The Educational Needs of Muslim Women in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores Ghanaian Muslim women’s experiences and perceptions of formal Western education and their levels of education in relation to their occupation. It also investigates their participation in decision-making in the country. The paper argues that despite opportunities available for education in Ghana, the level of women’s education is comparatively low. Consequently, their ability to hold key administrative and political positions and their participation in decision-making are compromised. Studies suggest that education for women impacts directly on the number of children a woman has, her level of education and quality of life. Studies
also suggest that the problem of girls’ access to and retention in school is well
recognized internationally. The United Nations Millennium Development Goals 2 and
3 seek by 2015 to achieve universal primary education and promote gender equality
and empowerment. This study believes that the attainment of these goals can improve
the situation of Ghanaian Muslim women, since Ghana is working towards the
attainment of these goals. The study adopts a qualitative research and critical theory
approach. The research methodology is based on a gender framework. It employed the
narrative and explorative study methods. In all, fifty-four participants from three
districts in the Eastern Region of Ghana participated in the study. The group
comprised indigenous Muslim women from Northern and Southern Ghana and some
women with immigrant ancestry. Data analysis was based on the themes which
emerged from the data generated in the study. The study employed Gramsci’s cultural
hegemony theory and Foucault’s theories on discourses and meanings in speech as
well as the management of power in society.

The study participants raised concerns about the cultural shift which results from
education and their desired recognition of, and respect for the beliefs, values and
sensitivities of members of the communities in which schools are located. They cited
further concerns about the quality and relevance of education, the staffing of schools,
and the creation of a conducive (girl-friendly) educational environment. Catering to
these needs is likely to enhance Muslim females’ education and eventually improve
their capacity to take up key administrative and political responsibilities. Attention
must also be paid to issues of poverty, fostering, girls’ household/domestic
responsibilities, fathers’ commitment to their daughters’ education and girls’ retention
in school. The use of gender-sensitive teaching methods and the presence of female
teachers in schools as role models, it is believed, will encourage more girls to go to school, will help to improve the educational status of Muslim women and will promote social justice in Ghanaian society.

**Introduction**

This paper emerges from the study of the value of education in the lives of Muslim women in Ghana. The research investigated Ghanaian Muslim women’s experiences and perceptions of education, their levels of education in relation to their participation in administrative and political decision-making processes and governance in the country. I explored the data to reveal the situation of the participants’ education in relation to the structures in the research context and to show the factors which the women identify as inhibiting their pursuit of education and active involvement in decision-making and the local and national political structures, processes and governance.

The paper begins with the background of the study, the research topic and the rationale/justification for the study. It presents a description of the research context and the background of the target population, to facilitate an understanding of the discussion that follows. I follow this up with what studies say about the background issues on the formal UK-based model of education operational in Ghana, Islamic education and the education of Muslim women in the country. I move on to discuss the research methodology and research design including the methods of data collection. I move next to analysing the data and present the findings and recommendations.
Background, Research Topic and Rational/ Justification of Study

Historically Ghanaian women’s involvement in governance has been limited (MOWAC, 2005) but Muslim women’s participation is much more limited. Despite opportunities available for education in Ghana and the fact that seeking knowledge of all sorts and from different disciplines is obligatory for every Muslim, as prescribed in the Qur’an, it seems that Muslim women in Ghana are unable to access formal, school-based education modelled on the colonial (UK) system. They lack the mechanism which will enable them to participate fully in local and national administrative and political decision-making, as well as national programmes or activities. Issues of poverty, gender discrimination, oppression and inequalities due to some traditional cultural practices, interpretations of some Islamic religious texts, political structure and more importantly, hegemonic systems/structures in Ghanaian society stand in their way and consequently impair their active participation at all levels of administration and political decision-making.

The women are as a result in the lower rungs of the social ladder. They lag behind in terms of education and are under-represented in the administrative and political structures of the country. There is therefore the need to explore the educational provision and resources which Muslim women identify as enabling them to participate in national administrative and political decision-making and programmes and find ways of overcoming or negotiating the hegemonic, cultural and attitudinal challenges they are confronted with. Against this background, my study sought to investigate Ghanaian Muslim women’s perception and attainment of formal Western education, the nexus between their educational achievement and their income earning capacities, their involvement in decision-making at various levels of Ghanaian society
as their participation in the governance of their country. I also sought to find what they thought were ways of overcoming or negotiating the hegemonic, cultural and attitudinal challenges confronting them.

