Towards Strengthening Democratic Governance: Interrogating the Gendered Pathways to the Presidency in Ghana

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Abstract

This article examines the gendered nature of presidential power, and the barriers women face in attaining and exercising executive authority, with a specific focus on Ghana. Through an integrative literature review, the paper argues that the presidency is not a gender-neutral institution but a deeply masculinised space whose norms and expectations have been shaped by and for men. The paper identifies five interconnected barrier domains: party gatekeeping and candidate selection; financial architecture of political competition; media framing and the "lead but not rule" paradox; cabinet appointment rules and the paradox of power; and conditional legitimacy and the glass cliff. Integrating feminist institutionalist and sustainable development paradigm, the paper contends that women's exclusion from executive power constitutes not only a democratic deficit but a fundamental obstacle to inclusive and participatory development. Applying these findings to Ghana, the paper argues that despite the historic election of Professor Naana Jane Opoku-Agyemang as Vice President in 2024 and the passage of the Affirmative Action (Gender Equity) Act 2024 (Act 1121), the structural conditions for a woman presidency remain profoundly unfavourable. The paper concludes that legal reforms and symbolic breakthroughs are necessary but insufficient in transforming the gendered architecture of Ghana's executive presidency. Ghana requires deliberate institutional redesign and structural alterations to enhance women's participation in political leadership for democratic consolidation.

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1. Introduction

The global landscape of executive political leadership remains intractably male-dominated. As of 2023, women constituted only 11.3% of heads of state and 9.8% of heads of government worldwide (UN Women, 2023). While the number of women in national legislatures has grown steadily, the apex of political power—the presidency and the prime ministership—has proven resistant to gender parity. The Council on Foreign Relations' Women's Power Index reports that progress toward gender parity in political participation has stalled, with the number of countries with women heads of state or government declining from a peak of 30 in 2023 to 26 in 2025 (Robinson & James, 2025). At the current rate, UN Women estimates it will take 130 years to achieve gender parity.

This article proceeds from the premise that the presidency is not a gender-neutral institution awaiting the arrival of qualified women. Rather, as Barnes and O'Brien (2025) argue, gender influences "who has access to power, how leaders behave and are received within institutions, and how institutions are perceived" (p. 174). The presidency, like all political institutions, was designed by and for men, and its formal and informal rules continue to reflect masculine norms of authority, leadership, and legitimacy (Bauer & Tremblay, 2011; Dittmar, 2018).

From the perspective of participatory development, the gendered nature of executive power and the overall gendered political leadership across national governments have profound implications for inclusive and sustainable development. This is because gender equality is not merely a matter of social justice but a fundamental precondition for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5 on gender equality and women's empowerment. Theoretically, the alternative development paradigm argues for the people-centred and participatory development approaches as key to societal progress (Friedmann, 1992; Pieterse, 2013). The alternative development theory enjoins all stakeholders to pay attention to issues of gender equality and empowerment which are considered critical to sustainable development (Friedmann, 1992; Odoom et al., 2022; Pieterse, 2013). As the United Nations recognises, women's full and effective participation in political leadership is essential for democratic governance and sustainable development (UNESCO, 2003; World Economic Forum, 2025). Despite the significant role of gender equality in sustainable development, concerns exist regarding women's participation in political leadership, with male dominance in executive leadership roles becoming a common incidence globally (Robinson & James, 2025; UN Women, 2023). The persistence of male dominance in executive leadership represents not only a democratic deficit but a developmental failure—one that limits the capacity of states to respond to the complex challenges of the 21st century, from climate change to economic inequality to public health crises.

Sustainable development scholarship has long recognised the interconnections between gender, governance, and development outcomes. In particular, the capabilities approach pioneered by Sen (1999) emphasises that development is not merely about economic growth, but it is about the expansion of human freedoms, including political participation and voice. Women's exclusion from executive power represents a fundamental constraint on their capabilities—not just their ability to participate in decision-making, but their capacity to shape the development trajectories for sustainable societal transformation. Feminist political economy has further demonstrated that gender inequalities in political representation are intimately connected to gender inequalities in economic and social life, creating a vicious cycle that perpetuates women's subordination across multiple domains (Elson, 2010).

The link between women's political leadership and development outcomes is increasingly well-documented. Research has found that higher levels of women's political participation are associated with lower risk of state-led violence, civil wars, and violations of political rights (Yeshaneh, 2023). Women's participation positively influences the conclusion of peace talks and the implementation and durability of peace agreements (Tandon et al., 2023). During the COVID-19 pandemic, nations led by women took more swift actions, communicated their actions clearly, and were risk-averse (Ozdenerol et al., 2023). These findings

suggest that women's executive leadership is not merely a matter of representation but has tangible consequences for development outcomes, peace, and democratic consolidation.

This article makes three contributions. First, it synthesises recent peer-reviewed scholarship from 2018 to the present to map the gendered barriers to executive power across five domains: party gatekeeping, financial architecture, media framing, cabinet appointment, and conditional legitimacy. Second, it applies this framework to Ghana, a country that has never had a woman president and where women's representation in Parliament and cabinet has remained persistently low (Bauer & Darkwah, 2020; Shahadu et al., 2025). Third, it integrates sustainable development perspectives by demonstrating how women's exclusion from executive power constitutes a fundamental obstacle to people-centred development, democratic consolidation, and the realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The 2024 election marked a historic milestone—the election of Professor Naana Jane Opoku-Agyemang as Ghana's first female Vice President—and the passage of the Affirmative Action (Gender Equity) Act 2024 (Act 1121) established legal benchmarks for women's representation. Yet, as this article demonstrates, these developments, while significant, do not address the deeper structural conditions that continue to exclude women from the presidency.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 outlines the methodology. Section 3 presents the theoretical framework, integrating feminist institutionalism with participatory development theorising. Section 4 examines barriers to attaining executive power. Section 5 analyses barriers to exercising executive power. Section 6 applies these findings to Ghana while Section 7 discusses the implications for development and democratic consolidation. Section 8 concludes the paper by offering vital remarks for reflection and action.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employed an Integrative Literature Review (ILR) approach, which is appropriate for synthesising diverse bodies of scholarship to address complex research questions (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). The ILR approach is a multilayered and systematic review of published evidence used to answer specific research questions (Lubbe et al., 2020). The guidelines proposed by Whittemore and Knafl (2005) informed this paper, following their five-step process: (1) problem identification, (2) literature search, (3) data evaluation, (4) data analysis, and (5) presentation.

2.2 Search Strategy

A systematic search of academic databases was conducted, including Scopus, ScienceDirect, Semantic Scholar, and Google Scholar. The search strategy employed combinations of the following keywords: gender and political leadership; feminist institutionalism; gendered construction of political institutions; masculine construction of executive authority; glass cliff; party gatekeeping; financial architecture; media framing; barriers to attaining executive power; barriers to exercising executive power; cabinet appointment; presidential leadership; female presidential leadership in Ghana; Affirmative Action; conditional legitimacy; gender and development; women's empowerment; democratic consolidation; and inclusive development.
The core research questions guiding this review were as follows:
1. What are the structural, institutional, and perceptual barriers that prevent women from attaining and exercising presidential power in Ghana;
2. How do these barriers differ from those faced by women seeking legislative office;
3. What are the implications for inclusive development and democratic consolidation?

2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Sources were included if they: (1) were peer-reviewed academic publications or high-quality scholarly reports; (2) were published in English; (3) addressed gender and executive politics, women's political representation, development studies, or the Ghanaian context; and (4) were published between 2018 and the present, with seminal earlier works included where theoretically necessary. Sources were excluded if they were not available in English or addressed the topic only tangentially.

