

FROM MARGINS TO MAINSTREAM: THE ROLE OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN ADVANCING WOMEN'S PARLIAMENTARY REPRESENTATION IN GHANA

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Abstract: Women's underrepresentation in national legislatures is a persistent global concern. This study interrogates how political parties can promote greater women's representation in Ghana's Parliament. Using the mixed-methods approach, the paper combines a survey of 100 participants and in-depth interviews with six key informants. The findings reveal multiple challenges facing women in politics and identify mechanisms through which parties can help overcome these barriers. Internally, parties can introduce measures such as candidate quotas, reserved seats in safe constituencies, reduced filing fees, financial and material support, and capacity-building programs for aspiring female politicians. At the national level, legal reforms, including the implementation of the Affirmative Action (Gender Equity) Act (2024), are pivotal. While these strategies hold promise for increasing women's parliamentary representation in Ghana, the study concludes that political parties must find a way to deal with internal opposition, as most stakeholders see these measures as undemocratic. The paper concludes that committed political party actions, coupled with supportive legal frameworks, are essential to achieving meaningful gains in women's representation.

Keywords: Women, Political Representation; Political Parties; Parliament; Ghana.

1. Introduction

Political participation is a vital condition for the democratic development of every society. Diamond and Morlino (2004, p. 21) argue that participation is a basic

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Ijon, F.B., Gyekye-Jandoh, M.A., (2025)

From Margins to Mainstream: The Role of Political Parties in Advancing Women's Parliamentary Representation in Ghana

precondition for democratic quality. Giving both men and women the same opportunities in politics and in the governance process is very important for building a sustainable democracy. The representation of women in politics all over the world has become a serious governance issue because of the rate at which women are being marginalized in decision-making.

Women's representation in the world is still less than the 30% benchmark given by the UN. The National Democratic Institute (NDI, 2013) revealed that when women participate in politics, it brings about tangible gains for democracy, sustainable peace, and increases citizens' responsiveness and cooperation across ethnic groups and political parties. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU, 2017) also postulates that allowing women equal access to political leadership positions is very important to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It further states that low women's representation is an impediment to gender balance.

Increasing the number of women in parliament leads to the situation where Parliament will develop more interest in issues such as education, economic issues, and health that directly affect the lives of the citizens (NDI, 2013). This is because women are more compassionate and care more about issues that will directly benefit their society. It is evident that the surge in the number of women parliamentarians in large societies such as South Africa, Croatia, Timor-Leste, and Rwanda led to the passage of anti-discrimination laws, domestic violence acts, family code, inheritance, and child protection laws (NDI, 2013). The low number of women's representation in Ghana explains why the affirmative action bill, which was introduced in 2007 in Ghana's parliament, took more than a decade to be passed.

Though the last decade has witnessed a rise in the number of women in national Parliaments, it is still below the 30 percent benchmark given by the UN. Over the last decade, there has been a modest rise in women's representation in national parliaments worldwide, but it remains below the 30% target. The IPU reported that the global average of women in parliament inched up from 23.3% in 2016 to 27.2% in 2025 (IPU, 2025).

Since independence, women in Ghana are not well represented in the decision-making bodies in the country. Having realized the contribution of women towards Ghana's independence struggle, the CPP, under the leadership of Nkrumah, reserved ten seats in Parliament for women in the first republican parliament in 1960. The number of women representatives increased to nineteen in 1965 because nine women won their seats in addition to the ten reserved seats. Unfortunately, successive regimes did not take women's representation seriously. In the 1969 elections, only

Ijon, F.B., Gyekye-Jandoh, M.A., (2025)

From Margins to Mainstream: The Role of Political Parties in Advancing Women's Parliamentary Representation in Ghana

one woman managed to win her seat. The government did not do anything about the situation until it was overthrown in 1971.

Although literature on women's representation in Africa proliferates (see, for example, Asante, 2011; Allah-Mensah, 2005; Bawa & Senyare, 2013; LeVan, 2011; Bawa, 2013), it is however surprising how little research has concentrated on the role of political parties in increasing women's representation in Ghana. Literature on women's representation in Ghana has only concentrated on the obstacles to women's representation (Allah-Mensah, 2005; Bari, 2005). However, there is a dearth of literature on investigating the role of political parties in increasing women's political representation in Ghana.

Against this background, the article seeks to investigate the factors contributing to the persistent underrepresentation of women in Ghana's Parliament, and examine how political parties can act as both gatekeepers and facilitators of women's political participation and representation. This paper is very innovative and shows a bold departure from the earlier studies that mainly focused on the obstacles to women's representation in Ghana. The paper contributes significantly to existing knowledge on women's representation by bridging the gap and by providing actionable insights into what political parties can concretely do to increase women's representation.

