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THE EVOLVING CHARACTER OF GENDER FOCUSED NGOs/CSOs IN GHANA

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1.0 Introduction

In Ghana, women's organizations have historically attempted to create space for themselves within the whole arena of civil society work but also in terms of their relationship with the state and how they get their voices heard and their issues addressed.

That is why the interest at this convention to look at the evolving character of gender-focused NGOs/CSOs is so important. Generally it demonstrates how far women have come in their struggle to gain credibility for what they do and the impact of their activism on civil society development and growth. In this paper therefore, there is an attempt to look at the history of the women's movement in Ghana in terms of the specific roles and contributions they have made and the implications for their growth and development.

2.0 Character of Women's Activism before NGO-isation

Women were able to organise themselves successfully before the whole concept of NGOs came on the development scene. There is a good account of how Ghanaian women have had a long history of organising themselves for different purposes.¹ Traditionally, women have always been active around social, economic, ritual and military issues. Some organised specific age groups of girls/women such as those that ushered young women into puberty and adulthood. There were also several groups of women who organized around particular dances and music which were performed at funerals, festivals and other occasions. Many of such activities were gendered. For example while men went to war, women, particularly, among the Akan would perform '*mmomomme*' which were dances and rites with military and religious connotations, to assure the community of victory in battle.

Another type of women's groups was active in social and community tasks such as the organization of funerals, social support networks and economic groups. Such groups were particularly active in providing communal labour and they remain important sites of organizing and contributing to well-being to date.

The character of these groups changed during the colonial period. The concepts of 'head of household' applied to men and 'housewife' applied to women transformed existing social

¹ These accounts can be found in some of the writings of renowned women like Takyiwaa Manuh and Dzodzi Tsikata.

relations between women and men and undermined women's traditional roles as economic producers and social organizers. The development of the colonialist state could therefore not sufficiently recognize the range of women's contributions and activism as critical in defining the nature and character of public institutions, structures and relationships. There was thus a disjoint between women's real status and contributions and how the modern state could recognize, value and adequately remunerate them. Indeed many of the tensions about women's position in society and how the state must recognize and address them within the arena of public discourse can be traced back to the conflict between what existed before and during the onset of colonialism.

The result of this approach to women's concerns was that they were that women were largely unrepresented in the political, economic and social structures of the colonial state. Women were however dissatisfied with this kind of relegation to the background so the character of their organizing abilities changed to respond to the need for independence. There are many accounts therefore of how women actively participated in the anti-colonialist struggles, as organizers, financiers and mobilisers.

One way to recognize women's contributions is to examine how they have been recognized in terms of the policies in place and how their full citizenship is assured. In the first republic, some important efforts to improve the situation of women were undertaken in the area of education and work. Thus by 1965, girls constituted 44% of total primary enrolments, 35% of middle school and 25% of secondary school. In relation to work, the first republic saw the abolition of pay discrimination against women, the granting of maternity leave with full pay and the opening up of new avenues of employment for women including opportunities to enter male dominated professions. In politics, the Representation of the People (Women Members) was passed in 1959. The Act made special provision for the election of women as members of the National Assembly. It provided for ten women to hold office. A woman deputy minister and women district commissioners were also appointed. Others were appointed onto boards of corporations, schools and town councils. Thus from the colonial period when women's capacities were ignored, a positive shift about the conception of women's place in society occurred during the period of the independence struggle to through to the first republic.

3.0 Women's Groups and their Contribution to Development

Another way to look at the changing character of women's organizing is to examine their contributions to socio-economic development. Historically, women and men have occupied gendered positions in the traditional division of labour. Women have however utilized such positions on some occasions to make substantial contributions in the areas of managing households, contributing to the wellbeing of communities and engaging in food crop production and small-scale trading activities. They have done this through their own initiatives, associations and groups.

Other times, they have challenged the status quo and demanded better treatment and recognition of their contributions beyond those defined for them by society at different levels. UN processes since 1975 have actually influenced such causes. The many UN conferences held between 1975-1995 as well as others in the post-Beijing period, have enabled Ghanaian



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women and indeed women across the world to use the experience gained from such conferences to challenge unequal economic and social relationships with men, and articulate critical national issues from a gender perspective and have mobilized themselves to seek redress for action from the state and policy makers.

