

# Catch them young: the young female parliament in northern Ghana

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In Ghana women constitute over half of the population and play a significant role in the country's economy, yet their visibility in key decision-making positions continues to be low. This results in policies and programmes that do not adequately address the specific needs of women and girls. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognises the right of every person to be involved in the government of his or her country. Equal access of men and women to decision-making and leadership at all levels is a necessary precondition for the proper functioning of democracy. ActionAid Ghana (AAG) has long been working with partners, duty bearers and right holders (see Box 1 for definitions), employing a variety of interventions to ensure a fairer representation of women in local governance processes.

More recently, the organisation has begun to consider how it can support young women to develop the skills and confidence needed to engage in public decision-making. One approach adopted by ActionAid Ghana with its partner Northern

## Box 1: Duty bearers and rights holders

A **duty bearer** is an individual or institution with the obligation to respect, protect and fulfil a right.

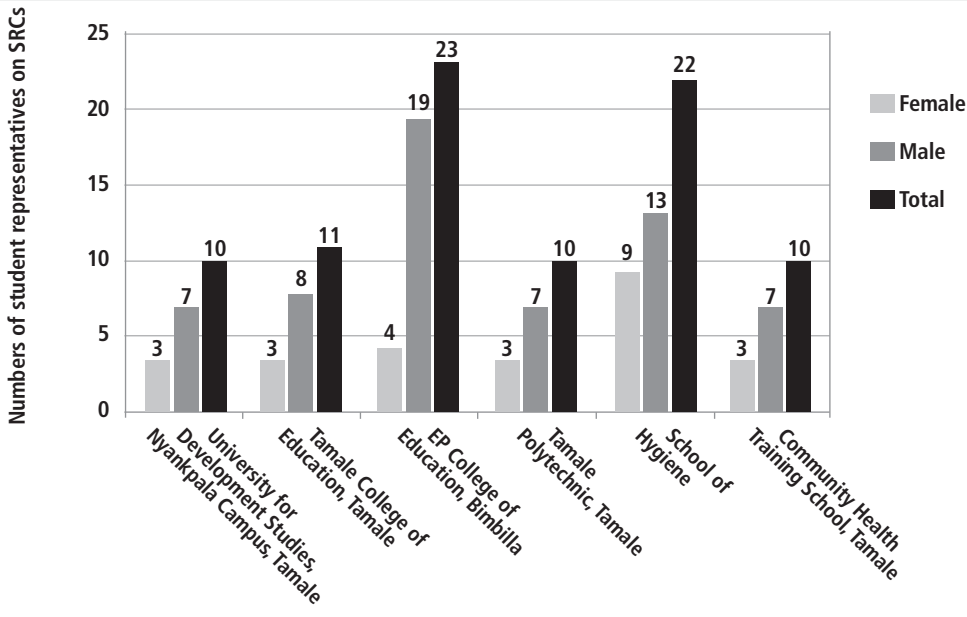
**Rights holders** are a person or group of people who, by virtue of being born, are entitled to the enjoyment of civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights – not as a favour or act of charity but as a right.

Sector Action on Awareness Centre (NORSAAC) has been to create a platform for young women to meet and debate issues that concern them. The young female parliament (YFP) was established in 2009 and regularly brings together young women from across the northern region.

## Limited political participation of women

Ghana is widely seen internationally as a beacon of hope in politically fragile sub-Saharan Africa for its stable politics, good governance and democratic credentials. However the country has no specific legislation taking affirmative action to secure spaces for women's participation in decision-making.

**Figure 1: Young women in student representative councils in the northern region**



Source: Administrations of respective schools.

Currently, there are only 19 female legislators in Ghana’s parliament, which is made up of 230 parliamentarians (Ofei-Aboagye, 2000). Women constitute 32% of the entire civil service and 24% of those in local government, with most being in the secretarial and clerical classes. Only 12% of the decision-influencing category – the administrative class – is female. The Ghana 2000 census report quotes 9543 women, representing 0.2% of women, as being in managerial and administrative positions in Ghana. In the recently dissolved district assemblies (DAs) at local government level, elected female assembly members made up only 10%. Additionally, until January 2010, no woman had ever assumed the position of chairperson or general secretary of any political party in Ghana. In the northern region women are particularly under-represented, largely due to the region’s patriarchal cultural systems. The region had a woeful 38 out of 573 female district assembly members.