Structurally, the paper is organized as follows. In the next section, the paper outlines the literature review, where the theoretical framework and the factors affecting women's representation are discussed. This is followed by the research methodology, where the mixed method approach is employed. The paper also discusses the findings in relation to existing literature. It then concludes by highlighting some policy recommendations.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Framework

This paper employs the symbolic representation model to explore women's political representation in Ghana. Advocates of the model argue that increasing the number of women in politics has intrinsic value, as their presence leads to inclusiveness and changes societal attitudes toward gender roles. Pitkin (1972) defines symbolic representation as the portrayal of a group through a representative imbued with specific meaning, evoking feelings of inclusion or exclusion. Visible women leaders can inspire others through a "role model effect" that encourages greater political participation, as noted by Alexander (2012) and Wolbrecht and Campbell (2007). High-Pippert and Comer (1998) contend that "feminizing" political spaces indicates a democratization of a system previously dominated by men, further enhancing women's engagement. Similarly, Karp and Banducci (2008) assert that the presence of women leaders increases political interest among women, while Burns,

Ijon, F.B., Gyekye-Jandoh, M.A., (2025)

From Margins to Mainstream: The Role of Political Parties in Advancing Women's Parliamentary Representation in Ghana

Schlozman, and Verba (2001) emphasize that a larger female presence improves citizens' trust and responsiveness to government.

Research indicates that gains in descriptive representation, where more women are elected, often correlate with improvements in substantive representation of women's issues, although policy outcomes do not always change (Weldon, 2002). By highlighting the transformative potential of simply having more women in Ghana's political institutions, the study underscores how increased visibility can inspire future leaders and redefine politics as less of a "man's game." This framework guides the analysis of survey and interview data on support for mechanisms such as quotas and seat reservations.

2.2. Women's Political Representation and Its Benefits

The benefits of greater female political engagement for democracy and development are regularly emphasized in scholarly literature. When women have a large amount of legislative authority, the emphasis frequently shifts to important problems, including family welfare, health, education, and anti-discrimination (NDI, 2013). Carroll (1994) described women as "agents of change" in politics because of their propensity to contribute distinct goals and viewpoints to leadership. Thomas and Adams (2010) argue that a critical mass of women enhances inclusiveness and participatory democracy, while Stensöta, Wängnerud, and Svensson (2015) associate greater female representation with lower corruption levels, likely due to differing leadership styles and accountability norms.

Examples from Africa reinforce these findings. Rwanda, with over 60% women in its parliament, passed major legislation on gender-based violence and children's rights. South Africa followed suit with social equity and family-oriented policies after increases in female parliamentary membership (NDI, 2013). These cases underscore the link between descriptive representation - having more women in office and substantive policy shifts that benefit broader society.

Symbolically, women in leadership challenge traditional norms and inspire others. Wolbrecht and Campbell (2007) found that visible female politicians increase political engagement among young women. In patriarchal societies, their presence signals that leadership is not exclusive to men. This fosters greater institutional legitimacy and reshapes societal perceptions of gender roles (High-Pippert & Comer, 1998; Karp & Banducci, 2008).

3. Trends of Women's Representation in Ghana

Ghanaian women have long played essential roles in political mobilization, yet their representation in Parliament remains limited. Allah-Mensah (2005) notes that women's support was crucial to Nkrumah's Convention People's Party (CPP) before

Ijon, F.B., Gyekye-Jandoh, M.A., (2025)

From Margins to Mainstream: The Role of Political Parties in Advancing Women's Parliamentary Representation in Ghana

and after independence. However, their contributions have not translated into proportional parliamentary inclusion.

In Ghana's First Republic, women were entirely absent from the first post-independence Parliament, as Mabel Dove lost her seat in the 1956 elections. To rectify this imbalance, the government passed the Representation of the People's (Women Members) Act in 1959, enabling the 1960 election of ten women. The number of women in the 1965 election increased from ten to nineteen because nine women were able to make their way into the CPP-dominated parliament, whose members were elected unopposed. Unfortunately, the 1966 coup truncated the second republican parliament, and that was the end of women's representation. However, the introduction of the Second Republic also meant the resumption of parliament. After the 1965 elections, only one woman was able to win a seat out of the 140 members (Abakah, 2018; Frempong, 2016). However, the number of women increased from one to two after the Member of Parliament for Chiana-Paga was disqualified and the seat was won by a woman in the bye-election.

After just three years of the coming into force of the third republic and the 1969 constitution, there was another coup which suspended parliament again. The country was subjected to military rule from 1972 until 1979, when the third republic was restored. In the 1979 elections, five women out of the 140 members were elected into the National Assembly. There was another coup that toppled the 1979 constitution. The intermittent military coups in the country affected the trend of women's representation.

After the PNDC agreed to return the country to constitutional rule in 1992, parliamentary elections were conducted in December 1992. The number of seats was increased to 200, and sixteen women won their seats to be represented in parliament. In the second elections of the fourth republic in 1996, there was a rise in the number from sixteen to eighteen. In the 2000 elections, the number increased marginally by one seat from the previous elections.

