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Patriarchy at Home: Barriers and Interventions to Women's Empowerment in Household Decision-Making in Northern Ghana

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Abstract

This study examines the systemic barriers impeding women's empowerment and participation in household decision-making in Northern Ghana, situating the analysis within broader historical and structural contexts of patriarchy, socio-cultural norms, economic inequality, and educational disparity. Guided by the Gender and Development (GAD) framework, the research employs a PRISMA-informed literature review of twenty-two peer-reviewed studies and institutional reports. Findings reveal that patriarchy remains a deeply entrenched structure legitimising male dominance across domestic, economic, and institutional domains. Cultural norms reinforce gendered labor divisions and constrain women's decision-making power, while limited education and economic

dependency further undermine their autonomy. Compounding challenges such as early marriage, financial exclusion, and unpaid labor create cyclical marginalization. Despite emerging progress through NGO initiatives, policy reforms, and grassroots advocacy, patriarchal resistance and weak institutional enforcement persist. The study concludes that achieving sustainable gender equity in Northern Ghana requires transformative and intersectional strategies that are deeply rooted in local cultural contexts.

Keywords: *Women's Empowerment, Household Decision-Making, Gender Leadership Gap, Gender Equality, Patriarchy, Northern Ghana.*

Introduction

The empowerment of women in domestic decision-making in Northern Ghana has developed within a deeply entrenched patriarchal and socio-economic hierarchy. Throughout much of the twentieth century, men exercised primary control over productive resources, including land, livestock, and income, and dominated household and economic decision-making (Fortes, 1949; Goody, 1976; Fortes, 2018). Although women contribute significantly to agricultural production and family maintenance, their labour is often undervalued and viewed through the lens of kinship obligations rather than being formally recognised (Goody, 1976; Whitehead, 2022). Colonial and postcolonial governance systems further reinforced these disparities by institutionalizing male authority within legal, customary, and administrative frameworks (Amanor, 2001).

Following independence, women's growing engagement in income-generating activities, such as shea butter processing, petty trading, and agricultural marketing, began to reshape intra-household power relations (Clark, 2010). From the 1980s onward, development interventions, particularly NGO-led initiatives promoting female literacy, microcredit, and agricultural extension, enhanced women's capacity to influence household welfare and resource allocation (Baden, 1997; Al-Hassan & Poulton, 2009). Nevertheless, persistent patriarchal norms, economic dependence, and unequal access to education continue to constrain women's decision-making autonomy.

Recent scholarship identifies household decision-making as a critical yet underexamined dimension of women's empowerment, reflecting and reproducing wider structural gender inequalities (Hanmer & Klugman, 2015; Njuki et al., 2023). The exclusion of women from domestic decision-making is widely viewed as a significant barrier to gender equality and

sustainable development, highlighting the necessity for interventions that tackle both cultural norms and economic constraints (Lecoutere & Wuyts, 2020; Gammage, John & Schaub, 2020; Shankar, Sundar & Smith, 2018). Despite global and national frameworks, such as Sustainable Development Goal 5 and Ghana's Affirmative Action Bill, policy efforts often neglect the domestic sphere where everyday gendered power relations are negotiated (Duflo, 2011).

This study addresses this gap by exploring how patriarchal norms, cultural expectations, and educational attainment intersect to shape women's leadership and decision-making within households in Northern Ghana, positioning the home as a central arena of empowerment and social transformation.

Theoretical Framework

This study is theoretically anchored in the Gender and Development (GAD) paradigm, which offers a critical and relational lens for interrogating the structural dynamics that shape women's empowerment in household decision-making. Moving beyond the limitations of Women in Development (WID) approaches that isolate women's experiences from broader socio-political contexts, GAD conceptualises gender as a system of power relations embedded within institutional, cultural, and economic structures (Moser, 1993; Rathgeber, 1990). Within the context of Northern Ghana, this framework is particularly instructive, as it illuminates how entrenched patriarchal norms systematically regulate access to resources, authority, and decision-making power, thereby constraining women's agency within the domestic sphere.

Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that men retain dominant control over household resources and financial decision-making, reinforcing asymmetrical bargaining positions and limiting women's autonomy (Doss et al., 2018). By foregrounding these relational inequalities, the GAD framework enables a more nuanced evaluation of empowerment, stressing that sustainable change depends on transforming underlying power structures alongside improving resource access (Moser, 1993; Tsikata, 2009). Accordingly, this study applies the GAD perspective to critically examine the intersecting barriers to women's domestic decision-making while also assessing the extent to which existing interventions challenge or reproduce patriarchal relations. To this end, this paper positions household decision-making as a key site for both the

reproduction of gender inequality and the potential realisation of transformative, gender-equitable social change in Northern Ghana.

Methodology

This study employs a literature review as its central methodological framework, integrating specific systematic review protocols to bolster rigour while maintaining a degree of analytical flexibility. A literature review is defined as a systematic, transparent, and replicable process for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing existing scholarship (Fink, 2019). Rather than generating new empirical data, the study critically examines secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and institutional reports (Rowe, 2014). This approach provides a theoretically grounded framework for analyzing the gender leadership gap and women's empowerment in household decision-making in Northern Ghana.

Household leadership in the region is shaped by intersecting patriarchal norms, socio-cultural practices, and resource distribution systems, which constrain women's agency beyond deficits in education or economic capital. The literature review therefore functions as a strategic analytical tool for identifying dominant themes, empirical trends, and persistent gaps in scholarship on gender, leadership, and domestic power relations within this context.

Application of the PRISMA Framework

To enhance methodological rigor, this study employs a modified version of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework. This adaptation preserves the transparency and structure of systematic review principles while providing the flexibility needed to address the thematic and contextual complexities of gendered leadership in Northern Ghana. Core PRISMA steps, including database searching, duplicate removal, and eligibility screening, were implemented to ensure quality and consistency.

The research question was developed using the PICO framework (Population, Interest, Context) as outlined by Lockwood et al. (2015), aligning the study focus with the population (women in northern Ghana), the phenomenon of interest (influences of patriarchy, culture, and education), and the broader context (a patriarchal and evolving socio-economic environment). This framework facilitated a focused yet comprehensive exploration of how patriarchy, cultural norms, and

education intersect to shape women's empowerment in household decision-making.

Data Sources and Search Strategy

Relevant literature was retrieved from multiple scholarly databases, including Google Scholar, Semantic Scholar, and institutional repositories, to ensure breadth and academic robustness. A targeted keyword strategy employing Boolean operators enhanced both the inclusiveness and precision of search results. The operator *and* was used to intersect key themes (e.g., “women’s empowerment *AND* household decision-making”) or broadened the search to include synonymous concepts (e.g., “gender leadership gap *OR* women’s leadership barriers”) and *NOT* excluded unrelated studies (e.g., “household decision-making *NOT* corporate leadership”). This logic-based search process yielded a diverse but thematically coherent set of studies, supporting a multidimensional understanding of women’s empowerment and domestic leadership.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria prioritised peer-reviewed, empirically grounded literature published in English with a primary focus on Northern Ghana. For comparative depth and contextual breadth, the review also incorporated studies from Southern Ghana and Sub-Saharan Africa where relevant. Exclusion criteria eliminated works lacking empirical rigor, those outside the scope of gender and leadership, and non-English publications.

Data Extraction and Thematic Synthesis

Data extraction followed a structured coding framework organised into three overarching thematic categories: 1. Barriers, encompassing patriarchy, including socio-cultural norms, and economic or educational constraints. 2. Gender roles such as addressing leadership, household decision-making authority, and women’s autonomy. 3. Policy interventions including analyzing governmental reforms, NGO initiatives, and community-based strategies promoting women’s empowerment. This structure enabled cross-temporal and cross-disciplinary synthesis, providing a comprehensive view of how cultural, structural, and institutional elements influence women’s domestic leadership and decision-making.