2.4 Selection Process

The initial search yielded 92 scholarly materials. Through systematic identification and evaluation, 53 papers were retrieved for closer examination. After removing duplicates and applying inclusion criteria, 31 publications were included in the final synthesis. The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) flow diagram (Moher et al., 2009) guided the selection process. A limitation of this approach is the concentration on four databases, which may have excluded other relevant regional scholarly works.

2.5 Analytical Approach

The 31 selected publications were analysed using thematic synthesis, extracting information that addressed the core research question. The analysis was guided by the theoretical framework of feminist institutionalism, integrated with inclusive development perspectives, which directed attention to both formal rules and informal norms, as well as the performative and symbolic dimensions of executive authority and their implications for development outcomes.

3. Theoretical Context

3.1 Feminist Theory and the Gendered Construction of Political Institutions

The theoretical foundation of this article draws on feminist institutionalism, a body of scholarship that emerged from the intersection of feminist theory and new institutionalism (Krook & Mackay, 2011; Mackay et al., 2010). Feminist institutionalism proceeds from the fundamental premise that political institutions are not neutral containers into which men and women are equally inserted, but are themselves gendered: their rules, routines, norms, and cultures reflect and reproduce masculine dominance (Acker, 1990; Barnes & O'Brien, 2025; Dittmar, 2018).

The intellectual foundations of this approach can be traced to Joan Acker's (1990) seminal theory of gendered organisations. Acker argued that "to say that an organisation, or any other analytic unit, is gendered means that advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine" (p. 146). Her work identified five interrelated gendering processes: the construction of divisions along gender lines, the creation of symbols and images that reinforce those divisions, interactions that enact dominance and submission, the production of gendered identities, and the gendered logic of organisational rationality (Acker, 1990, 1992).

Feminist institutionalist scholars have extended Acker's insights into the political domain. Mackay et al. (2010) argued that institutions are "gender regimes" structured around hegemonic masculinity—"an ideal-type masculinity to which other masculinities and femininities are subordinated" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Kronsell, 2005). A central contribution of feminist institutionalism is its distinction between formal and informal rules. Informal rules, including gendered norms, unwritten expectations, and customary practices, can perpetuate men's advantages even when formal equality has been achieved (Franceschet & Waylen, 2017; Gains & Lowndes, 2014). This is especially possible where "the formal rules are vague or ambiguous, leaving extra room for interpretation" (Waylen, 2011, p. 148).

Barnes and O'Brien (2025) provide a comprehensive recent synthesis of this approach as applied to executive politics. They argue that "gender is a system of power that influences who has access to leadership, how leaders behave and are received within institutions, and how institutions are perceived" (p. 174). Crucially, they find that "strategic career incentives and institutional constraints shape both men's and women's behaviour as leaders" (p. 175). This insight is fundamental: a woman president would not govern as a free agent but would be constrained by the same institutional logics that have historically excluded women from executive power. The argument that a women president will fail to govern freely due to structural constraints contradicts the capability and alternative development theories which value all persons including women as key to attaining sustainable societal transformation (Pieterse, 2013; Sen, 1999).

3.2 The Masculine Construction of Executive Authority

The presidency's masculine construction is not incidental but constitutive of how executive authority is recognised and legitimised. This is not merely a matter of individual prejudice or cultural bias; it is a structural feature of the institution itself, embedded in its formal rules, informal norms, and the performative expectations that define what it means to be a "presidential" leader.

The recognition of executive authority is a performative act. Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson (2016) considered the qualities associated with effective executive leadership—toughness, command, decisiveness, and emotional control—as culturally coded masculine expectations. These are not neutral descriptors of leadership competence but are historically contingent constructions that associate authority with traditionally masculine traits. Leaders who display these qualities are recognised as presidential material, while those who do not are perceived as lacking the requisite authoritative traits for the office (Mashele & Alagidede, 2022).

This conception creates a structural dilemma for women. To be recognised as competent, they must demonstrate masculine-coded qualities of strength and decisiveness. However, women who display these traits tend to receive backlash for violating feminine norms of warmth and likability (Hubner & Coker, 2026). Conversely, women who display feminine-coded qualities of empathy and collaboration are seen as weak and unfit for presidential office. The very criteria by which presidential fitness is assessed are gendered in ways that systematically disadvantage women.

The masculine construction of executive authority is institutionalised through several mechanisms. First, the historical exclusion of women from the founding of political institutions has embedded masculine norms in their foundational documents, procedures, and cultures (Dittmar, 2018). Dittmar's (2018) study of the United States Constitution showed that "the exclusion of women at the nation's founding and amid the creation of today's constitutional system reinforced a long-established norm of male dominance in political leadership" (p. 438). This historical legacy persists in the informal rules and routines that govern executive behaviour, creating what Bauer and Darkwah (2022) identified as "formal and informal rules" that "work against more women" in executive appointments.

Second, the legitimation of executive authority operates through "institutional constraints" that shape both men's and women's behaviour as leaders (Barnes & O'Brien, 2025, p. 175). A woman president would face pressure to demonstrate that she is not "only" representing women (Kimbugwe et al., 2026), to conform to masculine leadership styles to prove her legitimacy, and to navigate a media environment that treats women's authority as conditional (Adjin-Tettey & Muringa, 2026).

Third, the recognition of executive authority is mediated through what Mashele and Alagidede (2022) call the "masculine nature" of the presidential institution itself. Their study of Dilma Rousseff's presidency in Brazil showed how gender stereotypes and sexism fuelled criticisms of her leadership, reinforcing the perception that the presidency is a masculine domain. They observed that "far less than 10 percent of all

presidents and prime ministers worldwide are women, which reinforces the masculine nature of this institution" (p. 496). This statistical underrepresentation is not merely a symptom of exclusion but a mechanism of legitimation: the absence of women from executive office naturalises the association between masculinity and executive authority.

3.3 Distinctive Features of the Presidency as a Gendered Institution

The application of feminist institutionalism to executive politics reveals several distinctive features of the presidency as a gendered institution. First, the presidency is the most personalised and symbolically charged political institution, with its authority largely constructed through performances of masculine decisiveness, strength, and command (Escobar-Lemmon & Taylor-Robinson, 2016; Mashele & Alagidede, 2022).

Second, the qualities associated with "presidential" leadership are culturally coded as masculine, creating a double bind for women who must demonstrate masculine-coded competence while maintaining feminine-coded likability (Hubner & Coker, 2026). This double bind is structurally produced by the tension between the masculine construction of executive authority and the feminine norms that govern women's social roles. It is not a problem that individual women can solve through better communication or more strategic self-presentation; it is a structural feature of the institution itself (Barnes & O'Brien, 2025).

Third, and critically for this article, the presidency is a singular office, not a collegial body. This means that the quota logic applied to legislative bodies cannot be directly transferred to executive leadership. A woman cannot occupy 30% of the presidency; she either occupies it or she does not. This distinctive feature makes the presidency particularly resistant to gender transformation and requires a theoretical framework that examines both the formal rules of executive selection and the informal norms that define executive legitimacy.

3.4 Gender, Governance, and Development

The gendered nature of executive power has profound implications for governance and development. The literature on development and governance provides essential insights for understanding the connections between gender, governance and development. The capabilities approach, pioneered by Amartya Sen (1999), reframes development as the expansion of human freedoms—including political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees, and protective security. From this perspective coupled with good governance and participatory development frameworks, women's exclusion from executive power represents a fundamental constraint on their capabilities, good governance and on the overall development of their societies (Dar & Shairgojri, 2022). It is not merely a matter of political representation but a question of whether women have the freedom and capabilities to participate in the decisions that shape their lives, and how denying women political representation weakens societal progress.

