “gender pyramid” where top positions tend to be occupied by men, while women (more than 50%) face gender discrimination. Gender stereotypes about women are a major barrier to women’s career advancement in Ghanaian civil service. Based on a series of in-depth interviews with women in the Ghanaian public authorities, we identified the main problems women face in the Ghanaian civil service, such as patriarchal practices, gender discrimination, and harassment, including sexual harassment. Our study aims to show the practitioners why it is hardly possible to call public service a “comfortable job” for women in Ghana.

Keywords: civil service, female civil servants, discrimination, Ghana, women, patriarchy, in-depth interview


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Карьерные ограничения для женщин на государственной службе в Гане

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Аннотация. Государственная служба Ганы является классическим примером «гендерной пирамиды», в которой руководящие должности обычно занимают мужчины, а женщины (более 50% гражданских служащих) сталкиваются с гендерной дискриминацией. Гендерные стереотипы в отношении женщин являются серьезным препятствием на пути карьерного роста

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женщин на государственной службе Ганы. На основе серии глубинных интервью были выявлены основные проблемы, с которыми сталкиваются женщины на государственной службе Ганы. По результатам нашего исследования, это патриархальные практики, гендерная дискриминация и харассмент, в том числе сексуальные домогательства. Наше исследование направлено на то, чтобы помочь практикам выяснить причины, почему считать государственную службу «удобной работой» для ганских женщин не представляется возможным.

Ключевые слова: государственная служба, женщина на госслужбе, дискриминация, Гана, женщина, патриархат, глубинное интервью

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Introduction

The global processes of incorporating women into the labor market, including the civil service, are paying off. Today, there is a trend towards the feminization of the civil service. And Ghana is not an exception. There are more than 50% of Ghanaian civil servants are female. Thus, despite the high numbers of females in the civil service, gender disparities and discrimination remain a critical phenomenon in Ghanaian public administration. There is a “gender pyramid” in Ghanaian public authorities when only a small proportion of women have access to the decision-making level.

One of the main reasons for women to join civil service is a flexible work schedule, which enabled them to combine work and family and job security. Despite all the specific features in the socio-economic development situation of Ghana motivation of women to work for the government is quite common: they joined public authorities because of the benefits they were told the civil service gives to its employees, such as job security, study leave, retirement benefits, allowances, good salary, or when there is no job in the private sector. However, the question arises what challenges do women face in patriarchal culture-building their career in public administration considered as a male occupation.

While the neo-liberal approach emphasizes the strengthening of the female presence in government bodies, representatives of gender approaches argue for reproduction in the power structures of the patriarchal scheme of women subjugation by men, pushing them to low-status positions that involve performing routine work.

Women in Public Service of Ghana: Historical Background and Current Status

It is important to address the context of Ghanaian society to gain a deeper understanding of how historical and cultural norms have impacted the lives of local

women in general and, particularly, those in the public service. The current situation of Ghanaian women is the result of complex and intervening historical and social processes. The country fought its way to independence. And each new round in the post-colonial process was to a significant extent gendered, and thus strongly influenced the difference in the position of women and men [Tamale 2000; Agbaje 2019]. Some scholars argue that despite the patriarchal dominance in pre-colonial Ghana, women still had enjoyed some autonomy and were an active part of productive and trade activities [Adusah-Karikari, Ohemeng 2014]. Accordingly, it was the colonial period that caused significant drawbacks in women's position in society and reinforced strong binaries connected with the perception of gender. For instance, British colonizers imported to Ghana countries the "Victorian woman" who belongs to the private domain [Agbaje 2019]. As for women in public administration, there was open discrimination during the colonial period, including obligatory resignation after getting pregnant and off-limits to administrative positions in the service despite qualifications [Adusah-Karikari, Ohemeng 2014].

The gendered consequences of the independence were two-fold: to some extent position of women in the civil service in Ghana started improving and women started enjoying full political rights, partially because of the interest of nationalist rulers at a time in positioning themselves as progressive and democratic leaders. Yet there was a significant heritage of male privilege mixed with subordinating role of women in the political structures and ideologies [Tamale 2000].