Summary of PRISMA-Informed Process

Although not all procedural steps of a formal systematic review were replicated, the study adhered to PRISMA principles to maintain transparency and minimise selection bias. The process comprised three main stages: First, **Identification**: Literature was retrieved from databases (Google Scholar = 14, Semantic Scholar = 10, institutional reports = 8). Second, **Screening**: Duplicate removal yielded 22 unique articles. Third, **Eligibility**: After detailed screening, 22 articles met inclusion criteria and were retained for analysis. This process is illustrated below (Figure 1). By applying a streamlined PRISMA-informed framework, the study ensured a coherent, transparent, and reproducible methodological process. The integration of thematic synthesis with systematic selection strengthens the findings, ensuring they possess greater credibility, depth, and analytical rigour.

It is imperative to add that the use of a focused dataset of 22 studies is a result of the limited availability of context-specific literature on women's household decision-making in Northern Ghana and the study's PRISMA-informed design, which prioritises depth, relevance, and analytical rigor over breadth. This targeted selection enables a nuanced and contextually grounded synthesis, allowing for deeper engagement with complex, intersecting structural dynamics that broader but less focused reviews overlooked.

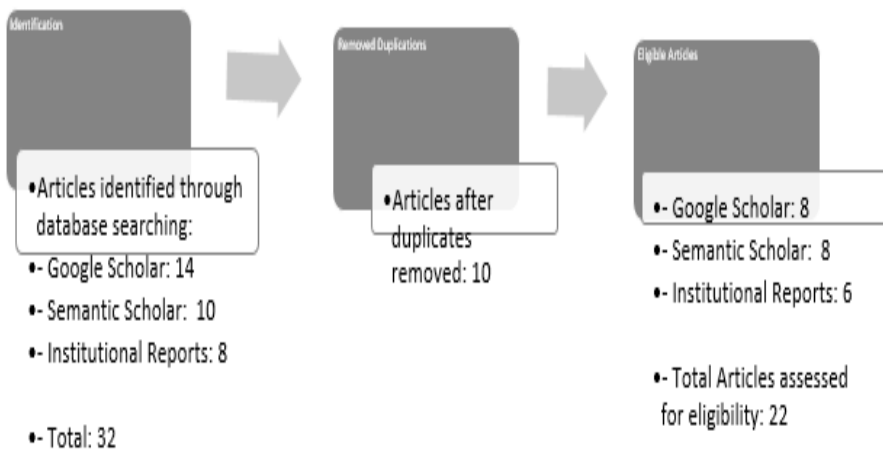


Figure 1.1 - A Diagram Representing Literature Review among Databases Using PRISMA Approaches

Results and Findings

The outcomes in this part include challenges to women's home decision-making in Northern Ghana (Figure 2), gender roles in empowerment and household decision-making (Figure 3), and empowerment solutions (Figure 4). They examine the complex elements affecting Northern Ghanaian women's empowerment in household decision-making. The analysis shows how patriarchal systems, socio-cultural norms, economic restrictions, and educational gaps impact women's agency and authority in domestic and public spaces. Gender roles, rooted in cultural and institutional frameworks, continue to limit women's decision-making power, maintaining gendered hierarchies and dependence.

The results indicate a transformative shift achieved through targeted interventions, including legislative policy efforts, state-sponsored programmes, and strategic initiatives led by NGOs. The findings show that Northern Ghanaian women negotiate, dispute, and modify their decision-making power and autonomy through structural impediments and developing mechanisms.

Barriers to Women’s Household Decision-Making in Northern Ghana

Authors (Year)	Main Themes	Sub-Themes	Key Findings
Adongo et al. (2023)	Patriarchy and Gender Inequality	Male dominance in leadership; Gender stereotyping; Economic barriers	Women remained in subordinate positions as teachers, while policies encouraged men to seek leadership. Patriarchal norms, gender stereotyping, and economic barriers restrict women’s access to leadership and decision-making.
Dako-Gyeke & Owusu (2013)	Socio-Cultural Norms and Gender Roles	Authority in households; Cultural expectations; Economic dependency	Compared to women, men had more authority over household affairs. Deep-rooted socio-cultural norms reinforce gender inequality, limiting women’s access to resources and education.
Gyan (2018)	Patriarchal Power Structures	Community participation; Gender exclusion	Male-dominated power structures entrench the patriarchal system. Women face household burdens limiting their participation in community development.
Nyarkoa & Agbley (2021)	Gendered Aspirations and	Preference for sons; Early	Males are supported to attain higher education... because males will be heads of families.