Feminist political economy has further demonstrated that gender inequalities in political representation are intimately connected to gender inequalities in economic and social life. Elson (2010) argues that the gendered division of labour, the undervaluation of care work, and the unequal distribution of resources create structural barriers to women's political participation. These economic inequalities translate into political inequalities: women have less time, fewer resources, and less access to the networks that facilitate political ambition Elson (2010). Thus, women's exclusion from political power perpetuates economic inequalities by ensuring that policy decisions are made without considering women's needs and interests.

The relationship between women's political leadership and development outcomes is increasingly well-documented. Research has found that higher levels of women's political participation are associated with lower risk of state-led violence, civil wars, and violations of political rights (Yeshaneh, 2023). Women's participation positively influences the conclusion of peace talks and the implementation and durability of

peace agreements (Tandon et al., 2023). For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, nations led by women took more swift actions, communicated their actions clearly, and were risk-averse (Ozdenerol et al., 2023). These findings suggest that women's executive leadership is not merely a matter of representation but has tangible consequences for development outcomes, peace, and democratic consolidation.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations in 2015, explicitly recognise the importance of women's political participation. SDG 5 calls for "women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life" (Target 5.5). SDG 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions emphasises the importance of "responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels" (Target 16.7). The achievement of these goals requires not only increasing women's representation in legislative bodies but also addressing the structural barriers that exclude women from executive power. As the World Economic Forum (2025) notes, gender equality outcomes differ significantly across societies, and no society has yet achieved full gender equality, underscoring the deep-rooted structural and socio-cultural barriers that continue to limit women's access to leadership positions and overall contribution to development efforts.

From sustainable development perspectives, the gendered presidency is not merely a political problem but a developmental one. It is a manifestation of the broader gender inequalities that constrain human development, limit economic growth, and undermine democratic governance. Addressing these inequalities requires not only legal reforms and policy interventions but also a fundamental transformation of the institutional norms and practices that reproduce masculine dominance in political leadership. As Kimbugwe et al. (2026) demonstrate, female presidents in Africa have often been constrained by party structures, patriarchal norms, and the imperative to prove their legitimacy by conforming to masculine leadership styles. These constraints not only limit women's individual capabilities but also undermine the potential of executive leadership to advance inclusive and sustainable development initiatives.

3.5 The Global Stagnation of Women's Executive Representation

The global data on women's executive representation reveal a troubling pattern of stagnation. According to UN Women (2023), as of January 2023, 11.3% of countries had women heads of state and 9.8% had women heads of government. Only five women were elected in direct presidential elections in 2024, although more than 30 countries held presidential elections (UN Women, 2024). The Council on Foreign Relations' Women's Power Index confirms this trend, showing a decline from 30 countries with women heads of state or government in 2023 to 26 in 2025 (Robinson & James, 2025).

This stagnation is not explained by a lack of qualified women. Rather, it reflects the resilience of gendered institutional barriers. As Barnes and O'Brien (2025) note, women remain underrepresented in executive roles, especially as chief executives. The barriers are structural, not individual. From a development perspective, this stagnation represents a significant obstacle to the achievement of the SDGs and to the broader project of inclusive and sustainable development. It suggests that current approaches to promoting women's political participation—including quotas for legislative bodies—are insufficient to address the distinctive barriers to executive power.

4. Barriers to Attaining Executive Power

4.1 Party Gatekeeping and Candidate Selection

Political parties are the primary gatekeepers to executive power. No candidate can become president without winning a party's nomination, and parties are themselves gendered institutions whose internal cultures, rules, and practices systematically disadvantage women (Bauer & Darkwah, 2020, 2021; Ramtohul, 2021). However, the barriers women face in seeking a party's presidential nomination are not

merely quantitatively greater than those they face in seeking a parliamentary seat. They are qualitatively different in kind.

The Distinctive Character of Presidential Selection

Parliamentary candidate selection in Ghana operates primarily at the constituency level, where local party structures, regional considerations, and community networks play significant roles (Bauer & Darkwah, 2021). While these processes are far from gender-neutral, they are mediated by multiple actors and interests. A woman seeking a parliamentary nomination must navigate local party hierarchies, demonstrate community ties, and secure the support of constituency executives. According to Bauer and Darkwah (2020), women are dissuaded from standing for Parliament due to the "exorbitant 'cost of politics', humiliating 'politics of insult' and keen appreciation of Parliament's limitations" (p. 102).

Presidential candidate selection, by contrast, is a national-level process controlled by a small, predominantly male party elite. In Ghana's two major parties, the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP), presidential primaries are conducted at the national level, with delegates drawn from across the country. This centralisation concentrates gatekeeping power in the hands of a few party kingmakers—regional chairpersons, national executives, and influential financiers—who are overwhelmingly male (Nabla, 2026). Janet Nabla, Chairperson of the People's National Party (PNP), observed that "the party chairman is always a man, the general secretary is always a man, the national organizer is always a man. The positions given to women are usually vice positions, and a vice only becomes relevant when the substantive person is absent" (Nabla, 2026).

The internal culture of Ghana's two major parties reinforces these barriers. Nabla (2026) argued that the NDC and NPP continue to sideline women from leadership positions and tend to condition women to play supporting roles rather than being groomed for leadership. This pattern of relegating women to less influential roles is well-documented in the comparative literature (Bauer & Tremblay, 2011; Escobar-Lemmon & Taylor-Robinson, 2016). Shahadu, Umaru and Mumuni's (2025) study on women's representation in Ghanaian governance since 1992 found that women's representation in Parliament and ministerial appointments has averaged just 11% and 14% respectively. They concluded that "the chances of a female rising to the post of president in Ghana are very negligible" (p. 217). They identified the presidential system itself, coupled with the stability of male-dominated institutions, as a major structural barrier.

The "Commander-in-Chief" Expectation

The presidency carries symbolic and performative expectations that parliamentary office does not. Executive authority is constructed through performances of masculine decisiveness, strength, and command (Dittmar, 2018; Escobar-Lemmon & Taylor-Robinson, 2016). These expectations are particularly acute in presidential selection because the president is not merely a legislator but the commander-in-chief, the head of state, and the ultimate decisionmaker in matters of national security and foreign policy.

Party elites and primary voters who evaluate presidential candidates therefore apply gendered criteria that are more stringent than those applied to parliamentary candidates. Mashele and Alagidede (2022) demonstrated that the qualities associated with presidential leadership are culturally coded as masculine. A woman seeking a presidential nomination in Ghana must demonstrate that she possesses the masculine-coded qualities associated with executive authority. This creates a double bind: she must appear strong and decisive enough to be "presidential" while not violating feminine norms of warmth and likability (Hubner & Coker, 2026).

The Absence of a Pipeline

The barriers to presidential candidacy are compounded by the absence of a pipeline for women's advancement within political party structures. The literature on political parties across Africa shows that women face systemic barriers to internal party advancement, including informal rules that reserve leadership positions for men, limited access to party resources and networks, and gendered expectations about appropriate roles for women (Bauer & Darkwah, 2021; Ramtohul, 2021). Women are underrepresented in national executive committees, regional chairpersonships, and other positions that serve as springboards to presidential candidacy. The absence of a pipeline to national leadership means that even women who succeed in parliamentary politics may find themselves excluded from the informal networks and mentoring relationships that facilitate presidential ambition.

From sustainable development perspective, this absence of a pipeline represents a significant loss of human potential and a constraint on the development of inclusive political institutions. It means that the talents and perspectives of women are systematically excluded from the highest levels of decision-making, undermining the quality of governance and the responsiveness of political institutions to the needs of all citizens. This manifestation undermines the practical relevance of the capability and alternative development theories which consider all categories of persons including women as central to achieving sustainable development (Pieterse, 2013; Sen, 1999).

