



Exploring communication norms and gender-based participation in indigenous governance systems: Insights from the upper East and Upper West Regions of Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Cultural norms are determined by societal expectations and are embedded and ingrained in communication practices. They define, prescribe, and dictate gender roles, including who is qualified to communicate or speak at public gatherings. Communication practices are shaped and regulated by cultural norms. This study investigates the ways and manners in which cultural norms affect women's involvement in traditional governance systems in two regions in Ghana, namely Upper East and Upper West. As part of the qualitative research technique, the study deployed focus group discussion, in-depth interviews, and participant observation in the data collection process. In addition to two Regional House of Chiefs registrars, one from each region, the participants also included two paramount chiefs from the Bongo and Builsa traditional areas of the Upper East Region, two paramount chiefs from the Kaleo and Tumu traditional areas in the Upper West Region, two paramount queen mothers from the Bongo and Builsa traditional areas of the Upper East Region and two paramount queen mothers from the Kaleo and Tumu traditional areas of the Upper West Region. The study represented gender-based non-governmental organisations from both regions. The inclusion criteria included those who were directly involved in traditional governance systems or actively involved in gender-related community work, including advocacy, while those whose roles did not intersect with traditional governance systems or whose contributions did not directly relate to traditional authority structures or gender advocacy were excluded. The study highlights how institutional structures and cultural discourses sustain gender inequality in the traditional governance systems of the study's locations, with a focus on Gender and Development (GAD) theory. The results reveal that gendered communication norms make it difficult for women to participate in traditional governance, which limits their visibility and impact and reinforces patriarchy in public discourse. Despite this trend, the study also identifies opportunities for revolutionary change, including policy changes, interventions designed to enhance the capacity of established authorities, and adjustments to communication methods that promote more inclusive discourse. It advocates for egalitarianism and participative governance systems, removing obstacles to communication and reassessing cultural norms via the prism of GAD. It recommends that policymakers, traditional leaders, and civil society actors who want to advance gender equality in governance should take note of this study's implications. The study concludes with specific recommendations, including the creation of community-level forums for inclusion and empowerment, the integration of gender-sensitive training for traditional leaders, and institutional support for queen mothers.

Keywords: Empowerment, Gendered Communication, Inclusion, Patriarchy, Traditional Governance, Women's Participation

I. INTRODUCTION

It is important to stress that in many cultural contexts across the globe, including Ghana, communication is not a value-free or neutral act but rather greatly influenced by gendered expectations and culturally accepted norms (Tannen, 1990; Holmes, 2006). It is also significant to note that these established communication norms do not only determine the degree of authority and legitimacy that particular voices are granted in both public and private domains but also dictate who can talk and how (Gal, 2012). These norms define the limits of inclusion and exclusion in traditional governance systems, especially in patriarchal communities such as the Upper East and Upper West Regions of Ghana where this study is focused. These norms dictate informal rules for interaction at social gatherings including the traditional governance meetings.

In Ghana, for instance, traditional governance structures remain essential for community engagement, organization, and decision-making, especially in the Upper East and Upper West regions (Apusigah, 2004). These indigenous governance institutions are viewed as very critical support to established formal government structures such as state institutions. They support formal governments in terms of mobilization of the grassroots for the implementation of programmes and policies. They are also critical in controlling local affairs, particularly when it comes to issues



bordering on inheritance, land distribution, resolving conflicts, and customary law (Giovarelli, 2006). These institutions which often involve chiefs, elders, queen mothers, and other influential community leaders are firmly established in the rural sociopolitical fabric in the Ghanaian context (Apusigah, 2004).

Despite their relevance, these traditional governance structures are characterized by enduring gender disparities (Tseer et al., 2025). Gender roles within these traditional structures are shaped by longstanding patriarchal norms that systematically exclude or minimize women's participation in leadership positions and public discourse. In particular, the communicative environment within these settings is highly gendered (Smith, 2025).

To buttress the point that these traditional governance structures are characterized by enduring gender disparities Horlings et al. (2017) argue that men are mostly in positions of leadership in these institutions. These authors as part of their study findings cited that the chieftaincy institution and traditional governance systems which continue to play a significant role in local politics and the cultural life of people is one of the institutions where men mostly become leaders, marginalizing women. According to the authors, this male dominance is maintained by communicative practices that equate leadership and authority with masculinized speech and expression, in addition to persistent socio-cultural restrictions on women's roles. Hence, gendered communication serves as a vehicle for reproducing long-standing power imbalances as well as a mirror of gender imbalance. In this regard, women are marginalized not only by structural exclusion but also by discursive practices that undermine their ability to communicate and contribute during the decision-making process on developmental issues. Examining how communicative norms are socially prescribed, internalized, and implemented in traditional governance, this study looks at how they affect women's involvement and participation in leadership positions and decision-making.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

When it comes to social interaction, norms often take centre stage by mostly prioritizing male voice over that of women and consolidating the belief that women do not speak at public gatherings. Women are expected to remain silent in public gatherings. For instance, in many traditional areas including the Upper East and Upper West Regions where this study is conducted, Social and gender norms frown upon or forbid women from speaking at social gatherings including the community level, Regional House of Chiefs meetings, and even political gatherings (Seidu, 2016). Young girls are oriented and indoctrinated as they grow to become womanhood to accept quietness as a sign of showing respect and obedience, all in the name of cultural norms and societal expectations (Fitzpatrick, 2024).