	Economic Barriers	marriage; Limited education	Patriarchy, early marriage, and financial constraints reduce women's aspirations
Amoah (2014)	Gender Roles in Domestic Labor	Women's role in waste management; Lack of decision-making	Women and children are the key players in domestic solid waste management. Cultural norms assign domestic duties to women, limiting empowerment and decision-making
Alhassan (2022)	Economic Dependence and Political Participation	Access to capital; Educational inequality	Economic dependence, low education, and limited access to capital reduce women's political participation and decision-making power.
Salia, et al (2018)	Microfinance and Empowerment Dynamics	Household conflict; Polygyny; Child labor	Women's success with microfinance destabilizes family power structures. Despite financial gains, microfinance may cause household conflict, child labor, and domestic tension.
Gyan et al. (2021)	Patriarchal Norms and Community Participation	Male control; Time burden; Education barriers	Males having too much control over the process serves as the strongest barrier. Patriarchal norms, heavy household duties, and low education impede participation.
Yussif (2021)	Socio-Economic Barriers to Leadership	Financial constraints; Lack of transport; Limited entrepreneurship	Financial constraints, lack of transport and entrepreneurship skills hinder women's participation and leadership in community groups..
Yokying & Lambrecht (2020)	Landownership and Agency in Agriculture	Gender gap in decision-making; Social norms	Patriarchal norms govern men's and women's behavior on farms. Women's land ownership increases security but does not close gender gaps in decision-making.
Bassit (2018)	Educational Inequality and Empowerment	Financial barriers; Sexual harassment; Sociocultural beliefs	Financial barriers, sexual harassment, and sociocultural beliefs promote women's lesser status. Education and support networks are essential for empowerment.

Figure 2 – Result and Findings on Barriers to Women's Household Decision-Making in Northern Ghana

Patriarchal Structures

The institutionalisation of patriarchy in Northern Ghana limits women's agency in household decision-making. This social system legitimises male

dominance and subordinates women in private and public spheres by portraying men as natural household heads, economic providers, and authority figures and relegating women to submissive roles. According to conflict theory, patriarchy perpetuates gender hierarchies and unequal power relations that exclude women from decision-making (Adongo et al., 2023; Gyan, 2018). The early indoctrination of gender roles serves to normalise male authority and female submissiveness, ensuring that men retain control over household decisions regarding finances, education, and healthcare. These processes compound income, education, and resource inequality, limiting women's autonomy and mobility (Gyan et al., 2021). Development interventions that ignore structural power asymmetries often reinforce patriarchal norms (Porter et al., 2020), highlighting patriarchy's self-perpetuating role in gendered hierarchies across domestic, economic, and institutional domains.

Cultural Norms

Northern Ghanaian socio-cultural norms strengthen patriarchal ideology and marginalise women in home decision-making. These norms normalise women's caring and domestic labour while legitimising men's leadership and decision-making, diminishing women's decision-making legitimacy (Adongo et al., 2023; Dako-Gyeke & Owusu, 2013). Gender stereotypes in proverbs and language normalise female subordination and value male authority, molding home and professional competence and leadership (Dako-Gyeke & Owusu, 2013; Adongo et al., 2023). Boys and girls learn inflexible gender norms that favour male dominance and female obedience from childhood (Gyan et al., 2021; Nyarkoa & Agbley, 2021). These norms undermine women's confidence and agency, and their disproportionate weight of unpaid domestic labour limits their time, mobility, and ability to participate in home and communal decision-making (Gyan, 2018). Thus, sociocultural norms perpetuate gender disparity throughout generations.