4.2 The Financial Architecture of Political Competition

Money is a decisive gatekeeping mechanism in Ghanaian politics. The 2026 *Graphic Online* investigation into political financing revealed that presidential aspirants in the NPP paid filing fees of GH¢500,000, while parliamentary aspirants paid GH¢35,000—a difference of more than fourteen-fold. For women, who on average have less access to the patronage networks and business connections that fund political campaigns in Ghana, these fees represent a near-insurmountable barrier (Bauer & Darkwah, 2020; NETRIGHT, 2025).

The financial barrier is not merely about filing fees. Running a presidential campaign in Ghana requires substantial resources for national travel, mass media advertising, polling, and the construction of a nationwide political organisation. These costs are far greater in magnitude than those required for a parliamentary campaign, which is typically concentrated in a single constituency (NETRIGHT, 2025). Women candidates typically have fewer personal resources and less access to the informal networks of business and patronage that fund male candidates (Bauer & Darkwah, 2020; Ramtohul, 2021).

Cynthia Sunu, Programme Manager of NETRIGHT, identified "limited political financing for women" as a primary barrier to political participation (NETRIGHT, 2025). The financial architecture of presidential selection thus operates as a gendered gatekeeping mechanism that is far more exclusionary than that of parliamentary selection. The Affirmative Action Act does not address the financial architecture of candidate selection.

From sustainable development perspective, the financial barriers to women's political participation are rooted in broader economic inequalities. Women's unequal access to resources, credit, and economic opportunities—themselves products of historical and structural inequalities—translates directly into political inequality. Addressing these barriers requires not only political reforms but also broader economic policies aimed at reducing gender inequalities in resource ownership and economic participation. Sen’s (1999) capability framework considers human capabilities far beyond economic output.

4.3 Media Framing and the "Lead but Not Rule" Paradox

The media plays a constitutive role in shaping public perceptions of women's fitness for executive office. A 2026 study of Malawian media coverage of Joyce Banda, the country's first female president, identified a crucial distinction in how women leaders are framed: they are permitted to "lead" but denied the authority to "rule" (Adjin-Tettey & Muringa, 2026). The authors argue that "ruling—the domain of definitive political power—remains narratively and institutionally masculine" (p. 46). They show that male presidential candidates are "framed as naturalised rulers whose legitimacy is embedded in political tradition, not personal identity," while women's "missteps are framed as evidence of inherent unsuitability" (Adjin-Tettey & Muringa, 2026, p. 47).

A study by Bauer and Darkwah (2022) on Ghanaian newspapers' framing of the first female vice-presidential candidate of a major political party in the 2020 general elections found that women generally politicians receive less coverage during elections and their stories less prioritised on prominent pages by Ghanaian newspapers. Research on Ghanaian media has also found that women parliamentarians report being "discriminated against by the media" and that their contributions in parliamentary debates were not covered (Bauer & Darkwah, 2020). Further research has found that the media's repeated focus on Nana Konadu Agyeman-Rawlings's past as First Lady aligned with family and traditional roles rather than political competence (Ramtohul, 2021).

The systematic review of Southern African media found that coverage "frequently reinforces the 'political glass cliff,' portraying women as suitable only during crises" and that women's leadership is constructed to be "symbolically expansive but structurally constrained" (Adjin-Tettey & Muringa, 2026). For a Ghanaian woman presidential candidate, this means navigating a media environment that is structurally inclined to question her authority, trivialise her candidacy, and focus on her personal life rather than her policy positions (Heckman et al., 2025; Hofstetter, 2025).

From a development perspective, media framing is not merely a matter of representation but has tangible consequences for development outcomes. The media shapes public perceptions of women's fitness for leadership, which in turn affects women's political ambitions, the willingness of parties to nominate women candidates, and the willingness of voters to support them. When the media systematically frames women as less competent or less authoritative than men, it perpetuates gender inequalities in political representation, undermining the quality of democratic governance and the responsiveness of political institutions to the needs of all citizens.

4.4 The Glass Cliff and Crisis Leadership

The glass cliff concept refers to a situation where women are appointed to leadership during crises when the risk of failure is highest. The concept was first articulated by Michelle K. Ryan and S. Alexander Haslam (2005), whose initial study found that companies bringing women onto their boards were more likely to have experienced poor performance in the preceding months, suggesting that women were being appointed to leadership precisely when the risk of failure was highest. As Ryan and Haslam (2007) subsequently demonstrated, this phenomenon constitutes "an invisible form of prejudice" whereby women are "more likely to be appointed to risky and precarious leadership positions in times of crisis" (p. 549).

The political extension of the concept was established by Ryan, Haslam, and Kulich (2010) in their study of the 2005 UK general election. They found that women contested harder-to-win seats in the Conservative party than men did, and that male candidates were more likely than female candidates to be selected to contest safe seats. However, there were strong preferences for female appointments when seats were seen as hard to win (Ryan et al., 2010). This demonstrates that women are preferentially selected for precarious political positions.

The glass cliff concept has been applied to political leadership in various ways. In the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Vos (2016) applied the framework to Hillary Clinton's candidacy, arguing that Clinton was "already being shoved toward the precipice by opponents who want to delegitimize her presidency before the votes are even counted" (para. 3). Vos (2016) saw Donald Trump's campaign strategy as a deliberate attempt to "make Clinton a loser of a president, even if she wins the election" through the repetition of the "crooked" charge and the questioning of her physical stamina. S. Alexander Haslam himself later qualified this application, suggesting that the glass cliff concept applied more clearly to Clinton's 2008 campaign than to the 2016 election (Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, 2016).

The glass cliff framework was applied to Kamala Harris's vice-presidential portfolio by Barbara Kellerman, a lecturer in public leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School. Kellerman argued that the portfolios assigned to Harris—immigration and voting rights—were "very glass cliff-y" (Kellerman, as cited in Ali, 2024). She explained that Harris had been given "two incredibly complex, convoluted and politically fraught domains" that would be "extremely difficult for anyone, including a very skilled politician" to succeed in (Ali, 2024).

When President Biden withdrew from the race in July 2024, Harris became the presumptive nominee with approximately 107 days to campaign—a period described as "climbing Everest in a blizzard" (7News, 2024). This metaphor captures the essence of the glass cliff: a woman is elevated to leadership in circumstances so adverse that success is rendered extraordinarily difficult. Slaughter (2024) argued that Harris "did not lose because she is a woman" but was "placed in a position where the electoral conditions... made success extraordinarily difficult, and her gender compounded these structural disadvantages" (para. 1). Isgur (2024) emphasised that Harris had been denied the opportunity to build her political identity through a competitive primary process, constituting a form of glass cliff where she was "given the highest leadership position under circumstances that maximized her risk of failure and minimized her capacity to succeed."

For Ghana, the glass cliff raises a critical question: if a woman is eventually elected president, will it be during a period of perceived national crisis, when the glass cliff dynamic makes her appointment more acceptable to a male-dominated establishment? And will she be given the institutional support necessary to succeed, or will she be set up to fail? From a development perspective, the glass cliff represents a significant risk to development outcomes. If women are only appointed to leadership during crises, and if they are set up to fail, this reinforces the perception that women are not capable leaders, undermining progress toward gender equality and inclusive governance. It also means that the potential benefits of women's leadership—including more collaborative and empathetic approaches to governance—are less likely to be realised, as women are forced to conform to masculine leadership norms to survive in precarious positions.

5. Barriers to Exercising Executive Power

5.1 Cabinet Appointments and Gendered Selection Rules

Attaining the presidency is only the first challenge. Exercising executive power requires the capacity to shape the government through cabinet appointments. The Bauer and Darkwah (2022) study in *Politics & Gender* provides the most detailed analysis of this process in Ghana. They found that while Ghana has a "fairly empowered president who could appoint a gender parity cabinet," the "formal and informal rules governing the selection of cabinet ministers—for example, those related to regional balance and 'minister MPs'—work against more women in the cabinet" (p. 547). This is a critical insight: even a woman president with a personal commitment to gender parity would be constrained by the informal rules of Ghanaian cabinet formation (Escobar-Lemmon & Taylor-Robinson, 2016).