Representation and participation in public decision-making is particularly

limited among young women. The country has no legislation that deliberately provides space for youth, including young females, to participate in governance at local and national levels. Even in youth organisations such as student representative councils (SRCs) at tertiary institutions (universities, colleges, polytechnics), young women are under-represented (see Figure 1).

**Making the link between girls’ education and women’s political participation**

During our reflection processes in 2008, AAG and partners realised that young women were being left out of our work to promote the rights of girls and women. While our support to girls’ education focused on girls in ‘basic’ schools (pre-schools, primary and middle schools covering ages 3 to 14 years), our support to women in leadership and decision-making focused on adults (mostly above 28 years). Young women from 15 years to 27 years in secondary and tertiary institutions were not targeted. Yet these young women are

Photo: Alhassan Mohammed Awal



**YFP members on their feet for the closure of the parliamentary session.**

an important group to engage in working for change.

AAG's work to support women to engage in local and national governance processes highlighted inadequate skills and lack of confidence as key barriers. Other barriers included cultural conceptions that positioned the man as the household head and therefore the one who makes decisions for and on behalf of the whole family. In some communities in the northern region, for example, women do not sit with men during community meetings. They are isolated, always sitting behind the men.

Meanwhile, AAG's work to promote girls' education revealed that while more girls than boys were enrolled in basic schools in 2006, only about 14% of girls were staying in school beyond the basic level (Amu, no date). In promoting girl child education, AAG and partners adopted strategies like annual girls' camps

to provide modelling and motivation to help strengthen the ability of girls to demand their right to education. Girls' clubs were also formed in schools to strengthen girls' skills to work with boys, school authorities, community leaders and religious heads in decision-making processes.

AAG and partners realised the need to better link these two bodies of work. We decided to develop a model similar to the girls' camps and clubs, which had proved useful in promoting girls education at the basic level. We introduced them at higher levels, particularly in senior high schools, universities, colleges and polytechnics. As a complement, the young female parliament (YFP) was set up, to help ensure girls stayed in school longer and also to provide a platform for empowering more girls to participate in local decision-making. It was hoped that the YFP would provide them

with a platform to develop and practice the skills required to challenge and engage actively in governance. It would also establish a bridge between our work to promote girls' education and to increase women's participation in decision-making. Girls would be supported and encouraged by the girls' camps and clubs. Their training and skill development would then be sustained through participation in the YFP, which would support them to overcome current barriers to young women's participation in governance.

Being a marginalised group, young women first required a safe space to develop skills, exercise these skills and build confidence if they were to effectively engage in governance, leadership and decision-making. This was to avoid the usually male dominance when common platforms are provided. The safe space created should also bear a resemblance to the political stage they would, we hoped, go on to engage in at national and local levels. Catching young women and empowering them now would build their confidence and skills to actively participate in decision-making. A female-only structure would also be useful since the young women have common concerns and challenges. There would be a stronger solidarity among them and shared understanding.

### **Establishing the YFP**

The YFP model was first conceived by AAG and NORSAAC in July 2008, during our annual participatory review and reflection process. At a second meeting in August 2008, AAG and NORSAAC further developed the model.

At a subsequent meeting in October 2008, other stakeholders such as the National Youth Council (NYC), the Regional Coordinating Council (RCC), the National Population Council and Grameen

Ghana (an AAG partner) were involved.<sup>12</sup> The process also included discussions with the district assemblies (DAs) to introduce the model and to facilitate their eventual ownership of it. This was a very important requirement as the YFP was being shaped to contribute to and influence policies and governance, especially at the local level. It was also important because DAs were expected to provide financial support to the administration of the parliament, finance the participation of representatives of schools in their districts and assist in the execution of special projects adopted.