In furtherance, Romaine (1998) in his study, reaffirmed that while these communication norms end up imbibed by women to become passive communicators or even not to communicate at all at social gatherings, men on the other hand are socialized to demonstrate and exhibit authority when speaking or talking at public gatherings or even at the home. Through this trend, gendered communication norms and habits become ingrained in societal norms leading to the marginalization of women's voices in the decision-making forums. Even in instances where women are allowed to become Queen Mothers, their contributions become informal, symbolic, or limited by interpretive frameworks dominated by men (Apusigah, 2014).

Although the literature on gender and political involvement in Ghana is expanding, the majority of them concentrates on formal political institutions like the local governance system and the national parliament (Essilfie, 2021). In addition, while scholars have conducted studies in the area of the roles of women in rural administration (Essilfie, 2021), few have concentrated on the relationship between gender, communication, and traditional authority. Furthermore, it is very critical to comprehend how communication norms in these traditional contexts can either support or impede women's empowerment, given the continuous regional and national public discourse and initiatives to improve gender inclusion in governance. Although understanding how gendered participation in traditional governance systems in the study area is shaped by specified communication norms, there are hardly any studies focusing on that area.

This study is aimed at filling in this gap. This research offers critical insight into the intersection of gender, communication, and governance in rural West African settings, with broader relevance to discussions on patriarchy and inclusion across sub-Saharan Africa by focusing on the Upper East and Upper West regions of Ghana.

1.2 Research Objectives

- i. How do prescribed communication norms impact women's participation in traditional governance processes?
- ii. What are the key barriers that limit women's involvement in governance, and how can these barriers be overcome?



II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 Gender and Development Theory (GAD) and Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT)

The study is grounded in the Gender and Development Theory (GAD) and Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT). The researcher used the two theories as overlapping theoretical frameworks to examine how gendered participation in traditional governance institutions in the Upper East and Upper West Regions of Ghana is shaped and confined by prescribed social communication norms. With their deeply ingrained cultural traditions and patriarchal power structures, these regions offer an intriguing location for investigating how communication practices within traditional political systems maintain gendered norms and expectations.

GAD, as a critique of Women in Development (WID), aims at changing the structures rather than incorporating women within them (Rathgeber, 1990). The theory examines how social structures including traditional leadership structures perpetuate gender hierarchies through both overt and covert cultural norms (Rao et al., 2015). The majority of leadership positions in traditional governance positions in the Upper East and Upper West Regions where this study is focused are held by men, while women's responsibilities are often symbolic, informal, or sidelined. GAD also contests the fundamental normative presumptions that determine who a genuine is, authoritative, or credible in public discourse, in addition to the underrepresentation. Most often, these presumptions are expressed in culturally accepted communication norms that are applied differently to men and women. These include silence, indirectness, or deference.

By exploring how identity, power, and the need for social acceptance or rejection influence interpersonal and group-level communication patterns, CAT provides a critical micro-level insight in this regard. From the point of view of CAT, people adapt their speech patterns, tone, style, and language choice to the laid down norms of communication and expectations of an authoritative figure or a group (Giles et al., 2013). By this implication, using less assertive language, avoiding direct disagreement, or concealing opinions entirely as part of language convergence to male-dominated norms, might be one way that women in traditional governance settings adapt to navigate or thrive in male-dominated situations, they frequently have the unintended consequence of strengthening the very norms that marginalize or stifle the voices of women. Although these accommodations might be viewed as adaptive, they continue to widen the gap of gender communication in governance be it traditional governance system or formal governance systems.

In addition, these accommodations are shaped by social risk and not merely communicative choices. In this context, women may be viewed as disrespectful, deviant, or unfit for leadership where they speak assertively. In this regard, women's participation in the traditional governance system is regulated not only by internalized norms of femininity but also by external expectations (Amarachi et al., 2023). While GAD helps to expose the structural and cultural mechanisms that maintain this risk, CAT on the other hand illustrates how this manifest in real-time interpersonal communication and interactions.

GAD and CAT collaborate to provide a multi-dimensional examination of the involvement of genders. GAD offers a macro-level perspective to examine how cultural norms and institutionalized patriarchy restrict the role of women with informal and formal governance, while CAT provides a microscopic perspective to understand how women deal with these limitations through communication strategies that are frequently influenced by power imbalances. From the perspective of this argument, communication in traditional governance becomes a gendered practice that is ingrained in norms that portray and uphold significant social hierarchies rather than being a neutral avenue.

The application of the integration of GAD and CAT to this study will not only help in diagnosing the problem but also create avenues for strategic intervention such as communicative empowerment, leadership training, and policy reform aimed at disintegrating both discursive and structural barriers that confront gender equity in traditional governance.

In the case of the Upper East and Upper West Regions of Ghana where this study is focused, will explore how these communication norms act as both a mechanism for exclusion and a potential site for transformation. By making these norms visible and contestable through both theoretical analysis and practical engagement, it becomes possible to envision more inclusive, dialogic, and equitable governance structures.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Global Perspectives on Women's Participation in Traditional Governance Processes

Globally, it is widely known and acknowledged that traditional governance structures play a very significant role when it comes to political engagement, especially in rural and indigenous settings (Tseer et al., 2025). Notwithstanding the important role of this fact, one of the major challenges that seem to put this institution in the negative limelight is the gendered communication norms that favour male voices and leadership and marginalize women. This trend continuously turns to controlling the arrangements of the traditional governance systems and structure in favour of men. Throwing more searchlight on the phenomenon, Lister (2016) asserts that due to the



continuous and deep-rooted patriarchal nature of traditional governing institutions in many communities, particularly those in Africa and Latin America, many women are confined to submissive roles and positions.