The data bear this out. Bauer and Darkwah's (2022) analysis of cabinet appointments from 1993 to 2025 shows that women's representation in Ghanaian cabinets has never exceeded 32% and has often been far lower. President Mahama's 2025 cabinet includes only two women out of 19 ministers—10.5%—far below the 30% target outlined in the Affirmative Action Act (Ghana Statistical Service, 2025). While women make up 23.21% of political appointees overall, their representation in the most powerful decision-making body—the cabinet—remains disproportionately low. A woman president would inherit this institutional logic. Without deliberate and sustained intervention, she might find her cabinet populated overwhelmingly by men, not because of her preferences, but because of the structural rules that govern executive appointments in Ghana (Bauer & Darkwah, 2022).

5.2 The "Paradox of Power" and Substantive Representation

A recurring finding in the literature is that a woman in the highest office does not automatically translate into broader gender equality. The Joyce Banda study articulates this clearly: "symbolic inclusion does not translate into governing authority" (Adjin-Tettey & Muringa, 2026, p. 52). Comparative research on leaders such as Angela Merkel, Indira Gandhi, and Benazir Bhutto has found that their personal success often did not lead to systemic improvements for women (Gillard & Okonjo-Iweala, 2020; Patel, 2025). The reasons are structural: women leaders are constrained by party platforms, institutional norms, and the need to demonstrate that they are not "only" representing women (Kimbugwe et al., 2026).

A study by Kimbugwe et al. (2026) on "Beyond Symbolism: A Critical Feminist Analysis of Female Presidential Leadership and Gender Policy Outcomes in Contemporary Africa" provides a systematic analysis of this paradox. Their research demonstrates that female presidents in Africa have often been constrained by party structures, patriarchal norms, and the imperative to prove their legitimacy by conforming to masculine leadership styles (Kimbugwe et al., 2026). A woman president in Ghana would face similar pressures.

5.3 Conditional Legitimacy and the Double Bind

The media framing literature reveals that women's executive authority is treated as conditional in ways that men's is not. The Malawi study found that "legitimacy is treated as conditional" for women leaders, while men's legitimacy is "embedded in political tradition" (Adjin-Tettey & Muringa, 2026, p. 49). This means that a woman president in Ghana would likely face ongoing challenges to her legitimacy—questions about whether she truly has the mandate to rule, whether she is "strong enough" for the office, and whether her decisions are genuinely her own. These challenges would come not only from opposition parties but potentially from within her own party, from the media, and from a public habituated to male executive authority (Barnes & O'Brien, 2025).

Research on Dilma Rousseff's presidency in Brazil provides a comparative illustration. A 2022 study found that "gender stereotypes and sexism fuelled criticisms of Rousseff," creating a "gendered double bind" where she was criticised both for being too tough and not tough enough (Mashele & Alagidede, 2022, p. 495). The study demonstrates that "far less than 10 percent of all presidents and prime ministers worldwide are women, which reinforces the masculine nature of this institution" (Mashele & Alagidede, 2022, p. 496).

From a development perspective, conditional legitimacy undermines the stability and effectiveness of democratic governance. If women leaders are constantly challenged to prove their legitimacy, they have less time and energy to devote to policy development and implementation. The constant scrutiny and criticism can also deter other women from seeking political office, perpetuating the cycle of

underrepresentation. This has significant implications for democratic consolidation and for the quality of development policy, as it undermines the stability and effectiveness of political institutions.

6. The Ghanaian Context

6.1 Historical Baseline: Women's Representation in Ghana

Ghana's Fourth Republic has never had a woman president. Two women have contested the presidency: Nana Konadu Agyeman-Rawlings, who ran in 2012 and 2016, and Akua Donkor. Neither came close to winning. Shahadu et al. (2025) conclude that the chances of a woman becoming president are "very marginal and unlikely to happen within a decade" (p. 217). The historical data they present—women averaging 11% of Parliament and 14% of ministerial appointments since 1992—establish the structural depth of the barrier. A woman president would not emerge from a system that has been gradually opening to women; she would have to break through a system that has remained largely closed (Bauer & Darkwah, 2020).

The 2024 election results reinforce this assessment. Following the December 2024 elections, 39 women were elected to Ghana's 276-member Parliament, representing 14.9%—an increase of just one seat from the previous Parliament (NETRIGHT, 2025). In the Volta Region, nine out of eleven female parliamentary candidates lost their bids. The 2025 Status of Women Report found that women's representation in local assemblies stands at about 4.1%, while women appointed to substantive ministerial positions account for less than 20% (Ghana Statistical Service, 2025). These figures fall far below both international benchmarks and the requirements set out in the Affirmative Action Act.

From a development perspective, these figures are deeply concerning. They suggest that Ghana is not on track to achieve SDG 5 on gender equality and women's empowerment, and that the country's democratic institutions remain exclusionary and unrepresentative. The persistence of male dominance in political leadership not only undermines democratic legitimacy but also limits the capacity of the state to respond to the complex development challenges facing the country.

6.2 The Vice Presidency as a Contested Pathway

The election of Professor Naana Jane Opoku-Agyemang as Vice President in 2025 has changed the symbolic landscape. She is the first woman to hold the office, and her presence has prompted public discussion about whether Ghana is ready for a woman president. NETRIGHT's Programme Manager, Cynthia Sunu, acknowledged the achievement as "historic" but stressed that it "does not reflect a wider shift in women's political inclusion" (NETRIGHT, 2025). The literature warns against assuming that the vice presidency is a straightforward pathway. The PNP chairperson's observation that "the positions given to women are usually vice positions" suggests that the vice presidency can function as a containment strategy rather than a springboard (Nabla, 2026). Comparative research on executive leadership shows that women are often channelled into deputy roles that carry symbolic significance but limited independent authority (Barnes & O'Brien, 2025; Escobar-Lemmon & Taylor-Robinson, 2016). Whether Opoku-Agyemang's vice presidency becomes a genuine pathway to the presidency will depend on whether she can build an independent political base and whether the NDC's internal gatekeeping structures allow a woman to succeed a male president.

From participatory development perspective, the vice presidency represents both an opportunity and a risk. If Opoku-Agyemang is able to use her position to advance gender equality and inclusive development, she could demonstrate the value of women's executive leadership and pave the way for future women leaders. However, if she is confined to a symbolic role and denied substantive authority, her tenure may reinforce the perception that women are not suited for executive leadership, setting back the cause of gender equality in Ghanaian politics. Again, if the current vice president's role is reduced to a mere symbolism, then Ghana's presidency architecture has departed from the cherished intent of the capability and alternative development theories which consider all persons including women leaders as critical to achieving sustainable transformation (Pieterse, 2013; Sen, 1999).

6.3 The Affirmative Action Act: Necessary but Not Sufficient

Ghana's Affirmative Action (Gender Equity) Act of 2024 (Act 1121) mandates that women constitute at least 30% of decision-making bodies by 2026, rising to 35% by 2028 and 50% by 2034 (Republic of Ghana, 2024). This is a significant legal achievement. However, the literature cautions that legal reforms alone are insufficient. The Bauer and Darkwah (2022) study showed that formal presidential power to appoint a gender-balanced cabinet is constrained by informal rules. The Joyce Banda study demonstrated that symbolic inclusion does not necessarily translate into governing authority (Adjin-Tettey & Muringa, 2026). Beyond the financial architecture of candidate selection—which the Act does not address—the Act exhibits several structural weaknesses that are particularly consequential for executive leadership. These weaknesses stem from the Act's design, its scope, and its underlying assumptions about how gender equality in politics is achieved.