In the 2004 elections, the number of seats was increased to 230, and out of that number, only 25 were women (Abakah, 2018). This means that there has been an improvement over the last three elections in the Fourth Republic. Unfortunately, women's representation in parliament fell after the 2008 elections. Only twenty women were elected, and the number further dwindled to nineteen after the MP for Chereponi constituency died and her seat was won by a man in the bye-election.

Ahead of the 2012 elections, the Electoral Commission increased the number of constituencies from 230 to 275 seats. However, the number of seats won by women in the 2012 elections improved to twenty-nine, though the improvement was not proportional to the percentage of increment. The seventh election in the fourth

Ijon, F.B., Gyekye-Jandoh, M.A., (2025)

From Margins to Mainstream: The Role of Political Parties in Advancing Women's Parliamentary Representation in Ghana

republic, which was held in 2016, also saw a rise in the number of seats occupied by women in the previous parliament to thirty-five.

From the summarized table of women's representation in Ghana's parliament from 1960 to 2016 below, it is obvious that, in terms of percentage, the 1965 elections gave more women (18.2%) the opportunity to be represented in parliament because of the affirmative action introduced in 1960. Though the number of women in Ghana's parliament is increasing (29 in 2012 and 35 in 2016), it is doing so at a slower rate, and the 12.7% achieved in the 2016 elections is still not close to the 30% recommended by the UN. This, therefore, makes this paper very significant because it examines the roles political parties can play to help increase women's representation in Ghana.

Table 1. Women in Ghana's Parliament (1960-2024 elections)

Year	No. of Seats	No. of Women Parliamentarians	% of Total in Parliament
1960	104	10	9.6
1965	104	19	18.2
1969	140	1	0.7
1979	140	5	3.5
1992	200	16	8
1996	200	18	9
2000	230	19	9.5
2004	230	25	10.8
2008	230	20*	8.7
2012	275	29	10.5
2016	275	35	12.7
2020	275	40	14.5
2024	276	41	14.9

Source: Authors' own processing.

Note: The number of women parliamentarians was reduced from 20 to 19 in 2008 after the female MP for Chereponi constituency died and a man won the seat during the by-election.

As shown above, the 2020 elections yielded 40 women out of 275 MPs, about 14.5%. This was a slight increase from 2016 in both number and percentage, continuing a gradual upward trend. However, in the December 2024 elections, women did not make further significant gains: 41 women were elected, keeping female representation at 14.5%. The stagnation or slight dip in 2024 has prompted concern among women's advocacy groups, especially since Ghana in 2024 finally passed an

Ijon, F.B., Gyekye-Jandoh, M.A., (2025)

From Margins to Mainstream: The Role of Political Parties in Advancing Women's Parliamentary Representation in Ghana

Affirmative Action Act mandating at least 30% representation of women in governance.

Despite some progress, women's parliamentary representation in Ghana's Fourth Republic has remained low – hovering in the single or low double-digits percentage-wise – and well below global and regional leaders. This persistent gap makes Ghana a pertinent case for examining what factors continue to impede women's political ascension and what role political parties can play in accelerating change. As the table and historical narrative illustrate, political parties have often been conservative in candidate selection, typically nominating far fewer women than men. For example, ahead of the 2024 elections, the two major parties (NPP and NDC) fielded only 36 and 39 female parliamentary candidates, respectively, out of hundreds of candidates nationwide. This suggests that party structures and decisions critically shape the pipeline of women candidates.

In sum, while Ghana has made notable strides since the early republics, the pace of change has been inadequate. Historical trends show that legal frameworks, party commitment, and systemic interventions are essential to ensuring that women are not just mobilized for votes but positioned as decision-makers within Parliament.

4. Obstacles to Women's Political Participation

A growing body of literature identifies several obstacles that hinder women's entry and success in politics, many of which are evident in Ghana. These barriers can be broadly categorized into socio-cultural, economic/resource-related, institutional, and electoral system-related challenges (Bari, 2005; Allah-Mensah, 2005; Fallon, 2008).

4.1. Socio-Cultural Barriers

Patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes continue to frame political leadership as a male preserve. In Ghana, women often face skepticism from both voters and political party elites regarding their leadership capabilities. Additionally, women are frequently expected to prioritize traditional domestic responsibilities, making it difficult to meet the demanding schedule of political engagement. The "role congruity" bias, where women in authoritative roles are viewed unfavorably, also affects their electability and acceptance within party structures. These deeply rooted cultural assumptions contribute significantly to the underrepresentation of women in political leadership roles.