According to the UN Women (2021) report, this phenomenon is pronounced more visible in cultures where men dominate in the decision-making process, relegating the political participation of women to the background and limiting them to supporting or backstage positions. Attributes and examples of gendered communication behaviors that restrict women's agency and capacity to affect governance outcomes in these institutions include quietness or silence, nonverbal submission respect.

Many researchers have brought to the limelight the difficulties women go through in navigating these gender communication trends (Amarachi et al., 2023). This phenomenon which is more pronounced in rural settings not only discourages women's participation and engagement in the decision-making process in development but also against their constitutional and human right to participate in development. (Dai, 2023). Socialization tactics are often adopted by many indigenous communities which mandate the conduct of women in public spaces such as debarring them from speaking publicly or assertiveness as unsuitable for women except men. These prescribed social norms and societal expectations no doubt serve to perpetuate gender communication norms (Hodzi, 2024). As a result of this phenomenon, the voices of women become very silent in many traditional institutions, making men continue to dominate the political and leadership spheres (Peter, 2024).

2.2.2 Gendered Communication Norms in African Women's Participation in Traditional Governance Processes

Scholars have pointed out that the phenomenon of gender communication norms is very common in many traditional governance systems in Africa, especially in rural areas where gender role is deeply laid down as part of the social norms (Odame, 2014). It is important to note that since time immemorial, women's engagement in traditional governance in sub-Saharan Africa, has been a major problem especially where women are constantly left out of positions of leadership and decision-making process (Tambe & Jormfeldt, 2024). The role of women is typically confined and limited to the traditional home, denying them the opportunity and their fundamental human right to get involved in politics (Baldwin, 2014). According to a study conducted by Alo, et al., (2022), these ingrained and strict gendered norms in these organizations are one of the major obstacles for women. The social expectation that women should remain silent in meetings, their restriction to leadership positions, and that women's voices are less powerful than men's are among the stereotypical views of society, making it a challenge for women to get involved in the decision-making process and governance. They are not able to voice out the positive views that could contribute to development (Odame, 2014). In the case of Tambe and Jormfeldt (2024), these sorts of communication norms have their roots in cultural behaviors that subordinate women in public and political settings.

To worsen the problem, political traditional governance structures gendered have institutionalized communication norms. For instance, traditional leaders in Ghana often uphold strict gender norms that dictate that women should talk less, submit themselves to male leaders, and avoid participating in political debate in the same manner as males (Awoonor-Williams & Overå, 2022). Additionally, social and cultural expectations which perceive women as less competent for leadership positions, contribute to the reinforcement of this scenario. (Odame, 2014). In most instances, women's participation in governance in these systems is very restrictive. For example, despite the influential role of queen mothers in the traditional governance system, they lack actual decision-making authority (Essilfie, 2021).

2.2.3 The Case of Ghana: Gender and Traditional Governance

In the Ghanaian context, Traditional governance plays a major role in the country's sociopolitical framework, particularly in the rural communities where formal government structures are either absent or insignificant (Kwarkye, 2021). Traditional governance systems even in the face of legal frameworks to promote gender equality in formal politics have been slower at embracing inclusive governance and practices. (Sossou, 2011). Although Ghana has made appreciable gains in terms of bridging the gender gap by allowing few women to participate in governance, women still encounter obstacles when trying to participate in traditional government systems (Essilfie, 2021).

The deeply ingrained communication norms embedded in these institutions have been cited as one of the major bottlenecks to women's participation in governance, especially in the indigenous governance structures. From Sossou's (2011) point of view, chiefs and other traditional leaders often ensure strict adherence to gender norms that dictate whether women should talk less or not to talk at all at social gatherings including traditional governance meetings. These communication norms established by social and cultural norms indoctrinate and orientate women to be submissive to male leaders, limiting women from participating in political discourse in the same manner as males. In other words, the power of cultural expectations about femininity and power, perceive women as weaker vessels and not qualified for leadership positions. This view reinforces these gender disparities especially when it comes to gender communication (UNDP, 2021). In this system of governance, women's participation in governance is often restricted to positions such



as “queen mother. Even in this case, the queen mother who has some form of influence is denied the opportunity to the decision-making process (Essilfie, 2021)

From the above-reviewed empirical evidence, it is established that gendered participation in traditional governing systems reflects a consistent pattern of women's exclusion and marginalization. A classic example is that cultural norms that view and consider women as passive participants make it very difficult for women to assert themselves in public decision-making settings (Nakayi,2023). Nakayi's finding (,2023) resonates with research conducted in Ghana, where communication and structural hurdles often prevent women from participating in governance (Essilfie, 2021). Kaleba, (2025) research emphasizes the influence of community leaders on gendered communication norms. Women's views could only be heard in the decision-making process in governance processes when both male and female leaders work together to support gender-inclusive procedures. The continuation of patriarchal communication practices that prevent women from participating in traditional governance systems needs to be addressed.