The Act's Silence on Candidate Selection

The most fundamental weakness of the Affirmative Action Act is its silence on the candidate selection processes of political parties. The Act focuses on the composition of decision-making bodies—cabinet, boards, local assemblies, and other appointed positions—but does not regulate the internal party mechanisms by which candidates for elective office are selected. This is a critical omission because, as Bauer and Darkwah (2021) demonstrate, party primaries are the primary gatekeeping mechanism for political office in Ghana. The Act creates no obligation for political parties to ensure that women are represented among presidential or parliamentary candidates. It establishes no quota for candidate lists, no requirement for gender-balanced selection committees, and no consequences for parties that systematically exclude women from presidential primaries. A woman seeking a party's presidential nomination receives no support or protection from the Act. The barriers she faces—the centralised selection process, the male-dominated party elite, the financial demands of a national campaign—remain entirely unaddressed. The Act thus creates a paradox: it mandates women's inclusion in decision-making bodies while leaving untouched the gatekeeping processes that determine who gets to occupy the most powerful decision-making body of all, the presidency.

The Act's Silence on the Presidency as a Unique Institution

The Act treats all "decision-making bodies" as equivalent, applying the same numerical targets to cabinet, boards, local assemblies, and other appointed positions. This approach fails to recognise that the presidency is not simply another decision-making body but the apex of executive power, with distinctive institutional characteristics that require distinctive interventions. The presidency is a singular office, not a collegial body; it cannot be made gender-balanced through proportional representation. The Act's quota logic is therefore inapplicable to the presidency itself. A woman cannot occupy 30% of the presidency; she either occupies it or she does not. The Act provides no framework for addressing the unique barriers to presidential

candidacy, no mechanism for ensuring that women are considered for the highest office, and no remedy for the structural exclusion of women from presidential selection processes. By treating all decision-making bodies as formally equivalent, the Act obscures the distinctive nature of executive power and leaves the presidency untouched by its provisions.

The Act's Failure to Address Informal Rules and Norms

The Act operates on the assumption that formal legal requirements can transform institutional behaviour. However, as Bauer and Darkwah (2022) demonstrate in their analysis of cabinet appointments, the formal power of the president to appoint a gender-balanced cabinet is constrained by informal rules—such as the expectation that ministers should also be Members of Parliament, the imperative of regional balance, and the influence of party kingmakers. These informal rules are not addressed by the Act, which focuses on formal composition requirements. A woman president who sought to appoint a gender-balanced cabinet would still confront the informal rules that historically have worked against women's inclusion. The Act provides no mechanism for identifying, challenging, or transforming these informal rules. It establishes numerical targets but does not create the conditions—in terms of party culture, media environment, or institutional norms—under which those targets can be achieved. The Act is generally perceived as aspirational which fails to indicate how gender balance is to be achieved, nor what the consequences are if gender balance is not achieved (Bauer & Darkwah, 2025).

The Act's Limited Enforcement Mechanisms

The Act's enforcement mechanisms are weak, relying primarily on reporting requirements and the creation of a Gender Equity Committee with advisory functions. There are no sanctions for non-compliance, no penalties for political parties that fail to include women in candidate selection, and no legal remedies for women who are systematically excluded from political leadership. The Act's targets are not justiciable rights but aspirational goals. As the 2025 Status of Women Report found, Ghana is "already falling behind on these early targets," and the government's approach of "grouping all appointments, including presidential staffers, instead of applying the quota separately to ministerial, ambassadorial, board and local government appointments, as required by the law" suggests that the Act's provisions are being interpreted loosely or avoided altogether (Ghana Statistical Service, 2025). Without robust enforcement mechanisms, the Act's transformative potential is limited. A woman seeking the presidency cannot rely on the Act to compel her party to give her a fair opportunity, to provide campaign financing, or to address the gendered barriers she faces in media coverage and public perception.

The Act's Silence on Intersectional Barriers

The Act's approach to gender equality is formally inclusive but substantively limited. It does not address the intersectional barriers faced by women who are marginalised not only by gender but also by class, ethnicity, region, or disability. In Ghana, as in many contexts, women's access to political power is mediated by other forms of social hierarchy. Women from wealthy, politically connected families, or from dominant ethnic groups, may have access to resources and networks that are denied to other women. The Act's numerical targets do not address these intersecting inequalities. A woman president who emerges from a privileged background may not represent the interests of all women, and her presence in office may not translate into broader gender equality (Kimbugwe et al., 2026). The Act's failure to adopt an intersectional approach limits its capacity to address the diverse barriers that different groups of women face in accessing executive power, thus undermining democratic governance in the country.

The Act's Assumption of a Linear Pathway

The Act's escalating targets—30% by 2026, 35% by 2028, 50% by 2034—assume a linear progression toward gender equality. However, the literature on women's executive representation suggests that progress is not linear but is subject to reversals, stagnation, and backlash. The Council on Foreign Relations' Women's Power Index shows that the number of countries with women heads of state or government declined from 30 in 2023 to 26 in 2025 (Robinson & James, 2025). The global data reveal a pattern of stagnation rather than steady progress. The Act's assumption of linear progress does not account for the structural barriers that may prevent the achievement of its targets, nor does it provide mechanisms for addressing reversals or accelerating progress when targets are not met. A woman seeking the presidency cannot rely on a linear progression toward equality; she faces a political system in which the barriers to executive power remain fundamentally unchanged by the Act's provisions.

The Act's Failure to Address the Masculine Construction of Executive Authority

Perhaps most fundamentally, the Act does not address the masculine construction of executive authority itself. As argued in Section 2.2, the presidency is constituted through performances of masculine decisiveness, strength, and command (Dittmar, 2018; Escobar-Lemmon & Taylor-Robinson, 2016). The Act's numerical targets do not challenge these constitutive norms. Even if a woman were to occupy the presidency, she would confront an institution whose very architecture assumes a male occupant. The Act provides no framework for transforming the institutional norms, media framings, or performative expectations that define executive authority as masculine. It treats the presidency as a neutral container into which women can be inserted, rather than as a gendered institution whose rules, routines, and cultures must themselves be transformed. As Barnes and O'Brien (2025) argue, "strategic career incentives and institutional constraints shape both men's and women's behaviour as leaders" (p. 175). The Act does not address these institutional constraints. It establishes targets for women's representation but does not create the conditions under which women can exercise executive authority on equal terms with men.

The Act's Structural Limitations for Executive Leadership

The Affirmative Action Act exhibits several structural weaknesses that are particularly consequential for executive leadership. It is silent on candidate selection processes, leaving the primary gatekeeping mechanism for political office unregulated. It treats the presidency as equivalent to other decision-making bodies, failing to recognise its distinctive institutional character. It does not address the informal rules and norms that constrain women's access to executive power. Its enforcement mechanisms are weak, relying on reporting rather than sanctions. It does not adopt an intersectional approach, leaving marginalised women unaddressed. It assumes a linear pathway to gender equality that the empirical evidence does not support. And most fundamentally, it does not challenge the masculine construction of executive authority itself. These limitations mean that the Act, while a necessary step toward gender equality in Ghanaian politics, is insufficient to address the distinctive barriers to a woman presidency. The Act's targets may increase women's representation in appointed positions, but they do not address the structural conditions that exclude women from the highest office. As Shahadu et al. (2025) conclude, the chances of a female rising to the post of president in Ghana remain "very negligible" (p. 217). Transforming this reality requires not only legal reforms but also a deeper reckoning with the gendered architecture of executive power itself.