4.2. Economic and Resource Barriers

Politics in Ghana is increasingly monetized. The high costs associated with campaigning, paying filing fees, funding party primaries, organizing rallies, and contributing to community projects pose major challenges for women, who generally have less access to financial resources and political networks than men. This lack of funding limits their ability to mount competitive campaigns. According to Krook

Ijon, F.B., Gyekye-Jandoh, M.A., (2025)

From Margins to Mainstream: The Role of Political Parties in Advancing Women's Parliamentary Representation in Ghana

and Norris (2014), globally, the lack of financial capital is one of the most formidable barriers to women's political representation. In Ghana, this is confirmed by women aspirants who frequently cite financing as their biggest hurdle during both party primaries and general elections (CDD, 2016). Without systemic efforts to offset these costs, women will remain at a disadvantage in the political arena.

4.3. Institutional Barriers within Political Parties

Political parties play a key gatekeeping role in candidate selection. However, Ghana's two dominant parties, the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the National Democratic Congress (NDC), have historically nominated few women in competitive constituencies. Internal party structures often favor incumbents or well-connected male aspirants, while women struggle to break through without party support. The lack of internal gender quotas, coupled with delegate biases in primaries, further undermines women's chances. Even when women secure nominations, they frequently receive limited financial, technical, and moral support. This perpetuates a cycle of exclusion, where male-dominated party hierarchies replicate themselves.

4.4. Electoral System Factors

Ghana's first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system compounds the challenges faced by women. In single-member districts, only one candidate can win, often pushing parties to nominate perceived "safe" candidates, typically men, especially incumbents or prominent figures with broad recognition. This contrasts with proportional representation (PR) systems, where party lists can be more easily adjusted to include women and where gender quotas have proven effective. Countries like Rwanda and Senegal have seen significant gains in women's political representation after introducing such systems. In Ghana's FPTP system, the burden falls on political parties to voluntarily level the playing field, yet few have done so decisively.

Mona Krook's (2005) framework and Pamela Paxton's studies emphasize the interplay between "supply" (the availability of qualified women candidates) and "demand" (party and voter willingness to support them). While the pool of educated and willing women in Ghana has expanded, structural constraints in party politics and electoral systems have dampened demand, keeping women's representation low.

5. The Role of Political Parties in Increasing Women's Representation

Political parties are the central actors in Ghana's electoral landscape. They structure electoral choices, select candidates, allocate resources, and shape policy agendas (Müller, 2000; Norris, 2002). As such, they hold strategic leverage to promote or hinder women's political participation. Ballington (2009) argues that parties, by

Ijon, F.B., Gyekye-Jandoh, M.A., (2025)

From Margins to Mainstream: The Role of Political Parties in Advancing Women's Parliamentary Representation in Ghana

virtue of their role in governance and candidate selection, are "strategically placed to address the concerns of women."

Several reform strategies are available to political parties. These include voluntary gender quotas on candidate lists, reserving safe seats for women, waiving or reducing filing fees for female aspirants, and establishing training and mentorship programs to build capacity (Matland & Ballington, 2004). Comparative examples abound: South Africa's African National Congress adopted a 30% gender quota, while the UK Labour Party implemented women-only shortlists in some constituencies. These measures have proven effective in boosting women's representation and shifting party cultures over time.

In Ghana, the NPP attempted a partial quota in 2016 by proposing that incumbent female MPs run unopposed in primaries. However, the idea was met with resistance from within the party, with critics branding it undemocratic and unfair to male aspirants. The backlash underscores a recurring issue: even when leadership shows commitment to gender inclusion, internal party dynamics, often shaped by male-dominated structures, resist change. The challenge, then, is not just about policy but also about managing intra-party perceptions and power balances. Measures like voluntary quotas must be designed to align with democratic values while still addressing historical gender imbalances. Encouragingly, public support for affirmative action is growing, and the passage of Ghana's Affirmative Action (Gender Equality) Act in 2024 may provide a policy foundation for bolder party reforms.

Despite occasional rhetorical commitments to gender equality, the NDC and NPP have yet to implement comprehensive strategies that significantly alter the gender composition of Parliament. Meanwhile, smaller parties such as the Convention People's Party (CPP) or Progressive People's Party (PPP) have been more vocal in supporting women's inclusion but lack the electoral strength to effect systemic change. To close the representation gap, Ghana's political parties must move beyond symbolic gestures and commit to structural reforms that expand access for women. This includes not only revising candidate selection procedures but also making meaningful investments in women's political development, both financially and institutionally.

6. Methodology and empirical data

The study focuses on increasing women's political representation in Ghana using the mixed-method approach. The mixed method approach is the integration of the elements of both qualitative and quantitative approaches in a single study (Creswell, Goodchild & Turner, 1996; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). This approach has been adopted because the weakness of one will be strengthened by the other approach.