Notwithstanding the fact in Africa research on gender and governance is expanding, there is still a gap when it comes to the relationship between gendered engagement in traditional governance and communication norms (Essilfie, 2021). Literature portrays that less focus has been conducted in the area of communication dynamics in traditional governance spaces, especially in rural areas. Rather, the majority of studies on gender and governance in Ghana have concentrated on formal political institutions (Awoonor-Williams & Overå, 2022). This study attempts to close this gap by exploring how prescribed communication norms affect women's participation. In the case of the Upper East and Upper West areas of Ghana where this study is focused, the traditional governance system is still a vital component of community development.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Study Area

The Upper East and Upper West Regions of Ghana were selected as the study's locations. This research, specifically, chose the Bongo and Builsa communities (Upper East Region) and the Kaleo and Tumu communities (Upper West Region) for the study. The justification for selecting these two regions for the study was based on the fact that they are endowed with robust traditional political systems, deeply embedded and ingrained with sociocultural values. The sociopolitical structure of these two regions is shaped by chieftaincy institutions, which are viewed as essential for cultural preservation. Robust The traditional political systems in these regions provide local leadership, and deal with conflict resolution among others (Abotchie et al, 2006).

These areas are characterized by patriarchal structures, in which social roles, inheritance, and ancestry are usually determined by gender. The active participation of queen mothers adds a significant perspective to the conversation about women's agency and leadership in male-dominated organizations. Rites of passage, festivals, and oral traditions are all essential components of the communities' identities and serve as a reflection of the expectations and ideals that are put on both men and women in positions of leadership. These regions represent vibrant traditional political structures in which the power of paramount chiefs and the influence of queen mothers coexist. This scenario makes it easier to understand gendered communication and power dynamics in traditional governance leadership structures in a nuanced setting. The responsibilities of chiefs and queen mothers in these communities are deeply embedded and ingrained in the governance and decision-making processes, making chieftaincy a critical component of the traditional governance system.

3.2 Research Design and Approach

The study employed a qualitative research approach based on the Gender and Development (GAD) paradigm as suitable for the study. The reason for going this way was that this method allowed the researcher to engage in a thorough investigation of how intricate social and cultural factors influence gender roles and communication conventions. The qualitative method provided the flexibility and depth required to comprehend the complexities of gender dynamics, which are intricately intertwined with particular historical, cultural, and institutional settings. The qualitative approaches allowed the researcher to capture the lived experiences of people and groups to better understand how gender is experienced, negotiated, and contested in daily life rather than reducing it to quantifiable factors.

The GAD paradigm highlights Gender inequality's structural causes which fits in perfectly with a qualitative study approach. In contrast to previous methods like Women in Development (WID), which often viewed women as a homogenous group that needed to be integrated into development, GAD focuses on the big institutional and social structures that produce maintain, and reinforce gender inequality. In addition to understanding the results of gendered activities, this paradigm aims to comprehend how institutions, such as traditional governing systems, uphold or



undermine gender hierarchies. This objective is furthered by a qualitative approach, which made it easier for the researcher to examine these structures' functioning and development in a very contextualized and thorough manner.

This study, therefore, aimed to comprehend how women's agency is either empowered or restricted within the traditional governance frameworks. Through the FGDs, Structured interviews, and Participant Observation, the study captured participants' views and perspectives on the subject matter investigated. The perceptions, views, and meanings people ascribed to gender communication, gender roles, and behaviors inside traditional governance institutions were captured by qualitative techniques through interviews, focus groups, and participant observation.

3.3 Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling technique involving participants actively engaged in traditional governance and gender advocacy-based non-governmental organizations was selected for the study. This approach allowed the researcher to collect in-depth insights from the participants (Patton, 2002). There were four (4) paramount chiefs (two from Bongo and Builsa in Upper East and another two from Kaleo and Tumu traditional areas of the Upper West Region), four (4) paramount queen mothers from the same traditional areas, two registrars from the Regional House of Chiefs, one from each region, and two representatives from gender-focused NGOs, one from each of the two regions. As part of the triangulation process, the study captured the views and voices of participants from the traditional governance systems, administrative governance, and Non-Governmental Gender-based advocacy voices. Those who did not directly participate in traditional government or gender-related community work were excluded.

3.4 Unit of Analysis

The individual participant was the main analytical unit, with a focus on their communication styles, roles, and experiences inside the governance frameworks. The subject of a secondary unit of analysis focused on the formation and application of communication norms in these settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Institutional contexts include the regional houses of chiefs and traditional councils.

3.5 Data Collection

Three complementary qualitative methods were deployed by the researcher to collect the data. The Focus Group Discussion, structured in-depth interviews, and Participant Observation targeted key stakeholders to capture their world views and perceptions about gender roles, participation, and communication in traditional governance. The interviews explored institutional expectations, perceived barriers, and pathways for inclusion. Again, on Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) four (4) were organized, two with queen mothers allowing participants to engage in collective reflection and discuss shared challenges and solutions. The researcher used between 30 to 45 minutes for each of the FGD. FGDs facilitated discussion of sensitive gender issues in a safe, dialogic space, enabling interaction among women across different levels of influence (Morgan, 1997). Participant Observation was carried out during traditional council meetings, community events, and informal interactions within the study areas.