The next stage was to discuss the model with the school authorities (senior house masters/mistresses), SRCs and student leadership. The girls and the school authorities accepted the model and agreed to the election of representatives from their respective schools to the YFP. Since the election period in schools had already elapsed, it was agreed that the first set of parliamentarians should be chosen from existing female leaders (girls' prefects at senior high schools and women commissioners at tertiary institutions). The girls, supervised by the school authorities, selected the first set of female parliamentarians through school-based consultations and elections. The process involved 15 senior high schools and eight tertiary institutions. Finally, with the selection of the first set of female parliamentarians, the YFP was inaugurated in 2009.

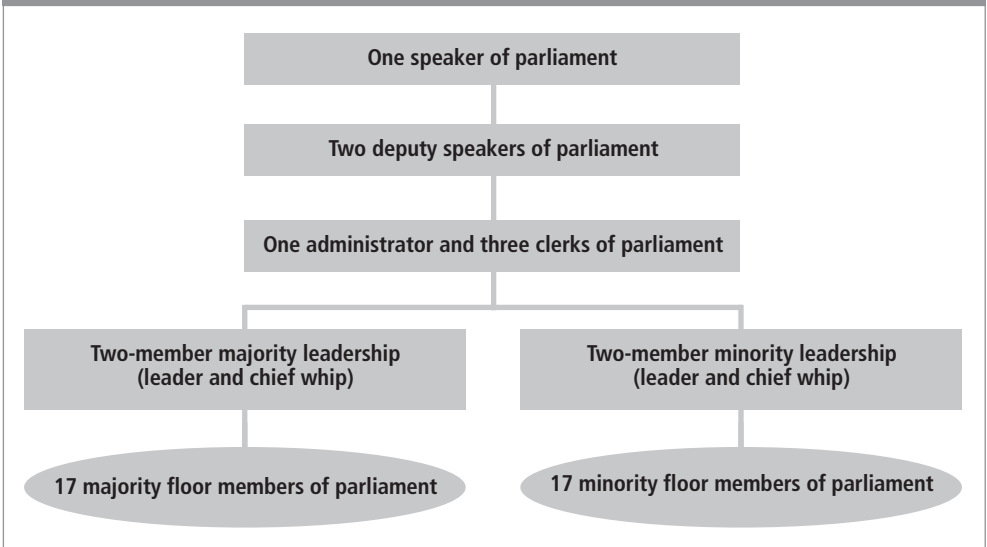
### **Structure of the young female parliament**

The YFP has 40 members: one representative each from 15 high schools in 15 of the 20 districts in the northern region, and three representatives each from seven of the eight tertiary institutions. The eighth, Tamale Polytechnic, has four representatives because it has the highest female

<sup>1</sup> The National Youth Council (NYC) is the state agency responsible for implementing youth policy and programmes.

<sup>2</sup> The Regional Coordinating Council (RCC) is the highest political administrative body in the region, responsible for the governance of the region.

**Figure 2: Structure of the YFP**



population among all the institutions. Female students vote their representatives into the parliament with a varying number of seats per institution/school depending on the overall number of females in the respective institution. Since the aim of the YFP is to provide the opportunity for as many young females as possible to develop their leadership skills and abilities, each member serves only one term, lasting two years.

The parliament has a well defined leadership structure (see Figure 2) with standing orders for members and requirements for affiliation and membership, as well as an outlined schedule for sittings/proceedings.

The leadership is made up of a speaker, two deputy speakers, a majority leader and chief whip, a minority leader and chief whip, a parliamentary administrator and three clerks of parliament. The speaker is elected by parliament. The first speaker was elected from amongst women commissioners of tertiary institutions but subsequent ones must be past female parliamentarians. For the first deputy speaker position, the majority presents a candidate for the approval by the parliament, whilst for the second deputy speaker

the minority presents a candidate for approval. The administrator and three clerks, who are not members of parliament, are appointed by the leadership, upon approval by a majority of parliamentarians. The minority and majority leaders, as well as the chief whips for both sides, are elected by their respective sides.