**Research Context**

Ghana’s population is about 21 million and 16 percent of whom are Muslim (Population and Housing Census, 2000; GLSS, 2004). Women constitute 51 percent of the population (MOWAC, 2005). Administratively, the country is divided into 10 regions and each region is further divided into 138 districts. The southern sector of the country is predominantly Christian, whereas sections of the northern part is predominantly Muslim (Stephens, 2007; Bening 1990). The study was carried in three out of the 17 districts of the Eastern Region (New Juaben (Municipal), Suhum-Kraboa-Coaltar (urban) and Birim North (rural) districts). Municipal, urban and rural districts were selected in order to solicit views from people of different backgrounds and to find out whether urbanization had influenced the thinking of those in the municipality. The Eastern Region was selected for the study because Muslims in the region have been concerned about their status in society. It was their realization that they themselves were in the best position to do something about education and ways of funding it. This encouraged them to institute an Education Development Levy among themselves. Under this levy, every willing Muslim resident in the region contributed a certain amount each month towards the fund.

**Background of Study Participants**

The participants of the study were mainly, but not exclusively married women with children, some of whom did not seem to have had a formal education in Ghana. It seemed that some of them had simply had no access to school-based education when
they were young. Their backgrounds were diverse; some were women from the northern part of the country while others were of immigrant ancestry; originally from West African countries including Nigeria, Togo, Benin, Niger and Burkina Faso (Kritzeck, 1969). However, both groups of women belong to patriarchal cultures- in other words societies that are structured on the basis of family units in which fathers are responsibility for the welfare of the family units (Brydon and Chant, 1989). Some of the participants were women from the south who had converted/reverted to Islam through marriage to men who had also reverted to the religion much earlier. A few had some level of education, but most had no formal education at all. Their diversity was therefore patrilineal, matrilineal, indigenous, immigrant, educated, illiterate, married, single, divorcee and widow. What they had in common was that they were all Muslims.

The available body of literature indicates that, generally speaking, Ghanaian women’s participation in the governance of the country is limited (MOWAC, 2005; WIPL, 1998). Tsikata (1997) has presented a detailed analysis of the policies and politics of gender equality during the Convention People’s Party (CPP) and the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) administrations, which to some extent enhanced the women’s political participation. Records indicate that Muslim women did not feature prominently in the enhancement of women’s political participation.

The literature on Ghanaian Muslim women indicates that the women, generally speaking, have limited formal Western education (Mahama, 1987). They have not been actively involved in decision-making in their communities (Sulemana, 2006) and seem to be at the margins of society (Ammah, 2003). Nafisa (1985) argues that even
though the role of women in the socio-economic and political development in the contemporary world has been an issue of great concern to UN agencies and governments, in particular those in developing countries including Ghana, no attention has been given to Muslim women by earlier researchers. This state of affairs has been attributed to some Muslim parents’ skepticism about formal Western education; parents’ apprehension that this type of education might lead to the adoption of Western lifestyles and the rejection of traditional cultural and Islamic religious values (Shaibu, 2000; MURAG, 2004). Due to their limited education, few of the women are in the administration and governance of the country. For instance, of the 4 women on the former Council of State, the advisory body to the President, none of them is a Muslim and there were only 3 Muslim women among the 238 parliamentarians in Ghanaian parliament of 2004-2008. Furthermore, out of the 7 women cabinet ministers, only one was a Muslim and of the 138 District Chief Executives only one was a Muslim. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to examine possible causes of Muslim women’s limitations in education and under-representation in administrative and political decision-making and their participation in the governance of Ghana.

**Research Methodology**

The study is qualitative and informed by methodologies associated with feminist research such as in-depth interviews, because the issues needed examination from a gender perspective (Lather 1991). Thus I used exploratory, narrative and to some extent life history methodological and analytical approaches to explore the issues under investigation. Fifty-four Muslim women from three districts of the Eastern Region of Ghana participated in the study. It was crucial for the women themselves to
express their views and narrate their experiences to bring out aspects of female experiences and consciousness which might otherwise be hidden and to facilitate a better understanding of the issues explored (Vulliamy, 1990). A few stakeholders in education, an expert on gender and selected Muslim men were also interviewed. This paper highlights some of the structural issues such as poverty, gender inequality, unfriendly school atmosphere and unresponsive political structures which impact on Muslim women’s education. The study draws on Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony and Foucault’s views on the exercise of power (Gramsci, 1972; Foucault, 1983) because they have implications for the Ghanaian context.

Research Design

The study was designed as a small-scale study using in-depth interviews with the study participants in order to bring out key aspects of their experiences and consciousness which would have been hidden in survey research. The small-scale study is upheld by social scientists such as Oakley (1981) and Stanley and Wise (1983). The clearest example of the method basic to feminism is the practice of small-group consciousness-raising, with its stress on examining and understanding experience and on connecting personal experience to the structures which define our lives (Hartsock, 1981; Gunew, 1992: 24 (ed)). The small-scale design is explicitly ideological in the sense that it follows the precepts of emancipation (Freire, 1972), it is democratic and empowering since it gives participants the opportunity to articulate their views in a free environment. The design advocates collaboration between researcher and participants (Atkinson et al., 1988; Hartsock, 1981). This design facilitated the collaboration between informants and me, gave them the opportunity to express their views freely and allowed the study to be conducted in a natural setting.
(Marshall and Rossmann, 1995) which was convenient for participants in the present study who were busy with their economic activities and household chores and would have found it rather inconvenient to travel long distances from their homes for the study. However, I cannot generalize the findings and recommendations of the study due to the limited number of participants and methods of data collection, which is a limitation of the small scale design (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Besides, this was not what I had sought to do in the study. What I wanted was the potential for analytic generalisation of concepts and understanding that might have wider applicability.