Ijon, F.B., Gyekye-Jandoh, M.A., (2025)

From Margins to Mainstream: The Role of Political Parties in Advancing Women's Parliamentary Representation in Ghana

Several efforts have been made by civil society organizations, women advocacy groups, and governments in Ghana towards increasing women's political representation. The study focuses on the role of political parties in increasing women's representation. As of August 2016, there were twenty-four registered political parties in Ghana. However, only four out of these numbers were more active in the political activities of the country. The quantitative data on increasing women's political representation were collected from 100 respondents. The qualitative data were collected from seven people who were purposively selected because of their in-depth knowledge of the operations of political parties. The qualitative data were gathered through in-depth interviews with two sitting MPs, one former MP, two women advocates, and two political party executives. The secondary data, which was also collected from journals, books, and online materials, was used to support the primary data in the analysis.

7. Results and discussions

The findings of this study provide both encouraging and sobering insights into the quest to increase women's political representation in Ghana. In this section, we interpret the results in the context of the theoretical framework and existing literature, discussing how Ghana's case reflects broader patterns and what it reveals about the role of political parties.

7.1. Voting Behavior and Attitudes Toward Female Candidates

A key question for understanding representation is whether voters are willing to support female candidates. The survey asked respondents about their past voting behavior and future intentions regarding female candidates.

Table 2. Voting for Female Candidates

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	20	20%
No	72	72%
No female candidate available (N/A)	8	8%
Total	100	100%

Source: Own processing based on field data in 2024.

As shown in Table 3, only 20% of respondents reported that they had previously voted for a female candidate, whereas 72% said they had never voted for a woman. An additional 8% indicated that no female candidate had ever contested in their constituency, essentially explaining their lack of opportunity to vote for a woman. These results highlight that an overwhelming majority have not voted for a woman

Ijon, F.B., Gyekye-Jandoh, M.A., (2025)

From Margins to Mainstream: The Role of Political Parties in Advancing Women's Parliamentary Representation in Ghana

before – but it is crucial to interpret this in context. Ghana has relatively few female candidates in elections; many constituencies have never had a woman on the ballot. Thus, the 72% “No” largely reflects the historical scarcity of female candidates rather than outright voter rejection of women. Indeed, 8% explicitly noted the absence of a female option as the reason.

When asked to elaborate, some respondents in the "No" category explained that in their voting history, the candidates available were all men. The data indicate a structural issue: the pipeline of female candidates is thin. As one respondent put it, "I haven't voted for a woman yet because there hasn't been one contesting in our area during the elections I've voted in." This underscores that increasing women's representation partly hinges on having more women run for office, which circles back to political parties' candidate selection.

7.2. Factors Influencing Voter Choice for Female Candidates

To dig deeper, the survey asked respondents what factors are most important to them when deciding whether to vote for a female candidate. This was a multiple-response question – respondents could select more than one factor – as voters consider a combination of candidate attributes. The goal was to understand what qualities or considerations matter most in evaluating female candidates.

Table 3. “What factors will you consider before voting for a female candidate?”
(Multiple responses allowed)

Factor	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Ability to perform (competence)	92	92%
Party affiliation	15	15%
Level of education	15	15%
Character of the candidate	12	12%
Family background	4	4%

Source: Own processing based on field data in 2024.

7.2.1. Ability to perform

By far the most dominant factor was the candidate's perceived ability to perform. An overwhelming 92% of respondents said that a female candidate's competence and capability to fulfill the duties of office would influence their voting decision. In other words, the vast majority of voters would judge a female candidate primarily on her qualifications, experience, and performance potential – not her gender. This echoes common voter behavior for any candidate (male or female): voters want someone who can deliver on the job. As one respondent noted, “I will vote for a woman if she is competent and can perform in Parliament. Gender doesn't matter as

Ijon, F.B., Gyekye-Jandoh, M.A., (2025)

From Margins to Mainstream: The Role of Political Parties in Advancing Women's Parliamentary Representation in Ghana

much as whether she will do the work well." Many interviewees were unsurprised that "ability to perform" topped the list.

A participant remarked, "Voters are rational. They want an MP who can bring development. If a woman can convince them she is that person, they'll vote for her." She added that often female candidates have to prove their competence more than male candidates do, precisely because of lingering stereotypes, but once they do, voters judge them by the same yardstick of performance. Another interviewee echoed this: "In my constituency, if a woman stands and she's hardworking and knowledgeable, she has as good a shot as any man – people just want someone who will deliver."

7.2.2. Party Affiliation

About 15% of respondents mentioned they consider the candidate's party affiliation when voting for a woman. Party loyalty is a strong force in Ghanaian elections, so it is not surprising that some voters will vote along party lines irrespective of the candidate's gender. Similarly, 15% cited the candidate's level of education as a factor – reflecting a view that educational qualifications contribute to perceived competence.

7.2.3. Character of the candidate

Another 12% pointed to the character of the candidate (integrity, honesty, demeanor) as an important consideration. Another interesting point from interviews was about character: some felt that while only 12% explicitly chose "character" in the survey, in practice, a candidate's integrity and how she carries herself matter a lot to voters. Often, these qualities are implicitly wrapped up in "ability to perform" in voters' minds. A participant said, "Especially for women, if you come off as trustworthy and community-oriented, people respond well. They look at how you carry yourself, because women in politics still face scrutiny. So, character is key, even if voters don't name it first."