Why the Legal Framework Falls Short in Addressing the Challenges

Since the independence, the Ghanaian government has made several attempts to improve the position of women in public bureaucracy and initiate gender-mainstreaming processes, however, with varying degrees of success. They included affirmative actions to guarantee the positions in the Nkrumah government, the so-called "Africanization" policy to indigenize the civic service, as well as the Labor Decree of 1967 that guaranteed equal rights of sexes and provided women with a paid maternity leave. In addition, the National Council on Women and Development has been created in 1975. In 2001, it was replaced by the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs – MOWAC (further renamed into the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection in 2013) [Adusah-Karikari, Ohemeng 2014]. These developments coexisted with Ghana's active involvement in international discussions of women's rights. Ghana ratified major international and regional women's rights protection treaties. Thus, the Ghanaian government is obligated to incorporate the provisions of these instruments into national laws. Moreover, the state officially supported the provisions of the laws that have arisen from the UN Conferences on women's rights.

Despite the number of initiatives mentioned above and ratification of the international treaties, Ghanaian women continue to experience discrimination. Scholars argue that the key reason for that has to do with the fact that laws solely are not sufficient to transform existing discriminatory practices against women and the change requires more local and narrow work with the communities. When

dealing with gender issues one often tends to make them something that women themselves are responsible for, lacking the understanding that most of these issues are, in fact, instigated by men and it is men who have more access to law enforcement mechanisms [Dowuona-Hammond et al. 2020]. International laws are not fully incorporated into the national legislation, and, as a result, national laws are often not enough to repeal discriminatory practices. Another important challenge is that laws are often poorly implemented because of the bias against some social groups (e.g., low-income women and men), lacking resources, constant delays in the court process, patriarchal environment, and deeply held beliefs that sustain systematic gender inequalities. In addition, the awareness of existing laws on women's rights is low because of inefficient legal education institutions.¹

Consequently, the position of Ghanaian women in the public service remains far from great. Scholars emphasize that it is not enough to simply focus on the proportion of women in the bureaucracy and to solve the existing problems the legislators should pay more attention to the more fundamental indigenous factors that still work against female success in climbing the bureaucratic ladder, including traditions and socio-cultural norms. Indeed, if we look at the statistics, the problem becomes quite vivid. As estimated by the International Labour Organization, the employment services of male and female in 2019 was 44.3% and 54.3% respectively. Furthermore, the wages/salaried worker and family workers contribution was estimated at 32.9% and 5.3% for males, while that of females was estimated at 17.3% and 13.1%. The above estimates indicate that irrespective of the fact that women are more represented in services, they earn less from their salary and provide more for family upkeep in Ghana. Ghana is currently ranked 117/156 in the Global gender gap index with a 0.67 coefficient right between Sri Lanka (116) and Guinea (118).² Even though the number of female ministers and women in representative public bodies in the country has been slowly increasing over the years, there is still space for improvement [Bawa, Sanyare 2013]. As a case in point, only eight ministerial positions out of 30 were occupied by women in 2021.³

Challenges Faced by Female Public Servants in Ghana

Many studies that examine the participation of women in public institutions, as well as their political representation, take Ghana as a case study [Acheampong, Dinye 2015]. Aidoo and Achira, for example, outline four factors that impede the careers of women in the formal sector organizations in Ghana: (1) organizational

¹ The Women's Manifesto for Ghana 2004. URL: <https://abantu-rowa.com/womens-manifesto/> (accessed: 16.02.2019).

² Global Gender Gap Report by The World Economic Forum. URL: <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-gender-gap-report-2017> (accessed: 16.02.2019).

³ Annang, E. (2021). Akufo-Addo to appoint 8 women as Ministers. Pulse.com. URL: <https://www.pulse.com.gh/news/local/akufo-addo-to-appoint-8-women-as-ministers/5k75t33> (accessed: 09.06.2021).

barrier towards the career progression of women by making them work harder than men to get promoted in an organization; (2) the role of government that ensures no affirmative action to improve the number of women in upper echelons); (3) the influence of the society where many believe that men are better managers than women; and (4) contributions made by the women themselves (especially those in the top positions being reluctant in ensuring and supporting other women in lower levels to reach the top) [Aidoo, Achira 2016]. Other factors that significantly influence the career trajectories of women in Ghana's government are work-life-(in)balance family, gender stereotypes, and harassment in the workplace.