Data Collection methods

Methods of data collection needed to be carefully selected. I had to take into account what was feasible within the time and resource limits and the availability of the women. Individual and group interviews and fieldwork were used to collect data. Group interviews were used to obtain views of a number of respondents at a sitting, to obtain respondents’ perceptions and feelings and to establish familiarity with the topic (Robson, 2002, Lewis 1992). Both the individual and group interviews were recorded on tape with the participants’ consent.

Presentation and Analysis of Data

The data were translated, transcribed, reduced and stored. They were then examined and themes, key factors, patterns from the data, systematic procedures and key relationships identified. The themes were further merged into categories. My analysis and arguments were constructed on the basis of the themes in the data (Mason, 2002). Key issues which emerged from the data include the influence of colonialism - the disrespect and abandonment of tradition, religion and culture due to education and the
poor quality and irrelevance of the education on offer. One key issue was the undefined nature of some participants’ citizenship status, which is explained in detail on page 11. Other issues explored how the activities of social networks affect girls’ education, the unfriendly nature of the school environment, disparities in the distribution of power, lack of/limited representation and involvement in the activities of the District Assemblies and informants’ participation in governance at the local and national levels.

The influence of colonialism- Cultural Shift

‘Cultural shift’ - the rejection of traditional cultural values and the adoption of foreign values and lifestyles - and Islamic religious values emerged in the data as objects of concern. Participants expressed the fear that their daughters might adopt Western lifestyles after going through the educational system. Some participants believed that the school system was such that it ensured the girls ‘threw away’ their culture. Stephen’s (2007) argument that traditionally, Ghanaian children are expected to learn in a way which differs from many of the values underpinning Western education corroborates this view. Specific mention was made of some educated women’s refusal or failure to greet relations and neighbours when they meet them, wear veils or pray, which to them was culturally unacceptable. A few cited the rejection of parents by some educated Muslims, as two informants commented:

Arkibah: Some of the educated women scare us from sending the girls to school by their behaviour. When they meet you they won’t even greet you, as if you were nothing before them.”

Asiya: Sometimes the girls are enrolled but when they are asked to go to school, they don’t go. They rather move around with boys. They begin to lead an immoral life. It then becomes obligatory on the part of the parents to marry them off because that sort of life is unacceptable to a Muslim.
The data indicated that the few first-generation educated Muslims by their attitude made it more difficult for some illiterate Muslim parents to consider giving their children Western education because some of them lost too much of their Islamic values or were converted to the Christian faith. Subsequently, parents frowned upon later attempts to get Muslim children enrolled in public schools perceived as secular or in Christian schools. Christian schools. Tradition and culture are essential issues for Ghanaians. Child upbringing, child-adult relationships and life generally are conditioned, by the dictates of culture (Stephens, 2007). The introduction of any cultural practice which does not conform with the norms of Islamic society is frowned upon.

**Poor quality of education on offer**

The main reason given by participants for withdrawing their girls from school is the poor quality and irrelevance of the education on offer. Some participants revealed that their daughters spent several years at school and passed out of basic school (JSS) without literacy skills and qualifications for employment. In connection with that a participant’s comment was:

**Hajara:** Our landlady gave us a letter in the absence of my husband. I gave the letter to my daughter in JSS3 to read and tell me what it was about, she couldn’t read the letter. Of what use is her schooling if she cannot read a letter? Her going to school is waste of money and time.

Participants said sometimes they were in a dilemma; first, they were not sure of the curriculum that their daughters pursued at school. They mentioned that, although girls spent a good deal of time at school they were unable to read and write and were also
unable to learn the trades that the mothers engaged in, the sale of prepared food in particular, they were in school so long. Secondly, some interviewees lamented that sometimes there were no teachers for the students. Mariam, a student who was re-writing the SSCE, recounted a situation where they had to prepare and write their final examination without guidance, because their teachers were part-time teachers whose concern during the examination period was their regular students. Casely-Hayford (2007) noted the poor quality of education available to children in the rural areas.

**Undefined Citizenship Status**

The data shows that because the citizenship status of some of the informants with immigrant ancestry is not clearly defined, some of the study participants are unable to access education for their children, participate actively in the political processes of the country (governance in particular) or claim the rights which they would have been entitled to as Ghanaian citizens, such as the allocation of stalls in the markets in their local government areas. Informants complained of their exclusion in terms of benefits and services in their local government areas. Duffy (1995) argues that the multi-dimensional nature of social exclusion shows that the concept relates not only to lack of material resources but also to the lack of educational capital, inadequate access to services and lack of power. It is in this sense that Muslim women in Ghana particularly those in the rural areas and those with immigrant ancestry are among the socially excluded in Ghanaian society.