Educational Barriers

Northern Ghana's educational gap inhibits women's empowerment and household decision-making. Educational investments favour sons over daughters, reflecting patriarchal beliefs that men will run the economy and women will be dependents (Bassit, 2018; Nyarkoa & Agbley, 2021). These habits hinder women's education and leadership and decision-making skills. These intergenerational cycles of female disempowerment persist

due to the perception of daughters as temporary family members, which leads to inherently unequal resource distribution (Nyarkoa & Agbley, 2021; Bassit, 2018). Early marriage, adolescent pregnancy, and financial difficulty increase female dropout rates, worsening these disparities (Bassit, 2018). Women's high agriculture and waste management engagement rarely leads to labour market leadership or decision-making (Amoah, 2014; Yokying & Lambrecht, 2020). Thus, socio-cultural, economic, and educational barriers limit women's agency.

Economic Constraints

Economic constraints impede northern Ghanaian women's autonomy and decision-making. Lack of financial wealth, property ownership, formal work, and professional training keeps women dependent on male family heads and maintains patriarchy (Adongo et al., 2023; Yussif, 2021). Rural women work in informal, low-paying jobs, increasing their dependence (Dako-Gyeke & Owusu, 2013). Despite women's crucial role in home survival and local economies, institutional barriers hinder female entrepreneurship and leadership (Gyan, 2018). Gendered schooling inequalities and unpaid domestic labour impede women's economic mobility and decision-making (Nyarkoa & Agbley, 2021; Gyan et al., 2021). Women's authority is limited by limited control over productive resources and exclusion from training and institutional help even in female-dominated sectors (Amoah, 2014; Yokying & Lambrecht, 2020). Microfinance and land-access projects aim to empower women economically, but structural disadvantages might promote dependency (Salia et al., 2018; Yussif, 2021). Alhassan (2022) highlights that economic inequality in Northern Ghana is deeply systemic, necessitating empowerment strategies that prioritise women's financial independence and their capacity to make decisions.

Gender Roles for Women's Empowerment and Household Decision-Making in Northern Ghana

Figure 3 – Results and Findings on Gender Roles for Women's Empowerment and Household Decision-Making in Northern Ghana

Authors (Year)	Main Themes	Sub-Themes	Key Findings
Adongo et al. (2023)	Patriarchy and Gender Inequality	Male dominance in leadership; Gender	Women remained in subordinate positions as teachers, while policies encouraged men to seek leadership.

		stereotyping; Economic barriers	Patriarchal norms, gender stereotyping, and economic barriers restrict women's access to leadership and decision-making.
Porter et al. (2020)	Technology and Gender Empowerment	Mobile access; Reinforcement of inequality	Existing inequalities are being re-inscribed. Patriarchal systems and poverty restrict women's empowerment despite mobile access.
Dzokoto & Darkwah (2014)	Autonomy and Decision-Making	Generational differences; Economic independence	Women's autonomy is growing but constrained by traditional norms. Younger women show slightly higher decision-making power than older generations.
Ganle et al. (2015)	Maternal Health and Decision-Making	Permission to seek care; Economic independence	Women require permission from husbands to attend clinics. Economic independence and education improve autonomy in maternal health decisions.

Figure 3 illustrates the specific ways in which gender roles influence the involvement of women in Northern Ghana regarding leadership roles and domestic decision-making. Despite their education and talents, patriarchal norms and socio-cultural expectations bar women from leadership and decision-making (Adongo et al., 2023). Women are socialized to care for the home and boys to lead (Dako-Gyeke & Owusu, 2013; Nyarkoa & Agbley, 2021). Female leadership is marginalised by linguistic, symbolic, and cultural narratives that reinforce male authority (Adongo et al., 2023). Women's community work is often disregarded. According to Amoah (2014), women's sanitation and community work rarely lead to decision-making power, showing a cultural value of female agency. According to Yokying and Lambrecht (2020), women in agriculture rarely lead or own. These studies promote the implementation of leadership training, affirmative action policies, and gender-sensitive curricula as essential tools for dismantling structural barriers and creating inclusive leadership opportunities for women (Adongo et al., 2023; Nyarkoa & Agbley, 2021).