The existing legislation aimed at preventing objective discrimination of women quite falls short in addressing the subjective discrimination voiced by female public servants. When asked directly, Ghanaian females indicate that they feel limited in promotion, education, and business travel opportunities when compared to their male colleagues and call other women to believe in each other and unite when needed. Interestingly, Ghanaian public servants are well aware of the government's commitment to increasing the number of women in decision-making bodies. Yet according to them, most of these measures still only exist on paper and hardly help in real life. Because of the existence of these barriers, the authors were not able to find a passive-active link of representative bureaucracy in the case of Ghana [Adusah-Karikari, Ohemeng 2014]. According to the Netright cited in Manuh and Anyidoho, partisanship is a major setback to women's advancement in Ghana. Moreover, the low representation of women in top management and leadership positions in Ghana was attributed to the poor operationalization and enforcement of gender policies [Manuh, Anyidoho 2015]. Adusah-Karikari and Akukos argued that all efforts to promote women's empowerment in Ghana, especially within the public sector seem less progressive and below expectation [Adusah-Karikari, Akukos 2010].

Methodology

On the background of difficult access to the research field and limited empirical knowledge about the problem, we chose a qualitative approach to the following study and used qualitative data to examine the experiences of female civil servants in Ghanaian public authorities. Our study was based on a set of ten in-depth interviews (see Table) with Ghanaian women respectfully who have worked in the civil service (minimum 2 years without a break) in different parts of the country. The description of those surveyed can be found in Appendix. We will treat these interviews as case studies. The interview guide represents a short biographical part focusing on the periods of school and further education, career choice, and path, some questions were related to marital status and reproductive intentions/children. The results were guided by the unstructured framing analysis, where the major research goal is to examine how women themselves explain and narrate job experiences.

Data of respondents of the in-depth interviews

No.	Respondent	Age	Place of work	Work experience
1.	Respondent 1	45	Information Services Department, Accra	2008 – Present
2.	Respondent 2	43	Ministry of Trade and Industry, Volta Region	2008 – Present
3.	Respondent 3	30	Ministry of Communications, Accra	2019 – Present
4.	Respondent 4	28	Information Technology Directorate, Ministry of Communications, Accra	2017 – Present
5.	Respondent 5	26	Kweabibirem Municipal Assembly – Department of Agriculture	2018 – Present
6.	Respondent 6	35	Birim North District Assembly – Department of Agriculture	2011 – Present
7.	Respondent 7	33	Birim North District Assembly – Development Planning Unit	2014 – Present
8.	Respondent 8	28	Nsawam Adoagyiri Municipal Assembly	2018 – Present
9.	Respondent 9	31	Ghana Health Service, Koforidua	2019 – Present
10.	Respondent 10	38	Ministry of local government	2017 – Present

Source: provided by authors.

The Results of the Study

Patriarchy

Our study shows that Ghanaian women working in public bodies have personal experience of patriarchy practices during all the period of working in the civil service. Landing a job in government agencies is associated with the influence of gender stereotypes and patriarchy, which reigns in Ghanaian society dramatically. For instance, it is the superior man, for example, the father, who has a significant influence on the choice of the civil service as a future profession for young women:

“My father is a huge influence in my life even when it comes to which service to choose to work with. He gave me the advantages of joining the public service because he himself was with the public service” (Respondent 2).

However, it is important to note that, in principle, there is an opinion that working in state horns is a so-called “female” profession, therefore, such a choice can be influenced by the superior woman – mother or an aunt – who already have a career in public administration and explain all the advantages *“like retirement benefits, ability to gain study leave and job security”*.

The cultural code of male excellence is embedded not only in the perceptions about the world but also in the personal career views of women in Ghana. Although some women reflex on this situation, they more often describe it as a natural phenomenon that cannot be changed. Therefore, they are forced to adapt to these conditions and adjust their behavior to them. Mostly, they try not to make any mistakes, otherwise *“when it is a female [mistake], after that, anytime there is a*

work and they give it to that particular female she is reminded of her past mistake, which should not be so».