According to Kritzeck (1969), at the beginning of the colonial period, there were economic developments in the southern parts of the Gold Coast and cocoa plantations
and mines were extended, leading to an acute shortage of labour. This information spread throughout West Africa and as a result, the Hausa, Zaberma, Dendi, Chamba, Kotokoli, Mossi and other tribes from French West Africa came every year to work on the Gold Coast. Some of these people went back to their countries, but others settled there more permanently. The descendants of some of these immigrants have remained in the country to the present day. Although Ghana’s Constitution (1992) clearly states requirements for Ghanaian citizenship, the structures for citizenship registration are not only inadequate but also unknown to many people, in particular, peasants in the rural areas. Thus, sometimes the births of the children of these immigrants and even of some indigenous Ghanaians are not registered. This has led to a situation where some people, including those with immigrant ancestry but born in Ghana before independence, are not legally registered as Ghanaians. Thus, they are unable to claim Ghanaian citizenship and are considered aliens, unlike in Britain where there are British citizens of Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi origin. For this reason, some Muslims, both males and females, are unable to get actively involved in national politics. Some participants in the present study raised this issue in their interviews. One participant expressed this as follows:

Asiya: The other day one of them was at my place there trying to tease me about our situation as Muslim women. I told him was it was our grandparents who came to work on your cocoa farms and the proceeds were used to look after you and today you are standing on our necks. But as for us the grandchildren, you can’t do that to us”.

Her argument was that her grandparents and parents had been exploited in working on the cocoa farms of indigenous Ghanaians for them, who had used the proceeds to educate their children. Now, indigenous Ghanaians of their age want to look down on them in the same way as their grandparents and parents did. The Human Development
Report (2007) states that there are relevant social institutions in Ghana which directly or indirectly result in limited and inequitable opportunities, participation and the capacity to participate in decision-making and social services, *inter alia*. In Ghana, before children are enrolled in school and in University admission processes, the particulars of children to supply include parents’ hometowns and for undergraduates, their addresses in their hometowns. But since some of the women have immigrant ancestry, they do not have hometowns in Ghana. Once they are unable to give that information, some teachers consider them ‘aliens’ while, at the same time, university fees for non-Ghanaian students are high. Therefore, in order not to disclose their identity, some illiterate parents with immigrant ancestry prefer not to send their children to school at all.

**Kinship and Social Networks and Girls’ Education**

Kinship and social networks and the commitment to them also emerged as issues of concern. Kinship refers to social relationships derived from consanguity, marriage and adoption and kinship system prescribes statuses and roles to people who are in particular relationships (Nukunya, 2002). In Ghana, Muslim women like other social groups, belong not only to kinship groups but also to social networks, such as perhaps those from a certain neighbourhood, those trading in the same commodity or women who are simply friends (Goody & Goody, 1969).

In one of the group interviews in Koforidua involving four southern Muslim women, the participants debated on which issue should be their priority; whether to buy ‘yayi’ (cloth) and other items to distribute to people when the daughters of their relations or members of their social networks were getting married and during child-naming
ceremonies or whether to pay their daughters’ fees. All the southern participants were of the view that it was more important to pay the fees of their girls than to pay attention to marriage customs and other ceremonies. However, the other participants thought otherwise. They said that, while it was good to pay daughters’ school fees, any failure to support relatives on occasions such as marriage was like abandoning their families when they needed help most. Some of those who rejected the idea saw it as a neglect of the extended family and friends. Such participants believed it is equally important to remain connected with their extended families, relatives and friends who will also support them in time of need. An interviewee remarked:

*Mistura:* If you don’t buy the ‘Yayi’ your sister or your friend will think you don’t like her. You will feel ashamed when everybody puts on the cloth and you don’t have it.

The implication of kinship and membership of social networks and commitment to them is that the informants spend a lot of their hard earned income, sometimes needlessly, on the activities of the networks, to the neglect of their daughters’ education. It could be argued that, since the women support each other in time of need, it may be necessary to consider adding support for members of the social networks whose daughters gain admission to educational institutions with high financial obligations. By extension, the social networks could also be a source of support for Muslim women who venture into politics and stand for elective positions.

**Decision-making in the home**

Studies such as UNICEF (2007) AND Payne and Nasser (2008) suggest that educated women are more likely to ensure that their children get a better education than they
themselves had. Thus, educated women’s involvement in decision-making will enhance girls’ education. Moreover, it is likely that in homes where there is joint decision-making, children’s education and sponsorship could be one of the major issues that parents might discuss; and here children’s education might be adequately supported. The study found that, generally, the educated participants and a few illiterate participants who lived in urban areas were involved in decision-making at the domestic level, as the accounts from some of them cited below indicate.