There are no permanent minority and majority sides as usually found in political legislative/parliamentary systems. These sides are constituted on the basis of issues/motions tabled for discussions (members are randomly selected through balloting to form both sides). This unique structure has eliminated tendencies to develop polarised or entrenched debates/positions and has provided an opportunity for deep and rich debate. The approach was taken after drawing lessons from adult political parliaments where debates are highly polarised based on political inclinations of permanent majority and minority sides.

### **Debating issues through the YFP**

The YFP debates topical national issues such as local and national government development projects, interventions, policies and programmes, among others.



Photo: Alhassan Mohammed Awal

A cross section of YFP members engage in a group exercise.

There are also debates on specific issues related to women and girls, especially violence, harassment and discrimination, the gender gap in leadership positions in the region and institutional/cultural issues relating to the development of young females.

Topics or motions are tabled for debate with the clerk of parliament two weeks ahead of sitting. They can be tabled by:

- individual parliamentarians;
- groups (minority or majority sides); or
- institutions (NGOs, CSOs, state institutions, local government, etc.)

This enables the leadership to assess the motion for inclusion in the next sitting. The leadership, through the clerks of the parliament, then conducts research to gather information on the respective topics for parliamentarians to study, to enable a well-informed and fruitful debate. Individual parliamentarians can and do

however conduct their own research on issues.

Following these debates, a collective position of the YFP is reached and disseminated by the leadership through a communiqué or brief. It may also be used as the basis for advocacy to engage relevant duty bearers with respect to the issue in question. Figure 3 illustrates the process of selecting, debating and advocating on issues.

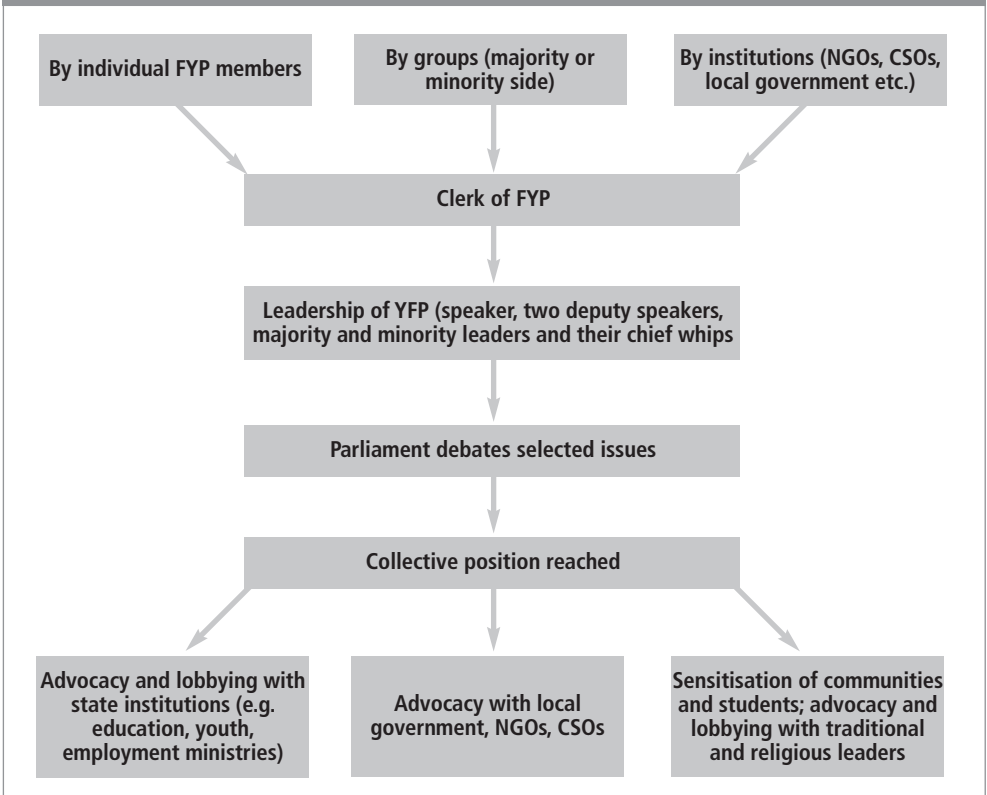
### Change as a result of the YFP

AAG and NORSAAC organises trainings, at least once every three months, for parliamentarians based on training needs assessments. These trainings have so far included:

- leadership and conflict management;
- debating (debating skills and how to present a good debate); and
- advocacy and lobbying with duty bearers.