3.6 Data Analysis

Three complementary qualitative methodologies including key informant interviews, Focus FGDs, and Participant Observation were employed to ensure depth, contextual understanding, and triangulation in the study. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders to gather firsthand accounts of gender roles, participation, and communication within traditional governance systems. These interviews explored a range of themes including perceived barriers, institutional expectations, and pathways to inclusion. All interviews were conducted in both English and the local language, with assistance from trained interpreters where necessary. With informed consent, sessions were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The resulting transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis, where initial codes were developed inductively. These codes were then grouped into broader categories to identify patterns and extract core themes that recurred across the interviews.

Four, two of which specifically targeted queen mothers. These sessions provided a safe, dialogic environment for women with varying degrees of influence to discuss sensitive gender issues, share common experiences, and propose potential solutions. The FGDs aided the group reflection on shared social and cultural dynamics (Morgan, 1997). Like the interviews, these discussions were conducted in both English and the local tongue, recorded with participants' consent, and later transcribed. The transcripts were analyzed thematically, with attention to how group dynamics influenced discussion. Particular focus was given to identifying areas of consensus and divergence within and across the groups.

Participant observation was carried out throughout the research period during casual community interactions, local events, and regular council meetings. Detailed field notes were kept to document non-verbal communication, seating arrangements, turn-taking patterns, and expressions of silence and respect insights that often elude structured



interviews. This observational approach, as described by DeWalt et al. (2011) helped contextualize and corroborate findings from both the interviews and FGDs. Observational data were analyzed through content analysis, with repeated behaviors and symbolic interactions categorized to uncover implicit social norms and cultural patterns.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

By informing study participants about the study's goals, their rights, and the voluntary nature of participation, the researcher aims to obtain their informed permission. Transcripts and reports were cleared of any personal information. All documentation used pseudonyms. During interviews and observations, local norms and power structures were followed, particularly when interacting with queen mothers and chiefs. Participants were guaranteed the freedom to leave at any moment without facing any repercussions.

3.8 Validation Strategies

Several validation techniques were used to increase the study's credibility and dependability. Through cross-checking, the researcher confirmed the accuracy of all the data sources gathered from observations, interviews, and focus group discussions. This made it possible to draw stronger conclusions (Denzin, 2012). To evaluate logic, coherence, and alignment with the research objectives, participants were given the chance to review and validate their interview transcripts, preliminary interpretations, preliminary findings, and themes. This process, known as member checking, also included peer debriefing. To document positionality, biases, and new interpretations during fieldwork, the researcher kept a reflective journal (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). These strategies made sure that the study's conclusions were ethically sound, believable, and culturally anchored.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

The study, "Exploring Communication Norms and Gendered Based Participation in Indigenous Governance Systems: Insights from the Upper East and Upper West Regions of Ghana," examined the impact of cultural norms on women's participation in traditional governance systems in two regions in Ghana, namely Upper East and Upper West. The results revealed that gendered communication norms remain a major challenge to women's participation in traditional governance structures, limiting their influence and visibility while reinforcing patriarchy in public discourse. Despite this trend, the result also identifies opportunities for radical change, including policy modifications, capacity-building initiatives that target existing authorities, and reorganizing communication strategies to encourage more inclusive dialogue. Highlighted below are the results.

4.1.1 Prescribed Communication Norms Impact on Women's Participation in Traditional Governance Processes

The result of this study showed that social norms and societal expectations prescribe communication patterns in the traditional governance systems in the studied locations. Many of the participants at the separate focus group discussions held at the studied locations sounded this. One of the key participants from the Bongo Traditional area in the Upper East Region remarked:

Per the Social and Gender Norms rooted in our cultural beliefs in this area, it is unacceptable for a woman to speak in public or challenge a male speaker in a public space. In fact, in my community when it comes to the decision-making process women's voices are muted all in the name of gender norms and social norms. In fact, in some situations, we are either not allowed to speak in public or even when given the least opportunity we must do that in submissiveness. Social and Gender Norms have been transported into the chieftaincy institutions including my traditional areas (Key Informant 1, 2025)

In furtherance, the participants stated that during traditional council meetings, it is the men (male chiefs) who would usually initiate the conversation process before a female could be allowed to talk. At the Tumu traditional area of the Upper West Region, one of the key participants stated this:

Never has been the history for us women to initiate discussion at the paramountcy level even if we are invited for such meetings. It is the men who will initiate such decisions. However, sometimes we are given the opportunity after the men have taken the lead. (Key Informant 2, 2025).

Also, during my visit to some of the traditional council meetings as a researcher, I observed that the sitting arrangement at the various palaces of the traditional council had been arranged in such a way that chiefs (men) and queen mothers (women) sit separately, communicating gender bias and sending a signal that the male chiefs look superior over the queen mothers.



