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THE GHANAIAN
WOMAN:
DEVELOPMENT
THROUGH
EDUCATION AND
FAMILY PLANNING

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INTRODUCTION

Females are an important segment of Ghana's population, making up 51 percent of the total population. Therefore, if Ghana is going to achieve its avowed aim of national development, it is important that women's needs be taken as seriously as those of men. True national development will be achieved only when the living standard of all the people — males and females — is improved.

Unfortunately, national development has been slow in many developing countries because of economic decline over the last few years. The economic situation in Ghana has also suffered, although some improvement has been seen recently. The number of poor people, particularly women, grew enormously during this period of economic decline. One reason for Ghana's increasing poverty is rapid population growth, which can dramatically slow down the developmental process.

If economic momentum is to be re-established and both males and females are to benefit from development, then both sexes must participate effectively in the development process. The barriers which prevent females from contributing effectively to the economy must be removed. This booklet outlines some of those barriers and ways to lift them.



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GHANA NATIONAL FAMILY PLANNING PROGRAMME

POPULATION GROWTH AND WOMEN

Ghana's population numbered 13.9 million in 1987, more than double the 1960 population of 6.9 million. This amounts to an average annual growth rate of 2.6 percent over the 27-year period. Because of frequent undercounts in national censuses, some demographers have estimated that Ghana's population growth rate is actually higher than the current official government figure of 2.6 percent per year. Whatever the exact figure, population growth is rapid and, on the average, a Ghanaian woman can expect to have about six children during her reproductive years.

Such rapid population growth, combined with the country's poor economy, leads to a falling standard of living. The

decline is reflected in Ghana by low-quality nutrition, inadequate medical, social, and recreational services, and by the friction that a low standard of living generates in any society.

It can be argued that women bear the greatest brunt of the negative consequences of Ghana's high population growth rate. This is so not only because women physically bear the babies but also because of the limitations society places on women in their complex roles as mothers, household managers, and often unpaid managers of the family farm. Women have to provide for ever-growing families in the face of shrinking resources and yet they are often left outside the decisionmaking process with regard to both economic development and family planning.

TRADITIONAL GHANAIAN SOCIETY

Society in pre-colonial Ghana was based on subsistence agriculture characterized by a division of labour between males and females. The general pattern was for married women both to care for their large families and to be economically active. Women worked not merely at tasks auxiliary to those of their husbands but had duties of their own. Women were expected to have their own sources of income and to assume part of the economic burden for the support of their households. Women, often assisted by their children, performed such basic farm tasks as planting, weeding, and harvesting food crops, in addition to looking after their homes and families. In fishing communities, women smoked fish and, where possible, sold or bartered what they produced.

Men undertook the more physically arduous tasks, such as fishing, building huts, and clearing land for crops. They were also the warriors, protecting their families and communities from attack and the danger of capture and enslavement. When the need arose, however, women took up arms and fought alongside their menfolk. Thus, in her many roles, the Ghanaian woman was a mainstay of the family, the economy, and society.

WOMEN IN SOCIETY TODAY

Today, the Ghanaian woman, whether rural or urban, is still expected to marry and have many children. Further, as in the past, married women remain economically active in their own right, contributing to the support of the household by providing for their own material needs as well as those of their children.

There have been, however, many other changes in Ghanaian society. For example, the overall structure of the economy has changed to incorporate crops for export (rather than subsistence) and many "modern" service industries. The talents of men and women have been differently tapped to support these new economic features, and unfortunately men and women have also benefited differently from the changes. According to the 1984 Ghana Census, females composed 51 percent of the population. The country cannot afford to ignore the potential talents of more than half its human resources.

As in the past, agriculture is the main area in which women achieve some degree of economic self-sufficiency. Trading—traditionally considered a female occupation in Ghana—has become the second major sector for women. It has accounted for more than one-quarter of female employment since 1960. As urban areas have



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grown, more and more women earn their livelihoods from trading and commerce.

The emphasis on the economic independence of women at a fairly early age may have helped perpetuate the idea that a large family is best in Ghana. Women have always been expected to support their children through their own earnings. In other parts of the world, one step in the development process has begun when women begin to work "in their own right." This step is often associated with a decline in fertility. However, the continued employment of Ghanaian women in traditional occupations like agriculture and trading does not represent a change likely to influence fertility.

