

Our attitudes about women running for elected office

Back in 2012, I was seated in the waiting area of a private clinic watching television while waiting to be seen by the doctor. While watching, there was a news clip of Hon. Adwoa Sarfo campaigning to be elected as member of parliament. One of the nurses turned to me and remarked in Twi which I loosely translate here *"This is a man's job. Instead of staying home to take care of her children and her husband she is going into politics."* That unfortunate remark illustrated one of the many examples of the social cost women face in trying to run for elected office.

The Fundamental Question

The Afrobarometer Survey has over the years captured Ghanaian attitudes about certain gender norms. Over five rounds (2005, 2012, 2014, 2017 and 2022), Ghanaians were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the following statement - Statement 1: Men make better political leaders than women, and should be elected rather than women. Statement 2: Women should have the same chance of being elected to political office as men.

In 2005, eighty-three (83%) percent of Ghanaians agreed that women should have the same chance of being elected to political office as men. However, by 2012, that percentage had dropped to seventy (70%) percent. Public attitudes would later improve between 2014 and 2022 where those agreeing that women should have the same chance of being elected to political office as men increased to seventy-eight (78%) percent.

The National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE) in election years, conducts a study called "Matters of Concern to the Ghanaian Voter." From the information publicly available, the first of the studies was done in 2008. Starting in 2012, the study asked about the willingness of Ghanaians to vote for a female candidate as a member of parliament as well as president. In 2012 seventy percent (70%) said they were willing to vote for a female candidate as member of parliament. The percentage remained unchanged significantly in the 2016 study (68%) but improved significantly in 2020 with as many as seventy-seven percent (77%) saying they were willing to vote for a female candidate as member of parliament.

The same question was asked about the willingness to vote for a woman as president of Ghana. In 2012, only fifty percent (50%) responded in the affirmative, increasing significantly to fifty-nine percent (59%) in 2016 and further increasing to sixty-six percent (66%) in 2020.

These statistics prove that overall, Ghanaians generally believe that women should have the same chance of being elected to political office as men. Additionally, they continue to show a willingness to vote for women candidates, although more so as a member of parliament than as president.

When Women Run for Office

So, what happens then when women run for office? In Afrobarometer Round 9, 2022 Ghanaians were asked three specific questions related to that.

Table 1: Ghanaian Perceptions of What Happens When A Woman Runs for Office | 2022 |

If a woman in your community runs for elected office, how likely or unlikely is it that the following things might occur?	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Somewhat unlikely	Very unlikely
A. She and her family will gain standing in the community	57%	29%	7%	7%
B. She will be criticized, called names, or harassed by others in the community	15%	27%	25%	33%
C. She will face problems with her family	14%	21%	25%	40%

From the table above, the perception of Ghanaians when it comes to women who run for election can be summarized as follows- a) it improves her and her family's standing in the community; b) six out of ten (58%) believe it is somewhat/very unlikely she will be criticized, called names, harassed and c) seven out of ten (65%) believe it is unlikely she will face problems with her family. The findings look quite promising as most of the people state that it is very unlikely women will be criticized or face problems.

The Challenge for our Political Parties

There are still some concerns. From the NCCE survey I referenced, some of the reasons citizens give for why they are unwilling to vote for a woman as a member of parliament or president is because *"women in high positions tend to be arrogant and disrespectful, a woman cannot cope with the pressure associated with holding public office, men can do a better job, and a woman cannot take bold decisions"*.

Our political parties are the vehicles through which candidates seek elected office and must step up if we are serious about our desire to see more women participate and get elected to office. Political parties must commit to devising specific ways that will lower the social cost for women who seek elected office.

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