4.1.2 Barriers and Limitations to Women's Participation in Traditional Governance

As one of the key participants indicated:

“Per the Gender Norms and Social Norms rooted in our cultural beliefs in this area, it is unacceptable for a woman to speak in public or challenge a male speaker in public space. In fact, in my community when it comes to the decision-making process women's voices are muted all in the name of gender norms and social norms. In fact, in some situations, they are either not allowed to speak in public or when given the least opportunity they must do that in submissiveness form This phenomenon has been transported into the chieftaincy institutions including my traditional area. We the Queen Mothers hardly speak unless few occasions. Some of us our husbands are even part of these meetings and traditionally when we confront them, we are likely to be scolded and victimized. I quite remember that there was an occasion where one of my colleague Paramount Queen mothers challenged an issue before the Regional House of Chief. This incident led to the House stopping us from being part of the Regional House of Chief Annual General Meetings. As it stands now, we the Paramount Queen Mothers of the Upper East Region are no longer part of the decision-making process of the Regional House Chief Annual General Meeting. We are not even aware of the periods the House organizes its meetings. The House is predominantly male chiefs and these chiefs cannot make decisions relating to women's issues. Socialization practices such as “women are seen but not to be heard”, reinforce these practices which automatically strengthen the community decision-making powers of men. These norms work to ensure the maintenance of women's subordination and discrimination” (Key Informant 10, 2025).

The above phrase epitomizes the fact that social norms act as one of the major barriers to women's participation in traditional governance systems as majority of the participants affirmed this during the Focus Discussion and the structured interview sessions in the studied areas.

literature as highlighted above.

4.1.3 Hierarchical Nature of the Chieftaincy Institution

Additionally, the majority of the participants also mentioned that another major way in which gender roles and communication are defined within the traditional governance system is through the hierarchical nature of the institution itself. This, the participants, noted, exhibits a hierarchical structure where authority and power are concentrated at the top, typically held by male chiefs. According to them, this structure influences how communication flows within the institution and who has the authority to speak on certain matters. The ensuing presentations of Life Interviews with Key Informants buttress this fact. Participants from the Kaleo Traditional area shared their views:

“From the Upper West Regional House of Chiefs point of view, male chiefs are elected as the President and the Vice President of the house and they preside over General Assembly meetings of the house and other related meetings organized by the house. These elected male chiefs are always seen to be providing leadership roles at the Regional House of Chiefs. We the female chiefs were also known as Paramount Queen mothers and women in general voices were not heard and we were not allowed to play any role in this hierarchical structure. Such leadership positions at the Regional House of Chief level are the preserved of Paramount Chiefs elected” (Key Informant 7, 2025).

4.1.4 Measures to Overcome Barriers to Women's Participation in Traditional Governance

Notwithstanding the above, the findings also revealed that there are some forms of transformation in the gender roles and gendered communication in the traditional governance system of the studied locations. One of the key participants from the Bongo Traditional area in the Upper East Region during the Focus Group Discussion narrated how the Paramount Chief, asked her to attend a programme on his behalf. There, she made an impactful speech that won the admiration of the audience and inspired other Paramount Chiefs in the Region who had not yet enskinned queen mothers to do so.

“In the year 2013 when I was enskinned by the Paramount Queen Mother of my traditional area, the Paramount Chief delegated me to represent him at a programme organized at Estee Hotel in Bolgatanga of the Upper East Region. At the said meeting, I proved to the gender and social norms Advocates wrong that women do not speak in public by being outspoken on the subject matter on the said occasion. I spoke to the admiration of stakeholders including Paramount Chiefs from the various traditional areas of the Region and the organizers of the programme. Immediately after the meeting, most of the Paramount chiefs came to me and confided in me that they were also going to enskin their Queen mothers taking into consideration what they had seen in me. Soon after the meetings they did exactly so. I 'm so happy about this positive development” (FGD 2, 2025).



To add to the above, the participants in the Tumu Traditional areas of the Upper West Region during the Focus Discussion sounded the same as their counterparts in the other study areas. They observed that, in contrast to earlier, the Queen Mother concept is gradually gaining traction and mentioned that the fact that some traditional councils are enskinning and enshrouding Queen Mothers in robes was a great way to give them a sense of recognition. One of the Queen Mothers who narrated to me indicated that if it had been in the past my Focus Group Discussion, wouldn't have been held in the traditional council, stressing that Queen Mothers are now being recognized.

Per the findings it has been established that societal expectations and social norms constitute a major barrier to women's participation in governance structures, particularly in the indigenous governance system. Participants of this study attributed the problem to ingrained and embedded prescribed communication norms, firmly ingrained and embedded in gendered and cultural traditions. The finding resonates with literature that holds the view that norms are reinforced by socialization practices that dictate women's behaviors in public spheres, framing assertiveness or public speaking as inappropriate for women (Hodzi, 2024). Other scholars also share the view that social expectations and norms regulate women to become silent at meetings, limiting their access to leadership roles, and making them less authoritative than men (Odame, 2014). Odame, (2014) elucidated further that these norms are further reinforced by cultural expectations surrounding femininity and power, with women seen as less suitable and qualified for leadership roles. As a result, the political and leadership spaces in many traditional systems remain largely male-dominated, with women's voices marginalized (Peter, 2024).

On routine basis when it comes to meaningful participation in public decision-making processes, women, especially Queen Mothers (female traditional leaders), are excluded. Women's voices are silenced, marginalized, and subordinated in public and social gatherings such as Regional and Traditional Council meetings where governance is carried out. This challenge is due to culturally sanctioned practices that shape this exclusion. Such communication norms are deeply rooted in cultural practices that place women in subordinate roles, particularly in public and political spaces (Tambe & Jormfeldt, 2024). This corroborates with Essilfie's (2021) study which observed that in these systems, women's engagement with governance is often limited to roles such as the "queen mother," a position that, while influential, often lacks real decision-making power.