Fulera: I personally do not have that problem because there is cordial relationship between me and my husband. My husband likes me particularly because I give him good advice.

Zinatu: As for me, my husband involves me in decision-making, but each time he talks, I know he does not have the means financially.

Research by Ardayfio-Schandoff (1994) and Nukunya (1992) suggests that urbanization, out-migration by educated men from rural to urban areas for employment and the movement of male farmers from area to area to find cash crop farming opportunities have led to a situation where lone females have become decision-makers in their households. Stephens (2007) suggests that such a situation has significant implications for sending and supporting children, particularly girls, to school. In contrast to the views expressed earlier, other participants expressed their opinion of women’s participation in decision-making in the home as follows:

Basiratu: Yes, Muslim men are fond of that. Whenever you want to advise him on an issue relating to the children’s education for instance, he will ask you, “Was I the one who married you or you married me? Are you the one to teach me what to do?”

Arkibah: As for our men, they have the idea that when they decide, you the woman shouldn’t talk. Whatever decision they take, that is what you have to go by, their decision is final. Even when you make a suggestion, they think your views and ideas do
not matter….even when you have a problem you are afraid to bring it up for discussion.

It is important to note that, with regard to decision-making in the home, there is no consensus. Whereas informants who were educated and some illiterates/peasants said that their husbands confer with them, others, peasants in particular, said they were not consulted by their husbands.

**Differences between Women from Matrilineal and Patrilineal Societies**

Familial relationships which emerged in this study reflect the prevalence of patrilineal and matrilineal systems. Women from matrilineal societies are more involved in decision-making than those from the patrilineal. Nukunya (1992) indicates that a child from the matrilineal system had more to do with her mother’s relations, while the one from the patrilineal system is closer to the fathers’. Thus, for children from patrilineal families, a father assumes responsibility for the daughter’ education whereas, in matrilineal families, mothers and paternal uncles play significant roles in the upbringing and education of children, including girls. On account of this, women from matrilineal societies have more say in their daughters’ education than their counterparts in the patrilineal family system.

The participants in my study are mainly patrilineal, but there are also some from matrilineal backgrounds who are mainly reverts to Islam/new Muslims. Their backgrounds seem to have influenced their participation in decision-making in the home. The participants from the matrilineal society seemed to be more involved in
decision-making than participants from patrilineal societies. One participant’s comments were as follows:

Mariama: No, they don’t. Even when you walk with your husband, some of the people in the zongo laugh at you. They don’t understand why a man and his wife should walk together.

The participant’s argument is that the other women from the patrilineal society do not relate to their husbands openly especially in public. Some women think it is wrong to influence husbands. A woman with a very close relationship with her husband is considered to have bewitched him or used some means to influence his thinking. The question is at what point is it appropriate to relate/get close to your husband? How do the decisions get made when money is short? How do you influence your husband to prioritize? The Women’s Manifesto for Ghana (2004) confirms this study’s finding. The Manifesto states that, apart from rural-urban differences, it has been observed that women in matrilineal areas are more involved in decision-making than those in patrilineal areas.

The Exercise of Power in the Ghanaian System

The views expressed by some participants were in connection with the exercise of power in the Ghanaian context. In the home, a participant’s view as to whether women participate in decision-making in the home is:

Shakira: Yes, they do, but sometimes the men are too autocratic. They express their views but the men won’t take their views into consideration.

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1 The zongo or strangers’ settlement is the Hausa word for ‘ward’ and it describes the strangers’ sections found in many towns throughout West Africa, especially those situated along the main roads (Goody, 1969). Zongos are sometimes identified with individuals and places such as Zongo Kadiiri in Accra, Zongo Yakutse at Suhum respectively, or ethnic groups – Moshi zongo of Tamale and even trades – zongo maitseri (blacksmith). Therefore even in majority Muslim parts of Ghana, there are zongos.
Rubama’s experience in the Ghanaian public school is recounted as follows:

Rubama: But being a Muslim in a Christian school is hell. You are not given the chance to pray. The headmaster and the masters just told you to go for church service and they told you to do many things which the Muslims in the school were not happy about. It was very discouraging but because of Almighty Allah, being with us, we were able to learn and pass our examination successfully.

The views of these two participants demonstrate the exercise of power in the Ghanaian context; wives give their views, which husbands do not accept, but take unilateral decisions. Similarly, at school power lies with the headteachers and teachers. They instruct the students to attend the church services in spite of their faith. This is where Foucault’s theory on fluidity of power is exemplified. Power is exercised at different points or settings, not only in political positions but also in the home and the school, for instance, and subjects have to comply. Stephens (2007) observes that obedience and humility towards elders are crucial in the Ghanaian value system and traditionally the way that children are expected to learn is at variance with the values underpinning their so-called Western education.