**Figure 3: Process of selecting, debating and carrying issues forward**



These activities are empowering participants to engage effectively in governance and decision-making. Individual members of the YFP have now developed the courage and confidence to contest leadership and political positions. For example, in last year's local government elections, two members of the YFP contested elections to represent their electoral areas in the district assembly. As one contestant in the West Mamprusi district assembly elections, Rabiātu reflected:

*...for me, the parliament has taught me two big things: that I have the right to participate in decision-making and that I can be whatever I want to be in the future. Though I was not successful in the last year's elections, I will never give up and I'm working hard to come back.*

Last year, the YFP debated the impact

of the low representation of women in DAs and how to bridge the gap. A communiqué was issued by the young women calling on government to allocate 50% of the 30% DA seats which are appointed (rather than elected) to women. This call contributed to government issuing a circular to DAs to allocate 40% of appointments to women.

Linkages have also been established between the YFP, schools and DAs. Schools have agreed to include the selection of parliamentarians in their student leadership elections, along with representatives to student representation councils. The schools, through their representatives, can communicate their particular challenges and situation on issues such as quality of education delivery, infrastructure and education financing. These concerns can then reach relevant state institutions, such as the Ghana Education Service. The involvement of the DAs from



Photo: Alhassan Mohammed Awal

YFP members rising for the opening of the parliamentary sitting.

the inception stage of the YFP to its operational stage, and the gradual establishment of strong linkages between the activities of the parliament will hopefully make the YFP a sustainable intervention.

### Challenges and possible ways forward

The operation of YFP has not been without some challenges. Principal among these is the slow pace of full ownership of the system by the RCCs and DAs, with financial constraints being the reason for the slow progress. The high time and resource demands of research needed to feed into the debates is another challenge currently confronting the parliamentarians.

In carrying these processes forward, a number of proposals to enrich the opera-

tion of the YFP have been identified. This includes expanding the representation to include females from all twenty districts of the northern region to achieve a regional perspective. Another idea is to facilitate exposure visits for the parliamentarians to witness and learn from proceedings of the national parliament and other DA sessions and improve their knowledge of processes leading to decisions in these institutions. It would also be good to facilitate the establishment of a library, well furnished with relevant literature, books and other facilities to support the research of female parliamentarians and other students, including male students.

Our reflections also reveal that, if girls will eventually be engaging and competing with boys in common spaces, it is



important to gradually enable girls to exercise the skills and confidence they have built in common spaces with boys. Opportunities are being explored towards getting DAs to recognise the YFP as a contributor to issues at DA level relating to women and girls and for DAs to adopt parliamentarians as *ex-officio* members of the assemblies. This would enable them to witness and make contributions during assembly sessions, providing an opportunity for them to further boost their confidence, knowledge of proceedings and other dynamics in DAs.

Finally, getting all schools and institutions to fully institutionalise the YFP into their regular student elections and leadership structure and DAs and RCC to own and fully finance the operation of the YFP would make it a sustainable intervention.

## Conclusion

The YFP is only one approach to increasing female participation in leadership and governance. Processes leading to the development and adoption of the YFP, by their participatory nature, have highlighted learning that could enrich the current model. Most critical is the point that the YFP, though gradually ensuring effective participation of women and girls, requires the support of local government, civil society and communities. Local government needs to work with and finance this model, civil society needs to empower girls, and communities need to provide the space for girls to exercise their skills. Only then will young females be attracted into participatory governance and remain there.

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