From the findings, it is clear that social norms and expectations legitimize and enforce communication norms which then dictate when, and how, a woman can speak in traditional governance venues. Women are excluded from contributing by speaking at public gatherings during stakeholder forums concerning development. In instances where they are given the opportunity, they are guided by societal expectations and gender norms reminding them of the need to be submissive to men. During my visit to some of the traditional council meetings as a researcher, I observed that the sitting arrangement at the various palaces of the traditional council had been arranged in such a way that chiefs(men) and queen mothers (women) sit separately, communicating gender bias and sending a signal that the male chiefs look superior over the queen mothers. This finding corroborates with other previous studies (Sedegah, & Akagbor, 2022). These two authors in their studies found that the rigid gendered norms within these structures created significant barriers for women. According to Awoonor & Overå, (2022) in Ghana, chiefs and other traditional leaders often maintain rigid gender norms, wherein women are expected to speak less, defer to male leaders, and refrain from engaging in political discourse in the same way as men. Again Sossou, (2011) re-emphasized in his study that Chiefs and other traditional leaders often maintain rigid gender norms, wherein women are expected to speak less, defer to male leaders, and refrain from engaging in political discourse in the same way as men. These norms are further reinforced by cultural expectations surrounding femininity and power, with women seen as less suited for leadership roles (UNDP, 2021). In these systems, women's engagement with governance is often limited to roles such as the "queen mother," a position that, while influential, often lacks real decision-making power (Essilfi, 2021).

In order not to incur public wrath, women are expected to communicate in a way that conforms to the femininity concept, thus being supportive, submissive, and passive instead of being aggressive and taking commanding leads and roles. As these communication norms rooted in cultural norms deny women the opportunity to contribute, women's ability to communicate and influence a change in matters of governance is limited.

These results resonate with the Gender and Development (GAD) theoretical framework, which has the belief that sociocultural systems divide power between men and women unequally and are the primary cause of gender inequality. GAD points out that examining the institutional and social structures that limit women's autonomy is very crucial in comprehending women's marginalization. The patriarchal order in this setting is strengthened by the traditional council and chieftaincy structures. The traditional council and chieftaincy structures not only mirror this but also actively support cultural norms that portray women as supporting characters in politics and public life. For instance, female traditional leaders, such as Queen Mothers, are on many occasions excluded from or unable to attend regional House of Chiefs and traditional council meetings. Queen Mothers are excluded from decision-making processes for questioning male authority, demonstrating that this hierarchy is maintained by both tradition and deliberate exclusion.



What deepens this interpretation the more is the hierarchical structure of the chieftaincy institution, which entrusts power to males at all levels. Though women are recognized for their important roles, men are the only ones who play leadership roles, such as the President and Vice President of the Regional Houses of Chiefs. Such a governance system buttresses the GAD claim that frequently formal official and informal organizations codify and uphold male power. Even in instances where women are given leadership titles, these organizations deny them the chance to participate and affect governance. They often engage in this by limiting women to symbolic roles or relegating them to the margins of decision-making.

This study illuminates not only structural exclusion but also how women internalize and negotiate these restrictive communication contexts. When analyzing how women modify their speech patterns and behaviors in reaction to prevailing social norms, CAT offers a convincing framework. According to CAT, people, especially those in subordinate roles, frequently alter their communication to conform to the demands of the dominant group when there are unequal power dynamics at play. To fit in with the male-dominated discourse environment, women under traditional governance mostly engage in what CAT would call "downward convergence," speaking in submissive ways or keeping quiet entirely. Although short-term adaptive, this accommodation reinforces the very dynamics it aims to control. It perpetuates the idea that women lack the authority or capacity to speak up in public decision-making settings.

However, the results also point to notable examples of resistance and change. These instances must be recognized to comprehend both the possibility of change and the continuation of patriarchal norms. One example of how challenging conventional communication norms can challenge long-standing gender roles is the story of the Queen Mother of the Bongo traditional area, who was invited to speak at a public event by the Paramount Chief and did so well that it led to the enskinment of other Queen Mothers. The Queen Mother's use of her voice in a public and assertive manner, defying the dominant gender script, is an example of a departure from accommodation.

This kind of agency is critical from the perspective of GAD. It signifies the potential for institutional change and the need to empower individual actors who challenge systemic constraints. It also demonstrates how adaptable and prone to change established institutions are, particularly when cultural actors reinterpret their roles and push the boundaries of acceptable conduct. Even if these changes are slow, they demonstrate how the traditional government's patriarchal framework is starting to break down. The growing recognition of the Queen Mother, the increased participation in public discourse, and the shifting seating arrangements to reflect parity are all signs of a growing awareness of gender equity among some traditional leaders.

However, it is critical to state that these innovative approaches are the exception rather than the rule. Indigenous or traditional governance systems remain predominantly a male-dominated area, deeply embedded and engrained in communication patterns that continue to conceal or devalue the contributions of women, in line with the broader tendencies of this study's findings. Even if the few findings are positive, systemic change has not yet been achieved. They also point to possible paths for change that need advocacy, public education, and government programmes to strengthen the voices and leadership of women in traditional settings.