7.2.4. Family Background

Finally, only 4% said they would consider the candidate's family background (which might include factors like family reputation or political lineage). This was the least important factor, indicating that voters place much less weight on a female candidate's family or marital background compared to her personal qualities and party.

The takeaway from this multi-response question is that voters apply a rational, criteria-based approach to female candidates, much as they would to male candidates. The ability to perform (which encompasses leadership skills, knowledge, and track record) is paramount. Party identity cannot be ignored (since Ghana has strong NPP vs NDC partisanship), but gender in isolation is not a major issue. In

Ijon, F.B., Gyekye-Jandoh, M.A., (2025)

From Margins to Mainstream: The Role of Political Parties in Advancing Women's Parliamentary Representation in Ghana

essence, respondents are signaling: "Give us capable women candidates, and we will consider them seriously." This undermines any notion that voters simply reject women or vote on gender bias – instead, they are looking for qualifications and competence. It also suggests that women candidates who can demonstrate their effectiveness have a genuine chance of winning voter support.

7.3. Perspectives on Increasing Women's Representation – General Measures

The survey next explored respondents' opinions on how to increase the number of women in Ghana's Parliament. This was approached in two ways: first, a general question on what should be done in general to boost women's representation (by any actors, not specifically by parties), and second, a focused question on what political parties specifically can do (which will be discussed in the next subsection). The general question allowed multiple responses, capturing the idea that a multi-faceted approach might be needed.

Table 4. "What do you think should be done to increase women's political representation in Ghana?"

Suggested Measure	Frequency	% of respondents
Women's empowerment	73	73%
Funding support for female candidates	27	27%
Motivation of female candidates	15	15%
Improve women's education	12	12%

Source: Own processing based on field data in 2024.

7.3.1. Women's empowerment

From the table above, women's empowerment was the most frequently mentioned strategy, cited by 73% of respondents. This term was understood in the survey context as a broad set of actions to strengthen women's capacity to compete in politics – ranging from education and training to creating an enabling environment where women feel confident to contest. Respondents view empowerment as a "catalyst" for increasing representation. The interviews strongly reinforced these ideas. All six interviewees, irrespective of their background, agreed that empowering women is essential. They pointed out that empowerment is not just about workshops or seminars; it should include giving women real opportunities and responsibilities. A participant argued that empowerment should extend to appointments of women to higher political offices (such as ministerial or executive positions) because having women in visible leadership roles creates a ripple effect and prepares them for elected positions. She remarked that: "When women are empowered, it gives them the opportunity to raise the needed resources to compete with men during elections... empowerment should not just be limited to seminars; it should include appointments

Ijon, F.B., Gyekye-Jandoh, M.A., (2025)

From Margins to Mainstream: The Role of Political Parties in Advancing Women's Parliamentary Representation in Ghana

to higher political offices.”. This indicates that part of empowerment is about giving women real power and experience.

7.3.2. Funding for female candidates

About 27% of respondents believe that providing funding for female candidates is key to improving representation. This aligns with earlier findings on financial barriers: many see a lack of funds as a primary obstacle for women, so allocating funds or reducing campaign costs for women would directly help more women get elected. 15% mentioned the need to motivate female candidates, which can be interpreted as providing incentives or moral support for women to run, for example, award schemes, recognition, or extra encouragement by communities and organizations for women who step forward.

7.3.3. Education

Another 12% emphasized improving women’s education levels, reflecting the view that better-educated women are more likely to pursue and succeed in political office, and that education builds the confidence and skills needed for leadership.

7.4. Voter Attitudes: An Opportunity Rather than an Obstacle

Despite the low past incidence of voting for women, the survey probed further: Are voters open to voting for a qualified female candidate in the future?

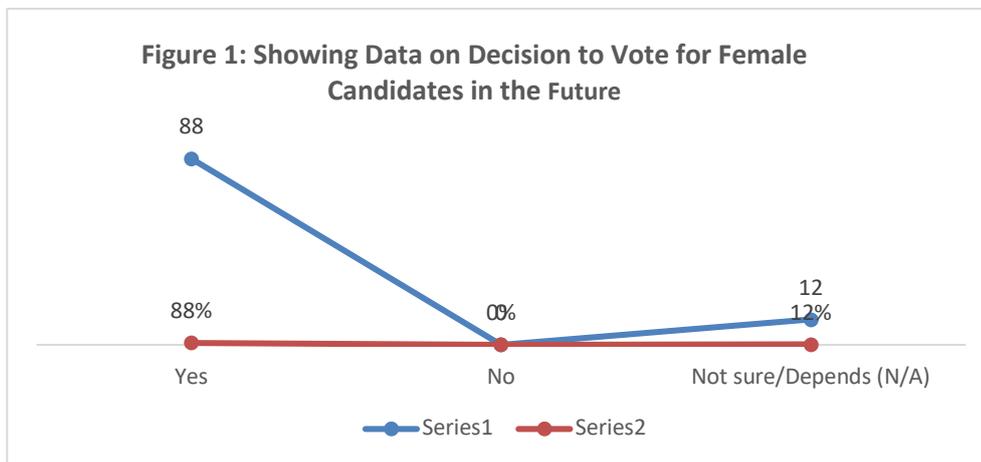


Figure 1. Decision to Vote for Female Candidates in Future Elections

Source: Own processing based on field data in 2024.