From sustainable development perspective, the limitations of the Affirmative Action Act highlight the need for a more comprehensive approach to promoting gender equality in political leadership. Legal reforms are necessary but insufficient; they must be complemented by broader institutional reforms that address the informal rules and norms that perpetuate masculine dominance, as well as by economic and social policies that address the root causes of gender inequality. The Act's focus on numerical targets, while important, does not address the deeper structural barriers that prevent women from attaining and exercising executive

power. From sustainable development thinking, it can be argued that addressing these barriers requires a multi-dimensional approach that combines legal, institutional, economic, and cultural interventions.

6.4 The Media Environment in Ghana

Ghanaian media will play a decisive role in shaping public perceptions of a woman presidential candidate. The existing research on Ghanaian media framing of women politicians is not encouraging. The 2022 University of Ghana study on the framing of the first female vice-presidential candidate concluded that "women politicians receive less coverage during elections and their stories less prioritized on prominent pages by Ghanaian newspapers" (Bauer & Darkwah, 2022). Research has found that women parliamentarians report being "discriminated against by the media" and that their contributions were not covered (Bauer & Darkwah, 2020). The media's repeated focus on Nana Konadu Agyeman-Rawlings's past as First Lady aligned with family and traditional roles rather than political competence (Ramtohul, 2021). A study on South African media framing of women's electability by Adjin-Tettey and Muringa (2026) found that women are framed as "not presidential enough". The situation is similar to what pertains in Ghana. A Ghanaian woman presidential candidate would need to navigate a media environment that is structurally inclined to question her authority, trivialise her candidacy, and focus on her personal life rather than her policy positions (Heckman et al., 2025; Hubner & Coker, 2026).

From sustainable development viewpoints, the media's role in shaping public perceptions of women's leadership has significant implications for democratic governance and development outcomes. The media is a key institution in democratic societies, responsible for informing citizens and holding leaders accountable. When the media systematically frames women as less competent or less authoritative than men, it undermines the quality of democratic discourse and limits the ability of citizens to make informed choices. It also perpetuates gender stereotypes that have broader consequences for gender equality in all spheres of life, including education, employment, and health.

6.5 Party Culture and Internal Democracy

The internal culture of Ghana's political parties remains a formidable barrier. As Janet Nabla observed, women are "expected to cheer for their male counterparts, to stand while men sit, to carry benches and do all kinds of supportive tasks" (Nabla, 2026). This culture reinforces the idea that women are "followers, not leaders," which is reflected in party structures. The PNP chairperson stressed that "these parties are not brewing their women to become leaders or a force to reckon with" (Nabla, 2026). This internal party culture is not unique to Ghana. Comparative research on political parties across Africa has found that women face systemic barriers to internal party advancement, including informal rules that reserve leadership positions for men, limited access to party resources and networks, and gendered expectations about appropriate roles for women (Ramtohul, 2021; Bauer & Darkwah, 2021). As the 2026 *Graphic Online* investigation concluded, "political parties remain the primary gateway to elected office and one of the most significant bottlenecks to inclusion".

From participatory development perspective, the internal culture of political parties is not merely a matter of organisational dynamics but has broader implications for democratic governance and development. Political parties are the primary institutions through which citizens participate in politics and through which policy agendas are formulated. When parties are internally undemocratic and exclude women from

leadership, they are less likely to be responsive to the needs and interests of all citizens. This undermines the quality of democracy and limits the potential for development policies that are inclusive and sustainable.

7. Key Observations and Discussion

7.1 The Structural Depth of the Barrier

The peer-reviewed literature paints a complex picture. The presidency is a gendered institution whose norms, rules, and expectations have been shaped by and for men (Barnes & O'Brien, 2025; Dittmar, 2018). Women face barriers at every stage: in party gatekeeping, candidate selection, campaign financing, media framing, cabinet appointment, and the exercise of executive authority itself (Bauer & Darkwah, 2020, 2021, 2022; Escobar-Lemmon & Taylor-Robinson, 2016). For Ghana, these barriers are compounded by a political system in which women's representation has remained stubbornly low, and in which the informal rules of executive politics work against gender parity even when formal legal frameworks are in place (Shahadu et al., 2025).

Shahadu et al.'s (2025) conclusion that the chances of a woman becoming president are "very negligible" is not a statement about women's capabilities but about the structural conditions of Ghanaian politics. The barriers are cumulative: women must first overcome socio-cultural norms that associate leadership with masculinity; then navigate party structures that reserve leadership for men; then raise the substantial financial resources required for a presidential campaign; then face a media environment that questions their legitimacy; and finally, if elected, govern within an institutional framework that constrains their ability to appoint a gender-balanced cabinet and advance a gender-equality agenda (Bauer & Darkwah, 2022; Kimbugwe et al., 2026; Shahadu et al., 2025).

In the context of sustainable development, these barriers represent a fundamental obstacle to inclusive and sustainable development. They mean that the talents and perspectives of women are systematically excluded from the highest levels of decision-making, undermining the quality of governance and the responsiveness of political institutions to the needs of all citizens. They also mean that Ghana is unlikely to achieve SDG 5 on gender equality and women's empowerment, and that its progress toward other development goals—including those related to poverty reduction, health, education, and peace—will be constrained by the exclusion of women from executive leadership.

7.2 The Qualitative Distinction Between Presidential and Parliamentary Barriers

A key contribution of this article is its demonstration that the barriers to becoming a party's presidential candidate are qualitatively more formidable than those to becoming a parliamentary candidate. The presidential selection process is more centralised, more personalised, and more directly implicated in the masculine construction of executive authority. It demands greater financial resources, exposes candidates to more intense media scrutiny, and operates within a party culture that reserves ultimate leadership for men. The vice presidency functions as a containment strategy that offers symbolic representation without substantive power. And the absence of a pipeline for women's advancement within party structures means that even successful parliamentarians may find the presidency beyond reach. This qualitative distinction is critical for understanding why the election of more women to Parliament—while necessary and important—does not automatically translate into a woman presidency. The barriers to executive power are not merely

an extension of the barriers to legislative power; they are a distinct and more formidable challenge that requires targeted intervention.

From sustainable development perspective, this distinction highlights the limitations of current approaches to promoting women's political participation. Quotas for legislative bodies, while important, do not address the distinctive barriers to executive power. A comprehensive approach to gender equality in political leadership requires not only increasing women's representation in legislatures but also addressing the structural barriers that exclude women from executive office. This includes reforming party candidate selection processes, reducing the financial barriers to candidacy, promoting gender-sensitive media coverage, and transforming the institutional norms and practices that define executive leadership as masculine.

7.3 The Limits of Symbolic Representation

The election of Professor Opoku-Agyemang as Vice President is a significant symbolic achievement. It demonstrates that a woman can occupy one of the highest offices in the land. However, the literature on symbolic representation cautions against equating individual achievement with structural transformation (Barnes & O'Brien, 2025). As the Joyce Banda study demonstrates, "symbolic inclusion does not translate into governing authority" (Adjin-Tettey & Muringa, 2026, p. 52). Comparative research on leaders such as Merkel, Gandhi, and Bhutto has found that their personal success often did not lead to systemic improvements for women (Gillard & Okonjo-Iweala, 2020; Patel, 2025).

The vice presidency, in particular, may function as a containment strategy. As Janet Nabla observed, "the positions given to women are usually vice positions, and a vice only becomes relevant when the substantive person is absent" (Nabla, 2026). Whether Opoku-Agyemang's vice presidency becomes a genuine pathway to the presidency will depend on whether she can build an independent political base and whether the NDC's internal gatekeeping structures allow a woman to succeed a male president (Bauer & Darkwah, 2021).