The combination of GAD and CAT in this study provides a comprehensive framework for understanding gender inequality in indigenous or traditional governance systems, from a communicative and structural standpoint. While CAT sheds light on the subtle, often undetectable ways that power operates in everyday communication practices, GAD emphasizes the necessity of systemic reform and entrenched power disparities. When taken as a whole, they clarify deference, assertiveness, speech, and stillness and show how cultural and historical influences shape political actions rather than being solely subjective choices.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the communication norms anticipated in traditional governance systems are gendered exclusionary practices that support patriarchal authority rather than being neutral. Nonetheless, the fresh accounts of women redefining their roles and resisting communicative subordination provide crucial springboards for more significant institutional transformation. The power and communication systems that define traditional governance need to be reorganized to resolve these disparities. Being included symbolically is insufficient. Only then will a government system be genuinely inclusive and equal.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This study has illuminated that women's engagement in traditional governing institutions in the Upper East and Upper West Regions of Ghana has been significantly impacted by prescribed communication norms that are deeply ingrained in gender norms and social expectations. The results show that these prescribed norms are deliberately reinforced practices that influence who talks, when, how, and to what extent in traditional political systems, rather than just being culturally rooted behaviors. Due to both overt exclusion and covert communication limitations, women,



especially Queen Mothers and other female leaders continue to be systematically excluded from decision-making settings.

Through the theoretical lenses of GAD and CAT, the study revealed the complex interplay between institutional power, cultural norms, and individual agency. GAD highlights how traditional governance structures perpetuate patriarchal dominance through both formal exclusion and symbolic subordination of women. CAT further deepens this understanding by showing how women, in response to these power asymmetries, often modify their communicative behavior, accommodating dominant male norms in ways that limit their influence and reinforce their marginalization.

Yet, the study also presents instances of emerging transformation. Isolated but significant cases, such as Queen Mothers taking public speaking roles and being assigned as representatives by Paramount Chiefs, suggest that traditional systems are not impervious to change. These developments, though limited, underscore the potential for reconfiguring the gender dynamics of traditional governance through intentional empowerment, structural reform, and cultural reorientation. Ultimately, this study concludes that meaningful participation of women in traditional governance cannot be achieved through token inclusion or symbolic roles. It requires a fundamental dismantling of the communicative and institutional hierarchies that have historically silenced women and denied them equal voice and authority. The challenge, therefore, is not only to recognize women's presence in governance but to also create an enabling environment that supports their full and equal participation in all aspects of decision-making.

5.2 Recommendations

The study, "Exploring Communication Norms and Gendered Based Participation in Indigenous Governance Systems: Insights from the Upper East and Upper West Regions of Ghana," examined how cultural norms impact women's participation in traditional governing systems in two regions in Ghana (Upper East and Upper West.). The results showed that gendered communication norms hinder women's participation in traditional governance structures, limiting their influence and visibility while reinforcing patriarchy in public discourse. Despite this trend, the result also identifies chances for radical change, including policy modifications, capacity-building initiatives that target existing authorities, and reorganizing communication strategies to encourage more inclusive dialogue.

This study suggests a multifaceted strategy that incorporates institutional reform, cultural reorientation, and capacity building to address the enduring obstacles preventing women from participating in traditional governance. To guarantee that women, especially Queen Mothers, are meaningfully included in decision-making processes, traditional governing institutions must undergo intentional and gender-sensitive modifications. Beyond merely having a presence, representation should give women voting rights and meaningful responsibilities at the traditional council, regional house of chiefs, and national house of chiefs. It is imperative to develop explicit institutional mandates to ensure that women are not marginalized in policy discussions or excluded from leadership roles.

Continuous efforts must be made to change the social and cultural norms that support women's silence in public settings in addition to institutional reforms. Media campaigns, educational initiatives, and community involvement programs should all question the conventional wisdom that associates femininity with submissiveness or silence. In governance situations, these public education tactics can support the development of an atmosphere in which women's perspectives are actively sought out and not just acknowledged.

Building the capabilities of women in traditional roles is equally important. To better negotiate and confront patriarchal governing environments, queen mothers and other female leaders should be prepared with leadership, public speaking, negotiating, and strategic advocacy abilities. Context-sensitive and rooted in the cultural reality of the communities they are implemented in, these training programs ought to be.

Additionally, a potent tool for elevating women's voices is the development of networks and partnerships between civil society organizations and female traditional leaders. These collaborations can increase awareness and impact locally and nationally by offering forums for camaraderie, mentoring, and group action.

The spatial and symbolic patterns found in traditional governing situations also require consideration. The existing arrangements, which include male-only executive roles and segregated seating, need to be changed to better represent gender equality and inclusivity. To challenge the structural hierarchies that have long excluded women, it is imperative to establish procedural and physical spaces that validate women's leadership.

There is a need to encourage those traditional leaders who have opportunities for women in the traditional space to continue and also encourage other traditional leaders to equally do so particularly now that the Affirmative Action Bill has been passed by the parliament of Ghana and signed by the President. To make the Affirmative Action law to become implementable traditional authorities must embrace women into their fold.

Lastly, it is critical to diligently record and share best practices from areas and groups that have had success in incorporating women into traditional governance. Replicating success stories can motivate reluctant traditional authority to embrace reform, as exemplified by Queen Mothers who have represented their communities and encouraged change. There is no doubt that if the aforementioned recommendations are implemented, it will provide a mechanism to break



down the gendered communication norms that still disadvantage women and make the traditional governing structure in the studied areas more inclusive, egalitarian, and very vibrant.

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