One striking result is the openness of Ghanaian voters toward female candidates. The study found that 88% of respondents are willing to vote for a qualified female candidate in the future, and none said they would outright refuse to vote for a woman.

Ijon, F.B., Gyekye-Jandoh, M.A., (2025)

From Margins to Mainstream: The Role of Political Parties in Advancing Women's Parliamentary Representation in Ghana

This aligns with a symbolic representation perspective: the idea that the presence of women in politics can normalize women's leadership and reduce prejudice appears to have traction. Ghanaian society has seen women in various high-profile roles, and it seems voters largely judge candidates on merit. This challenges any narrative that "voters won't vote for women" – at least among the public sampled, gender bias at the ballot box may not be the primary hurdle.

The data suggest that the scarcity of female candidates has been a key reason many have never voted for a woman (72% said they had not, often due to lack of opportunity). This implies a supply-side problem more than a demand-side problem. From a political science standpoint, this resonates with the integrated model of women's representation proposed by Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler (2005), which considers supply (women willing and able to run) and demand (public and party openness). Ghana's demand side – the electorate – appears reasonably healthy in terms of willingness, but the supply side is lacking. Supply, however, is heavily influenced by party recruitment and support processes.

The finding that voters prioritize "ability to perform" (92%) and candidate qualities over gender is consistent with research in other contexts that voters often evaluate female candidates using similar criteria as male candidates, though female candidates may face higher expectations to prove their competence (Fulton, 2012). The fact that party affiliation was only cited by 15% as a deciding factor in voting for a female candidate is interesting in a country with strong party loyalties – it might indicate that respondents interpreted the question as factors specific to evaluating a female candidate, thus putting personal attributes above party. In reality, of course, many voters vote along party lines, but, significantly, even partisan voters in our sample acknowledged they care about a female candidate's capabilities strongly.

Moreover, the results address the point raised by Krook and Norris (2014) regarding the sources of women's underrepresentation. They posited three potential sources: women's lower political ambition (supply), gatekeeper biases (parties), and voter bias (demand). Our data suggest that in Ghana's case, voter bias is the least of these issues, reinforcing that one should look more to the first two. The qualitative quote from Krook and Norris (2014) about "fewer women than men consider running, biases in recruitment by gatekeepers, or prejudices of voters" is telling. Our findings indicate that Ghana's underrepresentation is driven more by the first two: fewer women run (due to societal and economic barriers), and party gatekeepers have not done enough to recruit and support women. Prejudice by voters seems a lesser factor;

Ijon, F.B., Gyekye-Jandoh, M.A., (2025)

From Margins to Mainstream: The Role of Political Parties in Advancing Women's Parliamentary Representation in Ghana

in fact, the success of many women who have run (40 won in 2020 and 2024, including victories in competitive constituencies) attests to voter openness.

7.5. The Role of Political Parties: Gatekeepers and Game Changers

To address the core research question, respondents were asked: "What can political parties do to increase women's political representation in Ghana?" The responses were as follows:

Table 5. "What can political parties do to increase women's representation in Parliament?"

Party Action (Policy)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Build the capacities of women (training, mentorship)	35	35.0%
Introduce voluntary party quotas for women candidates	19	19.0%
Reserve certain seats or constituencies for women candidates	19	19.0%
Provide funding/financial support for female candidates	15	15.0%
Provide material support to female candidates	12	12.0%
Total	100	100%

Source: Own processing based on field data in 2024.

The results underscore that political parties are the linchpin in determining women's political fortunes in Ghana. Parties can act as gatekeepers that either block or facilitate women's entry into politics (Norris & Lovenduski, 1995). In Ghana, it appears they have historically been passive or even hindering gatekeepers – fielding low numbers of female candidates and not proactively addressing women's campaign needs. However, the survey and interviews highlight a range of actions parties could take to become game changers in this arena.

7.5.1. Capacity Building

Capacity-building, being the top recommended party action (35%), indicates a public perception that women may not be getting the same political grooming and mentorship as men within party structures. This relates to both symbolic and substantive representation: by building women's capacities, parties not only improve women's descriptive numbers but ensure those women can substantively perform and thereby reinforce the symbolic message that women are effective leaders. The emphasis on training and mentorship aligns with theories of empowerment (Kabeer, 2001) – giving women the agency (skills, confidence) to convert resources into achievements (winning office). It also resonates with the literature on candidate emergence, which shows that recruitment and encouragement by party elites are crucial for women's political ambition (Fox & Lawless, 2010). If Ghana's parties

Ijon, F.B., Gyekye-Jandoh, M.A., (2025)

From Margins to Mainstream: The Role of Political Parties in Advancing Women's Parliamentary Representation in Ghana

actively identify talented women and invest in their development, it could significantly expand the pool of viable female candidates.