Further, social changes like the decline of family control and the tendency for young women to establish households away from their parents or parents-in-law, though "modern," may not have reduced the propensity toward high fertility. Ghanaian women still feel the need for large families. Children remain the main source of support for old people because of the lack of health insurance and old age benefits.

WOMEN IN THE FORMAL SECTOR

Despite significant incursions into some modern sectors of the economy, women still lag behind men in certain key areas. Of the professional and technical occupations, it is only as statisticians and university lecturers that women approach even one-fifth of job-holders. In other areas such as engineering, accounting, the law, and the senior civil service, female representation is either minimal or non-existent.



The modern formal sector is occupied mainly by men for several reasons. First, the traditional division of labour between the sexes leads men to jobs away from the home and women to domestic labour both within and outside the home. Second, for those women who do work away from home, the demands of their household tasks may lead to a rate of absenteeism on the job higher than that of men. This causes some employers to complain that women's productivity and efficiency are generally low. Third, under the influence of tradition, girls still tend to go to vocational institutes after completing primary or secondary school. There they are trained as secretaries, typists, nurses, homemakers, dressmakers, or nursery and primary school teachers—jobs that in many ways represent an extension of the family functions expected of women.



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TABLE 1

**STUDENT ENROLMENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF GHANA,
1977/1978-1986/1987**

YEAR	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
1977-1978	3539 (84%)	653 (16%)	4192
1978-1979	3516 (85%)	622 (15%)	4138
1979-1980	3294 (85%)	587 (15%)	3881
1980-1981	3098 (84%)	607 (16%)	3705
1981-1982	2849 (83%)	580 (17%)	3429
1982-1983*	2744 (81%)	640 (19%)	3384
1984-1985	2766 (83%)	586 (17%)	3352
1985-1986	2797 (81%)	665 (19%)	3462
1986-1987	2758 (81%)	658 (19%)	3416

*There was no academic year 1983-1984 as the University was closed.

SOURCE: University of Ghana Basic Statistics, 1986-1987, 1987.

One serious implication of women's exclusion from top professional and technical occupations is that these are the categories that include high-level decisionmaking. Therefore, it could be concluded that in Ghana women exercise a negligible role in making the decisions that strongly affect their lives.

Even though an increasing number of females enter primary schools, the proportion of females who start school is below that of males. Moreover, the female dropout rate is much higher. The decrease in the proportion of female students continues through all educational levels right up to university. (See Table 1)

The reasons are not difficult to discover. Traditional attitudes toward gender roles, still tacitly accepted by parents, friends, and teachers, support the belief that schooling is not as important for females as it is for males. Females are supposed to be mainly concerned with the home. The ideal of motherhood that has been drummed into females means that they usually strive to get married as early as possible. Some females fear that high intellectual accomplishment may hinder their chances for marriage.

**EDUCATION AND
WOMEN'S ROLES**

Whatever the status of their occupations, women now represent about half the total labour force. These statistics emphasise the importance of formal and non-formal education and training of females for employment. If females are to contribute effectively to the workforce needs of the nation, especially with regard to higher-skilled positions, then their schooling and training must be taken seriously.



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Thus the motivation to excel in school is often suppressed by an image of what a prospective husband expects in a wife.

Moreover, since higher-level occupations are primarily the preserve of males, there is a perception that females have no

need of the higher education which would qualify them for such posts. The school curricula also reflect, and thus perpetuate, these perceptions. Schools divide subjects into those suitable for females and those suitable for males, thus forcing an early distinction between male and female aspirations.

Lack of access to formal education and repeated childbearing are part of a mutually reinforcing cycle which helps maintain high fertility and low occupational status in Ghana. It has been recognised around the world that women who have formal schooling beyond the primary level are much more likely to be fully integrated into all the socioeconomic changes which constitute national development. Such women are far more likely to exhibit lower fertility than females who have had only primary education or none at all. (See Table 2)

One way to ensure equal access to education is to introduce a compulsory education law for all children that is truly enforceable in the courts. Of course, such a law would be of little value unless sufficient schools, teachers, books, and other resources are made available for all children of school-going age. Such a law would also help girls to delay childbearing until they are mature enough to assume responsibilities for their children. Post-primary education exposes girls to ideas on family planning, child care, and nutrition which could greatly improve the well-being of their future families. For example, the infant mortality rate is significantly lower for children whose mothers have received post-primary education than it is for children of less educated women. Additionally, educated females will be in a better position to participate in decisions affecting their own children's education.