Household Decision-Making Gendered Power Dynamics

Gendered power disparity is evident in-home decision-making. Age, marital status, and socioeconomic level determine women's financial and parenting control (Dzokoto & Darkwah, 2014). In rural areas, poverty and patriarchal norms hinder women's financial autonomy, mobility, and healthcare decisions (Ganle et al., 2015; Porter, 2020). Men's control over

financial resources ensures that women remain dependent, thereby preserving patriarchal dominance within the domestic sphere (Dako-Gyeke & Owusu, 2013). Younger, economically independent women who display “positive defiance” (Ganle et al. 2015, p. 12) have modest but significant autonomy. Power shifts when these women manage reproductive and financial decisions. Rare events highlight the need for systemic, not individual, improvements.

Autonomy and Structure

Cultural, economic, and institutional barriers collectively hinder the autonomy that serves as a core pillar of women's empowerment. Due to limited resources and structural limitations, Porter et al. (2020) believe Northern Ghanaian women's gender equality growth is “depressingly sparse”. Younger generations are improving reproductive and financial decision-making, but traditional norms prevail (Dzokoto & Darkwah, 2014). Ganle et al. (2015) say husbands and mothers-in-law make most maternal healthcare decisions (p. 9).

Economic empowerment and autonomy are linked. Financial control empowers women, especially adolescent girls whose aspirations are restrained by male-dominated household administration (Nyarkoa & Agbley, 2021). Shea butter processing and smock weaving represent vital community-based enterprises that significantly bolster both the economic status and social standing of women. Such activities require systemic improvements for lasting empowerment. In conclusion, Northern Ghana's gender norms limit women's personal and public agency. Despite occasional empowerment among younger, educated, and economically involved women, institutional constraint and gendered exclusion continue. Meaningful transformation requires dismantling gender inequality-sustaining societal, institutional, and economic systems.

Interventions for women's empowerment

Authors (Year)	Main Themes	Sub-Themes	Key Findings
Adatuu & Gyader (2019)	NGO Interventions in Governance	Training and mentorship; Gender rights awareness	NGOs like NORSAAC and CAMFED provided financial and advocacy support. Training, mentorship, and gender rights awareness increased women's participation.

Akurugu et al. (2021)	Sustainable Development and Empowerment	Water access, Agroecology, and Food security	The garden has become our father and our mother. NGO interventions improved food security and reduced environmentally harmful livelihoods.
Akurugu et al. (2023)	NGO Adaptation during COVID-19	Microcredit; Gender sensitisation; Cultural adaptation	Empowerment must start from the mind. NGOs provided relief, microcredit, and gender sensitisation amid weak state support.
Anyidoho & Manuh (2010)	Policy and Donor Influence on Empowerment	Economic growth lens; Rights-based approaches	Donor-led empowerment programs (World Bank, CIDA) link gender equality with economic growth. NGOs like WiLDAF and ActionAid promote rights-based empowerment.
Essel & Essel (2019)	Violence Prevention and Legal Empowerment	Awareness; Advocacy; Legal aid	NGOs like Ark Foundation and WiLDAF use advocacy, training, and legal aid. Community-led interventions enhance violence prevention and awareness.
Fiattor (2024)	Legal and Institutional Reforms	Affirmative action; Education equity	Empowerment initiatives must span legal to socio-economic interventions. Affirmative Action and education equity remain key gaps.
Kipo-Sunyehzi et al. (2024)	International Partnerships and Development	UNICEF collaboration; Poverty alleviation	UNICEF and government collaboration (LEAP programme) support inclusive development and women's empowerment
Torto (2013)	Affirmative Action and Political Empowerment	Representation; NGO advocacy	Affirmative action laws promote representation but face poor enforcement. NGOs like ABANTU and WiLDAF champion gender equality and leadership.