**Participation in Governance at the Local Government level**

The study sought to ascertain from study participants how they were involved in the administration of the District Assemblies. It was found that no Muslim woman is officially recognized as a member of any of the three District Assemblies in the study districts. In the Birim North District, one participant had involved herself loosely in the activities of the District Assembly. No other Muslim woman in the district reported taking part in the Assembly’s activities. Two participants from Birim North and Suhum made the following comments in their interviews:
Aishatu: Muslim women here don’t go to the Assembly. I am the only one who goes there. [...] I have a friend at the Assembly who is not a Muslim. She came to the house to invite me to attend the meeting but there was a marriage ceremony and I was in charge of affairs so I could not attend the meeting. Otherwise I try to take part in whatever goes on at the Assembly.

Muniratu: There is no [...] however, the Assemblyman has Unit Committees and some of the women are put on some of these committees so that they can address their people in the community.

Rubama: Yes, with District Chief Executives we have Hajia Bintu Farzan Ibrahim.

The comments of the participants give the impression that Muslim women’s involvement in governance at both the local government level and national levels is minimal, because out of 138 District Chief Executives only one Muslim woman and only one cabinet minister were active. The comments made by the two participants indicate the extent to which Muslim women are marginalized in decision-making in their districts. Attendance at Assembly meetings is by representation and those who attend the meetings are expected to report back to the people they represent. In the case of the Birim North, the participant attended the meeting of her own accord and, probably because there was no Muslim representative, she was allowed to participate in subsequent meetings. She does not report to anybody. As she mentioned, it is a friend at the Assembly who informs her about meetings, making it all informal. Secondly, as she stated, she could not attend one particular meeting because there was a marriage ceremony where she was in charge. This shows that, in spite of her interest in the activities of the Assembly, she had to work with competing priorities, in particular when her contribution is not recognized or appreciated by her community.
In the urban study district, it was the Assemblyman who convened the Unit Committee on which some of the women serve. At least, when he did so, the women might get to know what transpires at the District Assembly, although they may not be directly involved in the decisions taken there. In contrast, in the New Juaben municipality containing the regional capital, two participants stated their views as follows:

**Rubama**: We have that idea that a woman is not expected to talk much, we think the man can talk for people to hear but for a woman, you have a lot of responsibility in the home, how will you leave your responsibility and go out to fight for the community.

**Sakina**: Because of our limitation in education. All the work done at the Assembly requires education. If you are not educated, you cannot do the work there.

The views expressed in relation to decision-making give an idea of the exercise of power in the Ghanaian context. The findings seem to resonate with Foucault’s (1980) argument that power is dispersed and not centralized, in the sense that people wield power at different points in society such as men exercising power in the home and government officials in the offices. Even some women exercise power as leaders of women’s social networks. Despite this, the presence of Muslim women seems to be minimal. However, in spite of the dispersed/decentralized power structure, Muslim women seem not to be actively involved in governance.

**Lack of Representation and Exclusion**

Another level at which lack of representation and exclusion emerged was at the national level in parliament. Rubama’s view of Muslim women’s political participation is:
Rubama: When Muslim women are in Parliament and they talk, I think it can help our community. When they are there and they talk, they can come out and develop our community: since they are not in Parliament, they can’t talk for the community. The Christians will rather make their suggestions and we will follow. So they will develop their communities before we will have ours. So I think if our Muslim women are also encouraged or educated to participate in politics, it can really help to develop our Muslim communities and the nation as a whole.”

Rubama’s views endorse what other participants said. The impression from her views is that Muslim women are under-represented, hence they have no means to enforce their views. She makes the point that other women in Parliament will have to talk on behalf of all Muslim women. The likelihood was that those other women will seek their interests first. Marshment (in Richardson and Robinson, 1993:126) makes the point that ‘in any situation where a social group has the power to represent another group, it is likely that these representations will serve their own interests rather than those of the group represented’. Rubama’s views resonate with those of Marshment. The implication is that the concerns of Muslim women will not be adequately addressed. However, the Minister for Women and Children’s Affairs observes that most qualified women are unwilling to take up political positions and some women who have the potential for political decision-making positions are not known in the political and public arena (MOWAC, 2005). The question is whether some Muslim women fall within the group she mentioned.

The idea of representation and exclusion and whether participants are sufficiently empowered to get involved in some of the administrative and political programmes emerged in the study. During the fieldwork I went with some of the women to the office of the Minister for Women and Children’s Affairs. They sat as if they were under some kind of pressure. I tried to assure them that the building belongs to all of us, so they should feel
free. Their response was to ask how they could have gone there without me. I told them that this is what we have to change.

**Governance and Decision-making at the National Level**

Participants were requested to express their opinions of Muslim women’s participation in education, health and administration at the national level, such as the holding of positions as Heads of Departments in the Ministries of Education and Health where women are known to be in the majority. Some of the responses of the participants were as follows:

**Majeda:** Fortunately these days we have; but it’s like apart from hearing that Hajia Katumi is the Director of Education for Akuapem North, I haven’t heard of any again.