In Ghana, the period between 1988 and 1993 found many women's groups focusing on welfare and service delivery activities within the communities without paying much attention to the extent to which institutions of the state were acting in their interest. Many women's groups and CBOs operating particularly at the grassroots levels provided basic needs such as income generating activities, improved technologies, water and health care. The NGO-isation of women's organizing grew at this time and donor interest in the work of women's organizations grew and many of their initiatives were supported. During the period 1994-1998 therefore, such groups became a bit more influential and managed to have their voices heard around critical issues such as the extent to which the national machinery on women, that is, the then National Council on Women and Development (NCWD) was being responsive to their needs. Many women's organizations however became ineffective as they could not compete with the then 31st December Women's organisation headed by the then First lady, Nana Konadu Agyeman Rawlings.

The definition of women's organizing was however seen as useful within the neo-liberal economic paradigm of development as different models were used to inform women's contributions to society. The concepts of 'Women In Development' (WID) and later 'Women and Development' (WAD) were applied to promote efficiency arguments. Even though the concept of 'Gender and Development' (GAD) began to be used from the 1995 period onwards, the activist nature of women's organizing was almost subsumed under the technocratic requirements of donor agencies and their definitions of how to promote gender equality. The notion of 'gender mainstreaming' for instance seems to have done more harm than good. Under it, different frameworks, tools and methods have been developed and used in different sectors of the economy to promote gender equality particularly in policy programme and project implementation efforts, without questioning and addressing underlying and structural inequalities between women and men.

From the period 1999 to date however, women's organizations have become more interested in policy advocacy work in line with the changes in development paradigms which stress issues of women's rights as human rights and also within the context of constitutionalism. Increasingly women's organizations are seeing themselves as having the same rights as their male counterparts and therefore using their organizational capacities to demand greater responsiveness from the state in addressing their specific needs and concerns. Women are now making contributions around discussions of the national budget and demanding that their issues should be sufficiently articulated in the budget formulation and implementation processes to ensure adequate allocations of relevant resources for their well-being. Other areas of engagement have been their critique of the neo-liberal economic framework and the demand for economic justice as well as a call for the state to address in a fundamental way, the continued abuse of their rights as citizens, particularly their experience of sexual and gender-based violence.

4.0 The Limits to Addressing Issues of Concern to Women

But these positive trends have to be looked at with caution against the background of the unfavourable economic and political contexts within which these changes have occurred. The economy of Ghana has since independence been characterised by near-permanent crises arising from continued dependence on a narrow production base of primary commodity production for export, little industrialization and low technological development. A small local elite and foreign interests control the profits and benefits from local production to the detriment of the bulk of working people and the poor in both urban and rural areas. Besides, economic policies over the years, have largely failed to change the fundamental character of the economy. Thus in the area of employment, Ghana's Core Welfare Indicators Questionnaire (CWIG) of 2003 says that unemployment and underemployment in both the formal and informal sectors worsened since 1998 and that the areas that experienced the worst decline, such as agriculture, small scale production are sectors where women predominate. Manufacturing industries have also suffered under trade liberalisation and in such situations women who usually occupy the lowest levels of the jobs on the shop floor are the first to be laid off. Thus it is said that the income levels of the poor fell between 1997 and 2003 while the population of the lowest income group in the country increased from 15% to 19%.

Economic policy reforms have not helped the situation of women in any remarkable manner. Since 2002, the Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy (GPRS) has been used as the basic framework of promoting economic development. Gender analysis was flawed in the first GPRS (2002). Effort was however made to address this in GPRS 2 by engaging more broadly with civil society institutions working to promote the well-being of women. Lack of good access to water and sanitation and energy resources are other areas that have implications for women's experience of poverty. The provision of water and energy for households is the primary duty of women in Ghana as it is in the rest of the world. Women usually spend long hours a day walking long distances to fetch and carry heavy loads of water and firewood. This has negative consequences for their time and health.

There are constitutional provisions which protect women's rights in Ghana. Article 35 (1) of the 1992 Constitution of Ghana, enjoins the State to promote the integration of all the peoples of Ghana and prohibit discrimination and prejudice on grounds of origin, circumstances of birth, ethnicity, gender, religion and other beliefs. The constitution also requires that the State guarantee the ownership of property and the right of inheritance of all (Article 36 (7)). However, in Ghana, all these basic rights face serious problems, which undermine the constitutional guarantees. This is because there are no systematic social policies and programmes to deliver the accepted minimum level of service provision. Thus after close to three decades of reforms in which various sectors of the economy have been extensively liberalized, there is still widespread poverty and insecurity. Women, children and the disabled have suffered particular forms of hardship, borne the brunt of labour retrenchments and the removal of subsidies from social services among others.

The Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs (MOWAC) is expected to act as an anchor to all of these efforts. Until recently its relation with civil society was unhealthy. This limited its

ability to support their initiatives on women. There is also insufficient clarity about mandate leading to gaps in services as well as duplication of efforts.

5.0 Significant Initiatives By Women's Groups

International women's rights provisions have assisted Ghanaian women at different levels to advocate for their rights. Three key initiatives are instructive namely:

- The establishment and role of The Network for Women's Rights in Ghana (NETRIGHT).
- The Domestic Violence Coalition (DVC).
- The Initiative of the Women's Manifesto for Ghana and the formation of the Women's Manifesto Coalition (MWC).

5.1 The Establishment and role of NETRIGHT

Shortly before the 2000 elections, there was the mysterious murders of several women in different places of Accra, Ghana's capital, as well as others occurring now and again in other parts of the country. This became a big campaign issue with the two main political parties, the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP) accusing each other as being the perpetrators of the horrible crimes. Gender equality activists and women generally felt this matter needed urgent attention. They stressed the need to express public outrage and call for proper investigations to be conducted to bring the perpetrators to face the full rigours of the law. Already NETRIGHT had been established and had gained some recognition, especially after conducting research on the performance of National Machineries on Women in eight countries in Africa. Out of NETRIGHT, a new formation, 'Sisters Keepers' emerged to lead the process of agitation and demonstrations. Many strategies and initiatives were adopted including the holding of press briefings. The final onslaught was the organisation of a mass demonstration to the Castle, the seat of government, which attracted a lot of media and public attention. The incumbency ignored this action totally. At the same time it lost the general elections and the new government recognizing the growing momentum among women announced its commitment to promoting issues of concern to women in its inaugural speech, and followed it up with the creation of a Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs. While women's groups were not particularly excited about the announcement of the establishment of a Ministry, the feeling that the new government was attempting to listen to them created a new confidence. This new confidence was given a further boost, (albeit in a different direction), when the actual work of the Ministry started and it became obvious that the state and women's groups did not necessarily share the same views and positions on issues of concern to women.

The ideological stance of NGO-state relationships was becoming contentious again and equality and social justice groups within civil society were challenged to identify entry points within the changed political environment which had ushered in multi-party politics to advocate for marginalised women and men. They needed to broaden the understanding and practice of democracy beyond political parties, official pronouncements and promises, and the holding of elections. Thus the interest of women's groups at this time had moved beyond programmes of credit and income-generation, important as these have been for women's survival. More centrally, women were interested in issues of power relations, injustices and women's participation in decision-making processes.

Since its establishment, NETRIGHT has been extremely active in working on economic justice issues, such as the Growth and Poverty Reduction Strategy and Land Rights. It has also recently advocated for recognition of the importance of women's rights work through the advocacy work it embarked on in relation to the Ghana Research and Advocacy Programme (GRAP). Through the effort of NETRIGHT, this pooled funding mechanism for Research and Advocacy Organisations (RAOS) in Ghana is currently going through an engendering process.

5.2 The Domestic Violence Coalition

It was at this time that another major coalition building effort emerged around the then Domestic Violence Bill. A series of activities were embarked upon by the Coalition on Domestic Violence to sensitise and create awareness in the public and influence the bill's early passage. The public was unhappy about a number of clauses in the bill, a factor that tended to stall the passage of the bill into law. The process however provided space for women to reflect more on their relationships with the state, their own capacities, and the strategies being used for their advocacy work. Through the efforts of the DV Coalition and other actors, Ghana now has a Domestic Violence Law. It is divided into two parts with provisions concerning domestic violence, civil protection and related topics. Unique features of the Law include the mandatory duty placed on the police in the enforcement of domestic violence legislation. The Law also provides for civil protection orders and defines sexual harassment. It places a duty on the Minister of Justice to make regulations for the training of court and police officers, education and counseling of victims and perpetrators of domestic violence.