Gender Discrimination

Several critical factors – institutional, systemic, structural, and societal – reinforce the (re)production of discrimination and glass ceilings in particular in the bureaucracy and politics in Ghana. But we need to realize that many women, talking about their work, often did not catch what they were talking about discriminatory practices, they just mention above all that being a woman is harder and *“gives you more headache to do more to succeed because if you give 100% to what the men do you would not be appreciated they expect 120% from you to be given the same appreciation they would give to the men” and conclude that “being a woman means harder work and more responsibilities” (Respondent 3).*

Many of our respondents openly stated that they were difficult to promote because they were women. And this was not due to the heavy workload with domestic work or the presence of children (as a difficulty for them), but above all as a stereotypical view of superior male colleagues:

“I know am responsible and very determined but my gender as a female would work against me because even at my district I am denied of promotion due to the fact of being female” (Respondent 1).

Generally, Ghana’s Civil Service is perceived as male-dominated and the male-dominated values in it as entrenched and very much alive. One interviewee complained that certain important activities in the ministries are relegated to after-work hours. The consequence is that women, in particular those married with children, on whom the burden of housekeeping typically falls, are unable to attend, having instead to return home to deal with domestic matters.

Harassment

Violation of personal boundaries is widespread in the Ghanaian authorities. Women are forced to work harder and better to have equal career prospects. Nevertheless, even when they achieve certain success in their career, they are faced with harassment, including sexual harassment. A significant number of Ghanaians know the predominance of sexual harassment in the workplace, particularly state-owned authorities. According to surveys, information on sexual harassment is mostly provided by the mass media; from news reports and expert media programs. Friends and relatives who experienced or witnessed harassment issues also serve as sources of information on the subject. Our respondents openly shared their experiences:

“...in my opinion based on what I have heard, yes it’s common because most of them complain of sexual harassment” (Respondent 5).

Experts reviewers of Ghana’s conventions on sexual harassment suggest that the laws are not practical and do not provide “sustainable protection for victims”. Thus, sexual harassment is prevalent and often confused with courting or playful

flirting. In the face of all these⁴ provisions and organizational policies, evidence has shown that many women refuse to take advantage of this provision for fear of being blacklisted for future references from the organization or being labeled as the black sheep.⁵ Andoh revealed that about 74% of female and 42% of male employees had been harassed at work in the past and about 95% of the cases go unreported.⁶

“I have witnessed harassment. On a few occasions I have seen service personnel leave the Director’s office to the washroom combing their hair and in tears.<...> The question is, has any woman the strength or bravery to report such harassment?” (Respondent 1).

So, most do not report for fear of losing their jobs and the situation remains unchanged. The perception that the female civil servants are objects of desire and the various prescribed gender roles could be blamed for sexual harassment. Unnecessary competition from men, and sexist comments at the workplace when a woman assumes a higher status also amount to sex discrimination. All these do not promote healthy culture at the workplace in Ghanaian public administration.

Conclusion and Discussion

The main challenges women face in pursuing a career in the public sector in Ghana are gender-related. In addition to structural factors based in part on gender stereotypes, the most pressing challenge for women’s career development for Ghanaian female civil servants relates to double burden – efforts to combine family and professional responsibilities. However, some women self-exclude themselves from the career race in order to be able to fulfill family responsibilities.

According to the results of our research, it is hardly possible to relegate public service as a “comfortable job” for a woman in Ghana. At the same time, more women join work in public agencies and, importantly, desire promotions. However, not all of them succeed, mostly because of discriminatory practices such as the glass ceiling and well-spread harassment. It appears that the challenges confronted by women across different agencies are quite similar; the landscape has not altered much since it was suggested in The Women’s Manifesto for Ghana⁷ in 2004, which calls for equal female participation in Ghanaian public administration.

This study is limited by not considering the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the status of women in Ghana’s government, which will be assessed at a later

⁴ Bortei-Doku Aryeetey, E. (2004). Coming to terms with sexual harassment in Ghana. Technical Publication. No. 64.

⁵ Kamal Lettor, I.B. et al. (2020). Knowledge and perceptions on COVID-19 among senior high school students in Ghana: a cross-sectional study. medRxiv. URL: <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.11.18.20234088v1.article-metrics> (accessed: 16.02.2019).

⁶ Amissah, P. et al. (2001). IEQ2/Ghana Final report: The implementation of Ghana’s school language policy. America Institute for Research.

⁷ The Women’s Manifesto for Ghana (2004). URL: <https://abantu-rowa.com/womens-manifesto/> (accessed: 16.02.2019).

date. Nevertheless, it is already possible to safely say that during the pandemic, the career prospects of women around the world have dramatically decreased, and Ghana was no exception.

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