**Fauziya:** I have already said when you are in need and go to any of the offices, whether health, education or the police station, you will never find a Muslim.

**Mariam:** At the hospitals a few times you can find one or two Muslim doctors and nurses who are from the north. It appears that Muslim women from the northern tribes are more serious in the pursuit of education and do politics more than those of us in the south.

The data show that a very limited number of Muslim women work in the public sector and even fewer are involved in the governance of the country. The study noted that lack of education, lack of a mechanism for communication in the public sector; the English language, traditional/societal l roles of women as homemakers, mothers and wives and community attitudes *inter alia* account for Muslim women’s limited participation in the Governance of Ghana. However, the poor quality of education on offer, excessive spending in the social networks which the women were engaged in and the unclear citizenship status of some of the women, as well as the exclusion...
which some of them suffer, all constitute barriers to the women’s/girls’ education. These barriers need to be overcome or negotiated and subsequently ensure these people’s participation in decision-making and the governance of Ghana. This suggests that Muslim women are trapped in a cycle of exclusion. The interviewees who were breaking that cycle mentioned the strategies which they adopted, some of which are indicated below.

Widad: The people in the community told you that you were grown you had to marry. When I was in Form 3, somebody said to my father, “This girl is grown. Her children are dying in her womb. Why not let her marry and you are instead allowing her to go to school?” My father said the man should leave me alone and that he knew what I was about. Therefore I was able to go on with my schooling but there were difficulties.

Widad: When I got married and came down to Koforidua, I thought of pursuing my education and I was determined to do so. I was able to get admission to the Teachers’ Training College. After the course I taught for sometime and saw that there was the need for me to further my education. I applied for the diploma course at the University of Ghana, Legon. Fortunately for me, I was selected. I was the only woman among 10 men. I was a Muslim woman wearing a veil among men.

Ilham: I’ve registered, I’m attending remedial classes and I will be writing again this year but I’m not finding things easy in the zongo. People worry me a lot. They say that I’m getting old and that I should get married. According to them, by refusing to marry, I am inviting God’s punishment on my parents in their graves.

Rubama: Most of the people in the community stopped talking to me. Some of them said that I was disrespectful and they ignored me and my parents. Though my father was not wealthy, they said he was wasting his money on us, his daughters by sending us to school.

Muniratu: Although they (the parents) were illiterate, my father was a driver with the Ministry of Health. He used to tell me that, the way he was driving very young officers who were about the age of his children, he wanted me to acquire a high level of education so that in future I would also be driven by someone. He therefore supported me financially. Both parents supported me by providing all my needs.
Their responses show that some of them were pressurised by some of the members of their extended families, the elders of their communities and their peers to leave school but they were able to overcome the pressures through determination, some support from parents and the influence of role models. One participant said that her father worked in a government department and was influenced by his experience there to support her daughters’ education.

**Ethical Concerns**

As part of the design process, I recognised the need to be sensitive to the ethical issues involved in the research (Robson, 2002). Some of the main ethical principles I observed were negotiating access to the study communities, seeking the research participants’ informed consent, protecting their anonymity and building trust between us (Marshall and Rossman, 1995). Each participant was told what the study entailed and the processes of the research and consequences that might follow the publication of the study in the public domain (May, 1997). Part of our agreement was that they could refuse to answer a question if they wished. They had the choice to opt out if they did not remain in the study and I was committed to thinking carefully about questions of confidentiality (Mason, 2002).

**Challenges of Fieldwork**

There were a few challenges which I anticipated in the course of designing this study and for which I had prepared. Other challenges which I did not anticipate also emerged during the fieldwork, but which I managed to handle these.
One challenge in undertaking a study of this nature is gaining the collaboration of potential participants, particularly if they are peasant women located in rural communities. In seeking their collaboration I was asking for a commitment to participate actively in the research process; to contribute to group discussion in the data collection phase, providing feedback on the data which emerged and then engaging the participants in a discussion and analysis of the initial findings. I had to ensure that the research process was not only non-exploitative, but also that it could offer some outcomes which could be beneficial to them. In the discussion during our first meetings, I stressed that the project was an opportunity for me to learn from them, whilst also offering my expertise in the issues to be discussed.

One of these challenges which I anticipated was my position as a researcher and an outsider. Even though I had been in touch with some of the interviewees before, I did not live in their communities; I was coming from a very different community to research another and being a Western-educated Muslim woman could be a disadvantage if the community was apprehensive about formal Western education and if the study participants were uncomfortable about any other Muslim woman knowing their family secrets. I took my background into consideration and consciously made an effort to relate to them in such a way that they could respond with ease.