5.3 The Women's Manifesto for Ghana Initiative

The idea of producing The Women's Manifesto for Ghana emerged as an initiative of ABANTU for Development, a gender and policy advocacy organisation founded to promote women's engagement with policy issues and processes. However many civil society groups joined the initiative, culminating in the formation of the Women's Manifesto Coalition (WMC).

The initiative started in June 2003 with the organisation of a consultative meeting of NGOs, professional organisations, organised labour and other civil society organisations from all over Ghana to dialogue on major issues of concern to women in the political process before elections in 2004. The main objectives of the meeting was to explore the opportunity for building a strong coalition of women's groups to work towards increasing the active participation of women in the political process in terms of numbers and effectiveness. More directly it was to seek the mandate of the group to facilitate a process towards the development of a political document to be known as The Women's Manifesto for Ghana, which could be used by women in the 2004 elections and beyond. The specific objectives of the Manifesto idea were as follows:

- To demand that government, its agencies, political parties and the general population take action to address the economic and socio-cultural environment that hinders the active participation of women in the processes of national development.

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- To call on government and its agencies to implement the many international commitments on the promotion of gender equality and the rights of women.
- To provide information for those committed to becoming knowledgeable on what is needed to achieve gender equality and become equipped to make demands for its realisation.
- To provide information that empowers women to use their votes as a bargaining tool.
- To provide a concrete agenda which women and men, elected into decision-making structures can work with, thereby fulfilling their responsibility to the electorate – especially women.
- To check and monitor political parties' accountability and their attitude in relation to issues of concern to women and the space they create to promote women's active participation in politics and in decision-making processes.

The document is currently being used at different levels in the country. Clearly, the Coalition on the Women's Manifesto for Ghana has been a landmark experience for women's groups in Ghana. It has shown how important it is for women to work together to promote their rights as citizens. Confidence has been built among women and collective processes have become easier especially through the coalition building efforts of The Women's Manifesto for Ghana. We have also learnt about the importance of building partnerships both within the movement and with other constituencies. Again we have learnt that broad based approaches that cut across different identities of location, ethnicity and socio-economic background are central to women's organising, to broaden the space and voice of women in influencing the policies that affect their lives.

6.0 Challenges and Prospects for the Future

Throughout the processes of developing our coalitions, it has been clear that, a strong political stance on issues of concern to women is the starting point for organizing and mobilisation. The NGO approach has enabled women to have some basic resources for our work. But that is not sufficient to push the boundaries of our activism beyond basics. The real work includes strengthening the organisational capabilities of the Coalitions and ensuring that the various efforts lead to collective action for change.

Through the work of the Manifesto, the DV Coalition and NETRIGHT, advocacy groups have built a strong base for addressing gender issues in Ghana. Recent events point to the value of the work we continue to engage in:

- The celebration of the 50th anniversary of Ghana's independence and the decision of the 3 Coalitions of Women to come together to affirm our place in the independence struggle, social development and the need to address the gaps in the promotion of our rights as equal citizens.
- The passage of the domestic violence law.

In the years ahead there is a need to strengthen members' capacity and mandate by working hard to address other critical issues of concern to Ghanaian women as contained in the political document, The Women's Manifesto. It is the only way governments will be accountable, with democracy becoming a reality for women, ordinary citizens and marginalised groups.

7.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, the political empowerment process of establishing NETRIGHT, initiating the DV Coalition and the Women's Manifesto for Ghana, within the context of constitutionalism, provide critical lessons and insights into the ways in which advocacy NGOs with a political agenda, can pool their capacities together to influence relevant change towards social transformation from a gender perspective. It also provides insights about the many challenges that continue to constrain Ghanaian women and those in the sub-region and Africa in general in their efforts to participate and contribute to the decisions that affect their lives.

What is clear is that pressing for our rights as women is useful as well as providing evidence that there are disparities in social provisioning. However to improve our well-being and achieve gender equality, we have to continue to provide continuous analysis of the issues, have a clear vision of where clear policy interventions need to be made, and work effectively to mobilise ourselves to demand that the state delivers on its policy promises to promoting gender equality. We have to do this recognizing the challenges posed by international relationships, globalisation policies and their negative implications for our countries and how strengthening our coalition building efforts beyond our national borders would be significant in securing those social and economic policies that would be more responsive to us as women.