TABLE 2

FERTILITY BY EDUCATIONAL STATUS OF WOMEN

EDUCATIONAL STATUS	TOTAL FERTILITY*
No Education	6.9
1 to 6 years	6.8
7 or more years	5.3

*Average number of live births to a woman during her lifetime

Source: 1979-1980 Ghana Fertility Survey, First Report, 1981

EDUCATION AND FERTILITY

As females acquire more formal schooling, the tendency is for their fertility to be reduced. Females who stay at school for longer periods tend to marry at older ages and are more likely to make mature and responsible decisions about childbearing. Such women are better qualified for jobs outside the traditional sector and may thus postpone and limit childbearing. Those who drop out of school are likely to marry early, probably before they have acquired adequate knowledge about contraceptive practices. These girls are therefore likely to have higher fertility.

In fact, unplanned pregnancies are a major reason for the high rate at which girls drop out of school. Girls who become pregnant are forced to end their educational careers because it is difficult for schools in most countries, including Ghana, to accommodate them. This means that many females get less schooling and training than males, and thus less remunerative jobs.

To counter this situation, it is important to encourage and support girls' decisions to stay in school. It is also important to include family life education in the school curricula. In addition, contraceptives should be made accessible to all those who require them.

When a girl leaves school prematurely because of truancy, lack of support, or unplanned pregnancy, then part of society's investment in her is wasted.

POLYGYNY

The negative consequences of polygyny on population growth as well as the emancipation of females must be mentioned. Polygynous unions help to sustain traditional patterns of high fertility because wives in



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polygynous households are often tempted to demonstrate their fertility to their husbands. Likewise, the males while on their rounds would like to prove to their partners that their sexual potency is in no way diminished. The wives tend to feel more secure when they have many children with their husbands.

We often have a situation in which one male produces many children with various wives and later acquires younger wives when the older ones pass reproductive age. The consequences of such unions on women and children can be harsh. Most men in polygynous unions do not live with their wives under the same roof; in urban areas this has contributed to an increase in female-headed households.

In such households, children are largely deprived of needed affection, supervision, and discipline from the father. School dropouts at tender ages and juvenile delinquency are often associated with children from such homes. The children—particularly the boys—may also grow up to adopt the same casual attitude about sex and marriage.

CONCLUSION

Experience around the world has shown that one important strategy for reducing population growth is to give women a more equal stake in society by improving their education and status.

It was on this basis that the National Council on Women and Development was established to promote women's participation in national development at all levels. One can say with pride that Ghanaian women have shown ability and expertise equal to their male counterparts when given the chance. For example, in colonial times, Yaa Asantewaa, the queen of the Ashantis, led the Ashanti empire to war against the British colonial masters.

Today, women's participation in the public sector is increasing, even though it is still below expectation. It is clear that women will become far more productive as their talents and capabilities are enhanced.

The 1969 Ghana Policy Document recognised the need to improve the status of women:

"Ways will be sought to encourage and promote productive and gainful employment for women, to increase the proportion of girls entering and completing school and to develop a wide range of non-school roles for women. . . ."

The policy document further states:

" . . . The productive employment for women in the labour force is an important aspect of the effort to make the best use of human resources in the nation. It is also an inevitable trend in a progressive society. . . . Similarly, the broadening of educational opportunities for girls not only increases needed social, vocational, and technical skills, but also enables the nation

to benefit from the inverse relationship between education and fertility."

In Ghana it is generally believed that a large family is best; the effects of this assumption on a young girl's prospects and the quality of life of her future family are often not considered. Education of women is an important way to eliminate the barriers which society places on women and to reduce the rate of population growth. Educated women develop higher aspirations for themselves and their children. Such women will advance their own status in life and contribute even more to Ghana's national development.



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