Figure 4 – Results and Findings on Interventions for Women's Empowerment

Enabling Interventions for Women's Empowerment

Interventions aimed at advancing women's empowerment in Northern Ghana reflect a multifaceted landscape shaped by governmental reforms, international development collaborations, and non-governmental organisation (NGO) initiatives. The literature consistently identifies policy reform as the primary mechanism for formalising gender equity across both domestic legal systems and international agreements.

Policy and Governmental Interventions

Ghana's establishment of the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs in 2001 marked a critical step toward institutionalising gender equality within national development frameworks (Adatuu & Gyader, 2019). Aligned with global commitments such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 1, 5, and 10), these reforms aim to advance inclusive governance and poverty reduction (Akurugu et al., 2021). Earlier milestones, including the 1960 Affirmative Action provision and *The Women's Manifesto for Ghana* (2004), further reflect the evolution of gender policy in Ghana (Torto, 2013; Adatuu & Gyader, 2019).

However, the "dual logic of reform" identified by Anyidoho and Manuh (2010) underscores persistent tensions between promoting gender justice and aligning with donor-driven economic priorities, particularly the World Bank's emphasis on empowerment for "shared growth." While gender policy frameworks have created important institutional foundations, their transformative potential remains dependent on political commitment, sustained funding, and effective implementation. Government initiatives, including the National Gender and Children Policy, the Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit (DOVVSU), and Domestic Violence Courts, demonstrate formal commitment to gender-responsive governance (Anyidoho & Manuh, 2010; Essel & Essel, n.d.).

Nonetheless, inadequate resourcing, weak decentralization, and legislative inertia persist. Women's political representation remains limited, illustrated by the 1994 district assembly elections in which only one woman was elected (Adatuu & Gyader, 2019). These structural weaknesses of state institutions tasked with supporting women's empowerment were further exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, which uncovered significant capacity limitations (Akurugu et al., 2023). Continued delays surrounding the Affirmative Action Bill (2003) and the Property Rights of Spouses Bill (2009) further hinder progress (Fiattor, 2024), despite promising initiatives such as LEAP 1000 demonstrating the value of integrated, gender-responsive social protection (Kipo-Sunyezi et al., 2024).

NGO-Led and Community-Based Interventions

NGO-led initiatives have been central to advancing women's empowerment in Northern Ghana, particularly by strengthening political participation, legal awareness, and access to resources. Organisations such as NORSAAC, CAMFED, and ActionAid Ghana have enhanced women's

electoral competitiveness through leadership and financial training, while broader advocacy efforts have promoted women's rights to land, education, and credit (Adatuu & Gyader, 2019; Anyidoho & Manuh, 2010). During the COVID-19 pandemic, NGOs also provided essential relief and support to survivors of gender-based violence despite significant operational challenges (Akurugu et al., 2023).

Legal and feminist organisations, including WiLDAF-Ghana, FIDA-Ghana, ABANTU for Development, and NETRIGHT, have shaped legislation, public awareness, and national gender discourse (Essel & Essel, 19; Torto, 2013). However, the long-term sustainability of these interventions is limited by a reliance on external donor financing, highlighting the necessity for enhanced institutional partnerships with state bodies and the development of enduring community-based capacity.

Economic and Educational Interventions, Cultural Sensitisation and Community Advocacy and Reframing Household Decision-Making

Economic and educational interventions are central to advancing women's empowerment. Microfinance and entrepreneurship programs have improved women's access to capital and autonomy, though safeguards are necessary to reduce intra-household conflict (Salia et al., 2018). Collateral-free loans and community savings groups have proven particularly successful in enhancing the decision-making authority of women (Yussif, 2021; Alhassan, 2022). Educational reforms further address intergenerational disempowerment by tackling barriers such as early marriage, sexual harassment, and financial exclusion while expanding leadership opportunities (Adongo et al., 2023; Bassit, 2018; Fiattor, 2024). Cultural sensitisation initiatives including community dialogues, media campaigns, and engagement with men and traditional leaders have successfully challenged gender norms and promoted shared household decision-making (Adongo et al., 2023; Dako-Gyeke & Owusu, 2013; Akurugu et al., 2023).