7.5.2. Institution of quotas and Reserved Seats

The support for quotas and reserved seats (together 38%) suggests a significant segment of the population is ready for bold measures. This is consistent with global trends: more than half of countries worldwide have adopted some form of gender quota (whether legislative or party quotas), and these have been instrumental in rapidly increasing women's representation (Dahlerup & Freidenvall, 2005). Ghana's neighbors, like Senegal (with a parity law) and Burkina Faso (30% quota law), have leaped ahead in women's parliamentary representation by using legal quotas. Ghana's reluctance to implement similar measures has left it lagging (as of 2023, Ghana's 14.5% women in parliament pales in comparison to Senegal's 43%). The public openness to quotas in our study indicates a potential shift in attitude – perhaps reflecting frustration with the slow pace of change.

However, the discussion also reveals the tension and nuanced concerns around quotas. Party leaders fear internal democracy issues, and indeed, there is evidence from Ghana and elsewhere that poorly implemented quotas can cause backlash or be circumvented (Franceschet et al., 2012). The interviews revealed an interesting consensus: voluntary party quotas might be more palatable than a top-down national quota (at least to some officials), and focusing on safe seats could mitigate the “undemocratic” critique by not entirely barring men from all contests, only earmarking a subset where women get priority. This reflects a strategic compromise – one that two interviewees explicitly described. It also aligns with the concept of “strategic implementation” of quotas: parties might choose methods that fit their context.

7.5.3. Funding and material support

Funding and material support emerged as essential, which aligns with virtually all analyses of women in politics in low-resource settings (Goetz & Hassim, 2003; Bari, 2005). Financial constraints are a clear example of how descriptive representation is hindered by practical barriers. Our findings that parties lowering financial barriers (like reduced filing fees) had a real effect echo case studies in other countries: for instance, in Nigeria, some parties have experimented with free nomination forms for women to encourage more female aspirants, albeit with limited success due to other intervening factors (Awolowo & Aluko, 2010). Ghana's example of the NPP's reduced fees in 2016 is a proof-of-concept that such measures can yield quantifiable results (more women candidates leading to more women MPs). Thus, one recommendation strongly supported by our study is for parties to permanently adopt women-friendly financial policies – waiving or significantly lowering nomination

Ijon, F.B., Gyekye-Jandoh, M.A., (2025)

From Margins to Mainstream: The Role of Political Parties in Advancing Women's Parliamentary Representation in Ghana

fees for women, fundraising specifically for women candidates, or providing direct subsidies.

8. Conclusions

Women's political representation in Ghana has remained comparatively low since independence, a trend that has increasingly attracted scholarly attention, particularly among female academics and advocacy groups. This paper examines the critical role that political parties play in advancing women's representation in Ghanaian politics. The paper finds that political parties can serve as instrumental actors in addressing this disparity by institutionalizing internal party quotas and providing targeted financial and material support for female aspirants. These measures have been identified as essential mechanisms for enhancing women's political participation.

Moreover, the study observes that factors such as party affiliation, candidate personality, family background, and perceived competence play pivotal roles in influencing the selection and eventual election of female candidates. These findings suggest that while voters may not be inherently opposed to electing women, they tend to prioritize specific candidate attributes in their decision-making processes. In light of these insights, the paper recommends that political parties implement deliberate reforms aimed at increasing female participation. These include enabling women to contest unopposed in party primaries, reserving safe or winnable constituencies for female candidates, and adopting voluntary gender quotas. At the national level, the paper advocates for legal frameworks (constitutional quota) that mandate gender quotas, the establishment of dedicated funding schemes for women candidates, and the introduction of legislative seat reservations.

The study concludes that the responsibility for increasing women's representation in governance should not rest solely with political parties. Rather, the broader citizenry and electorate must also play a proactive role in addressing gender disparities in political representation. Women themselves must also be encouraged, empowered, and supported to run for office. Consequently, the paper calls for future research to explore in greater depth how citizens and voters can contribute to the enhancement of women's political representation in Ghana.

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Ijon, F.B., Gyekye-Jandoh, M.A., (2025)

From Margins to Mainstream: The Role of Political Parties in Advancing Women's Parliamentary Representation in Ghana

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From Margins to Mainstream: The Role of Political Parties in Advancing Women's Parliamentary Representation in Ghana

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Ijon, F.B., Gyekye-Jandoh, M.A., (2025)

From Margins to Mainstream: The Role of Political Parties in Advancing Women's Parliamentary Representation in Ghana

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