A second challenge was that of language, since the participants were from diverse language groups. Four languages emerged as the choice of all the interviewees: English, Akan, Hausa and Dendi. Like some of the participants, I had the advantage of being able to communicate in all four languages, hence, the issue was easily settled. Furthermore, all the Hausa speakers could also communicate in Akan and therefore it was convenient for the speakers of Akan and Hausa to be in the same group.
One other challenge had to do with translation into English from the local languages in which some of the interviews were conducted. Sometimes, I could not find the English equivalent to certain words used by participants who were interviewed in Hausa and Akan. I therefore had to use the words I considered nearest in meaning, or words which in my view connoted the intended meaning of such words. Another challenge was that sometimes I had to observe cultural norms throughout the exercise and even in asking the questions. In both Hausa and Dendi for example, it is culturally unacceptable to ask an elderly woman whether she was married. In such cases, I framed the question as; ‘Please do you live together with your husband?’ In this way, the participants felt at ease. In contrast, the widows did not feel shy saying that they were widows.

Figurative/Metaphorical use of Language was also an issue of concern. In some cases, some interviewees used language metaphorically to convey particular meanings and experiences. For instance, one participant used the Hausa idiomatic expression “Tallan Fulani” which literally means “Transportation/Hawking by the Fulani” in relation to participatory decision-making at the domestic level. She meant that husbands sometimes did not involve their wives in decision-making and that wives got to know of the activities of their husbands through gossip. The expression actually implies gossiping and I transcribed it as such

Finally, time constraints were an issue of concern which was anticipated in designing the study. The busy schedules of the study participants, the location of research sites, the fact that the study was to be conducted in the rainy season and the nature of the roads to some of the study sites made it clear that time might be a constraint. In order to address this concern, the research team went to live in the study areas during the week on the days when the participants were available for interviews, so that we could conduct the interviews without delay.
FINDINGS

- The study observed that some interviewees were not keen on sending their girls to school because they think that the education on offer does not meet their needs. They explained that some girls leave the JSS without literacy, numeracy and employable skills. Besides, when they were at school they could not learn the trades of their mothers.

- The data indicated that the participants allude to perceived neglect by ruling/parties or governments because of their undefined citizenship and low educational status, as well as their religious affiliation. This could be born in part from neglect and in part from the international mechanism for excluding not only those perceived to be ‘aliens’ but allocating Muslims in general to particular kinds of work. Kimble (1963) argued that in the colonial era the north where Muslims were in the majority was reserved as a source of cheap labour because the north was not rich in other resources, as Ashanti and the south were. Northerners were recruited to work in the mines, cocoa plantations, railways and later drafted into the army to fight alongside the British. The situation has not changed much, for many of them continue to do menial jobs.

- The study noted that the unclear citizenship status of some of the participants contributed to their marginalization, deprivation from certain benefits and services and eventually their social exclusion.

- The findings indicate that the educated participants and the illiterates living in urban areas are more involved in decision-making at the domestic level than the peasant/illiterate participants. This could be the influence of urbanisation and of living among people who are educated.
• An interviewee in one of the districts suggested that to draw attention to their plight they should boycott a Local Government Election in protest against their marginalization. It is noteworthy that the elderly interviewees suggested instead that they send a delegation to the District Chief Executive to lodge a formal complaint.

• The findings show the low patronage by women of the existing media as channels for information and education. For instance, some interviewees in SKC said they did not know that local government elections were to be held, even though this had been advertised and discussed through the media in all the local languages over a period.

• Underneath what the women said in their interviews was that the problem of their limited education and the subsequent lack of involvement in decision-making and exclusion from governance is in the system and not purely located in them. The women said that they have no mechanism to force their views; they cannot speak English, the language of nationwide communication.

• The study also noted that although the 1992 Constitution commits Ghana to Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE), there are hidden costs, such as sports and cultural activity fees, uniforms and writing materials, which some parents are unable to meet. Secondary education is also not free, either. Another issue is that, girls are sometimes married off early and are therefore unable to acquire a high level of education.

Conclusion
The study explored participants’ perceptions about Western education and the ways in which they inform their pursuit of formal education, and participation in decision-making and participation, *inter alia*. The findings indicate that the strategies required to improve the educational status of Muslim women, their participation in decision-making at all levels of Ghanaian society and ultimately their active involvement in the governance of Ghana should ensure that the education on offer is of good quality, that it takes cognisance of the values, beliefs and sensitivities of Muslims and that teachers’ attitudes to Muslim girls in school should be welcoming. Parents need to be well informed and in favour of the importance and benefits of education, motivated not only to send their girls to school but to ensure they remain in school up to the higher levels. The study noted the need for those Muslim women who have been able to acquire higher education in spite of constraints to mentor Muslim girls who want to pursue education and for the parents to feel encouraged to send their girls to school. In this way, more Muslim women will acquire the qualifications and the skills needed for political participation and participation in governance in Ghana.

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