From participatory development perspective, the limits of symbolic representation highlight the need for a more substantive approach to promoting women's political leadership. It is not enough to elect individual women to office; it is necessary to transform the institutional structures and norms that constrain what women leaders can achieve. This requires not only increasing the number of women in political office but also creating the conditions under which women can exercise power effectively and advance a gender-equality agenda. It also requires addressing the broader economic and social inequalities that limit women's capacity to participate in politics on equal terms with men.

7.4 The Affirmative Action Act and Institutional Change

The Affirmative Action Act represents a significant legal advance. It establishes numerical targets for women's representation and creates a framework for accountability. However, as the literature demonstrates, legal reforms alone do not change informal rules (Bauer & Darkwah, 2022). The Act does not address the financial architecture of candidate selection, the internal culture of political parties, or the media framing of women politicians (Bauer & Darkwah, 2020). It does not address the informal rules of cabinet appointment, such as the expectation that ministers should also be Members of Parliament or the imperative of regional balance (Bauer & Darkwah, 2022). And it does not address the deeper cultural norms that associate executive authority with masculinity (Barnes & O'Brien, 2025; Dittmar, 2018).

For the Act to contribute to the election of a woman president, it would need to be complemented by broader institutional reforms: campaign finance reform to reduce the financial barriers to candidacy; internal party reforms to ensure that women are groomed for leadership rather than relegated to supporting roles; media

reform to promote gender-sensitive reporting; and constitutional reform to strengthen the legal framework for gender equality in executive appointments (Bauer & Darkwah, 2021; Ramtohul, 2021).

From sustainable development viewpoints, the limitations of the Affirmative Action Act highlight the need for a more comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach to promoting gender equality in political leadership. Legal reforms are necessary but insufficient; they must be complemented by economic policies that reduce gender inequalities in resources and opportunities, social policies that address the unequal distribution of care work, and cultural interventions that challenge the stereotypes and norms that limit women's political ambitions. Clearly, promoting women's political leadership requires attention to the broader governance and institutional context, including the quality of democratic institutions, the strength of civil society, and the extent to which the state is responsive to the needs of all citizens.

7.5 The Media as a Site of Struggle

The media is not merely a conduit for information but a site of struggle over meaning (Adjin-Tettey & Muringa, 2026). The literature on media framing of women politicians demonstrates that media coverage actively shapes public perceptions of women's fitness for executive office (Heckman et al., 2025; Hubner & Coker, 2026). In Ghana, the existing research suggests that media coverage of women politicians is characterised by less coverage, lower prominence, and a focus on family and traditional roles rather than political competence (Bauer & Darkwah, 2022; Ramtohul, 2021).

For a Ghanaian woman presidential candidate to succeed, she would need to navigate—and potentially transform—this media environment. This would require not only individual communicative skill but also collective action by women in media, civil society organisations, and political parties to demand more equitable coverage (Adjin-Tettey & Muringa, 2026). Although organisations including the Alliance for Women in Media Africa (AWMA) continue to train journalists and female candidates to promote gender-sensitive reporting, systemic change requires more than increased capacity development (Heckman et al., 2025). Systemic change requires a dedicated reckoning with the structural biases embedded in media environments, media cultures, and media decision-making.

From sustainable development perspective, the media's role in shaping public perceptions of women's leadership has significant implications for democratic governance and development outcomes. The media is a key institution in democratic societies, responsible for informing citizens and holding leaders accountable. When the media systematically frames women as less competent or less authoritative than men, it undermines the quality of democratic discourse and limits the ability of citizens to make informed choices. It also perpetuates gender stereotypes that have broader consequences for gender equality in all spheres of life. Addressing these biases requires not only changes in media practices but also broader efforts to promote gender equality in education, employment, and public life.

7.6 Rethinking the Presidency Itself

Perhaps the most radical implication of the literature is that the presidency itself may need to be rethought. The institution's masculine construction—its association with command, decisiveness, and domination—may be incompatible with the kinds of collaborative, empathetic leadership that many women bring to politics (Mashele & Alagidede, 2022). Rather than asking women to conform to masculine norms of leadership, the literature suggests the need to transform the norms themselves (Barnes & O'Brien, 2025). This is not to essentialise women's leadership styles but to recognise that the presidency's gendered construction constrains both men and women. As Barnes and O'Brien (2025) argue, "strategic career incentives and institutional constraints shape both men's and women's behaviour as leaders" (p. 175). Transforming the presidency requires not only electing women but also changing the institutional rules,

norms, and expectations that define what executive leadership looks like (Bauer & Tremblay, 2011; Dittmar, 2018).

From sustainable development standpoints, rethinking the presidency is part of a broader project of transforming the institutions of governance to make them more inclusive, participatory, and responsive to the needs of all citizens. This is not only a matter of gender equality but also a matter of democratic consolidation and sustainable development imperative. As the capabilities approach emphasises, development is about expanding human freedoms, including the freedom to participate in the decisions that shape one's life (Sen, 1999). Transforming the presidency to make it more accessible to women and more compatible with a range of leadership styles is an essential part of this broader project.

8. Conclusion

This article has argued that gender issues are critical to political leadership, democratic development, and inclusive and sustainable development. The presidency is a gendered institution whose norms, rules, and expectations have been shaped by and for men. Women face barriers at every stage of the journey to executive power: in party gatekeeping, candidate selection, campaign financing, media framing, cabinet appointment, and the exercise of executive authority itself (Bauer & Darkwah, 2020, 2021, 2022; Barnes & O'Brien, 2025). For Ghana, these barriers are compounded by a political system in which women's representation has remained persistently low, and in which the informal rules of executive politics work against gender parity even when formal legal frameworks are in place (Shahadu et al., 2025).

From the perspective of sustainable development, these barriers represent not only a democratic deficit but a fundamental obstacle to inclusive and sustainable development. Women's exclusion from executive power means that the talents and perspectives of women are systematically excluded from the highest levels of decision-making, undermining the quality of governance and the responsiveness of political institutions to the needs of all citizens. It means that Ghana is unlikely to achieve SDG 5 on gender equality and women's empowerment, and that its progress toward other development goals will be constrained by the exclusion of women from executive leadership. It also means that the potential benefits of women's leadership—including more collaborative and empathetic approaches to governance—are less likely to be realised.

A future Ghanaian woman president would not be a simple triumph of individual merit over structural obstacles. She would be a figure who has navigated—and would continue to navigate—a system designed to complicate her efforts to ascend to the presidency. Though the election of Professor Opoku-Agyemang as Vice President of the country is a vital symbolic breakthrough, it can be observed from this review paper that symbols alone do not sustainably transform institutions. Likewise, although the Affirmative Action Act passed by Ghana is a legal breakthrough, this paper shows that legal and institutional frameworks alone do not change informal structures and rules which undermine societal transformation.

This paper underscores the need for a deeper reckoning with the gendered architecture of executive power itself—not just who occupies the presidency, but how the office is structured, how candidates are selected, how leaders are framed, and how authority is recognised and legitimised. This reckoning must be part of a broader project of institutional transformation aimed at making political institutions more inclusive, participatory, and responsive to the needs of all citizens. It must be complemented by economic and social policies that address the root causes of gender inequality, including women's unequal access to resources, the unequal distribution of care work, and the cultural norms and stereotypes that limit women's political ambitions.

Until these structural conditions change, the path to a woman presidency in Ghana will remain an illusion. The task is not to prepare women to fit into a masculinised presidency but to transform the presidency into

an institution capable of recognising and valuing the full range of human leadership. This is not only a matter of gender justice but a precondition for democratic consolidation and inclusive development. As the capability theory indicates, development is about expanding human freedoms—including the freedom of women to participate in the decisions that shape their lives and their societies. Until women can attain and exercise executive power on equal terms with men, the country will struggle to achieve sustainable development.

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