Reframing household decision-making as a core site of empowerment generates broader benefits for public leadership, community participation, and sustainable development by redistributing authority and fostering relational models of gender equity (Adongo et al., 2023; Ganle et al., 2015).

Findings

This section synthesises key themes from the literature on women's empowerment and decision-making in Northern Ghana. Across studies, patriarchy emerges as the central structural barrier institutionalising gender inequality, legitimising women's subordination in both private and public spheres while reinforcing male authority in leadership and decision-making (Adongo et al., 2023). Gendered socialisation from childhood assigns assertive and leadership roles to boys and domestic responsibilities to girls, perpetuating intergenerational inequality (Dako-Gyeke & Owusu, 2013; Nyarkoa & Agbley, 2021). Cultural narratives embedded in proverbs and symbolic representations further normalise male dominance and depict women as secondary household members, reinforcing unequal investment in daughters and structural disempowerment (Bassit, 2018; Gyan et al., 2021).

Women's substantial contributions to agriculture, waste management, and local economies remain undervalued and rarely translate into decision-making authority (Amoah, 2014; Yokying & Lambrecht, 2020). Formal institutions mirror these biases, with women underrepresented in leadership despite comparable qualifications. Legislative inertia, exemplified by delays surrounding the Affirmative Action Bill (2003), continues to constrain institutional progress (Akurugu et al., 2023; Fiattor, 2024). Limited access to land, capital, and formal employment reinforces economic dependency, while microfinance initiatives may intensify household tensions if unaccompanied by structural safeguards (Salia et al., 2018). The mere symbolic ownership of land, absent the power to make decisions, is insufficient to generate any substantive sense of empowerment (Yokying & Lambrecht, 2020).

Education functions ambivalently as both a pathway to empowerment and a site of constraint. Girls' schooling is disrupted by early marriage, poverty, and social expectations, while educated women face a "double burden" of domestic and professional responsibilities (Bassit, 2018; Adongo et al., 2023; Salia et al., 2018). Consequently, education alone does not ensure leadership or autonomy without broader social transformation.

Within households, decision-making remains predominantly male-controlled, particularly regarding finances, health, and education. Women's influence is mediated by age, marital status, and income, with economic independence occasionally enabling limited acts of autonomy (Dzokoto & Darkwah, 2014; Ganle et al., 2015). State interventions signal formal commitment to gender equity but remain constrained by underfunding and

implementation gaps (Adatuu & Gyader, 2019; Akurugu et al., 2021). Conversely, NGOs have demonstrated greater adaptability in promoting women's political participation, legal rights, and access to resources, though sustainability remains threatened by donor dependence (Adatuu & Gyader, 2019; Anyidoho & Manuh, 2010; Torto, 2013). Overall, the literature underscores that transformative empowerment requires restructuring cultural norms, institutions, and economic systems through sustained, multi-level engagement.

Theoretical and Empirical Linkages of Women's Decision-Making in Northern Ghana

This diagram below in this study situates women's limited participation in household decision-making within a web of interlocking patriarchal, cultural, educational, and economic barriers. Using the Gender and Development (GAD) framework, it demonstrates that gender inequality in Northern Ghana is relational and historically entrenched, legitimised by patriarchal authority as an analytical lens and socio-cultural norms that assign women to caregiving roles while privileging male decision-making power. Despite gradual progress driven by education, microfinance, and NGO advocacy, these reforms remain constrained by weak enforcement, funding gaps, and enduring gender stereotypes.

The findings conclude that authentic empowerment must transcend economic inclusion to address structural and ideological constraints through intersectional, decolonial, and context-sensitive strategies. Household-level empowerment serves as the cornerstone for societal change, establishing a direct link between domestic autonomy, active community leadership, and the achievement of sustainable development. Policies that integrate gender equity with culturally embedded community practices, sustained education reform, and institutional collaboration hold the greatest promise for advancing genuine gender inclusivity at the household level in Northern Ghana.

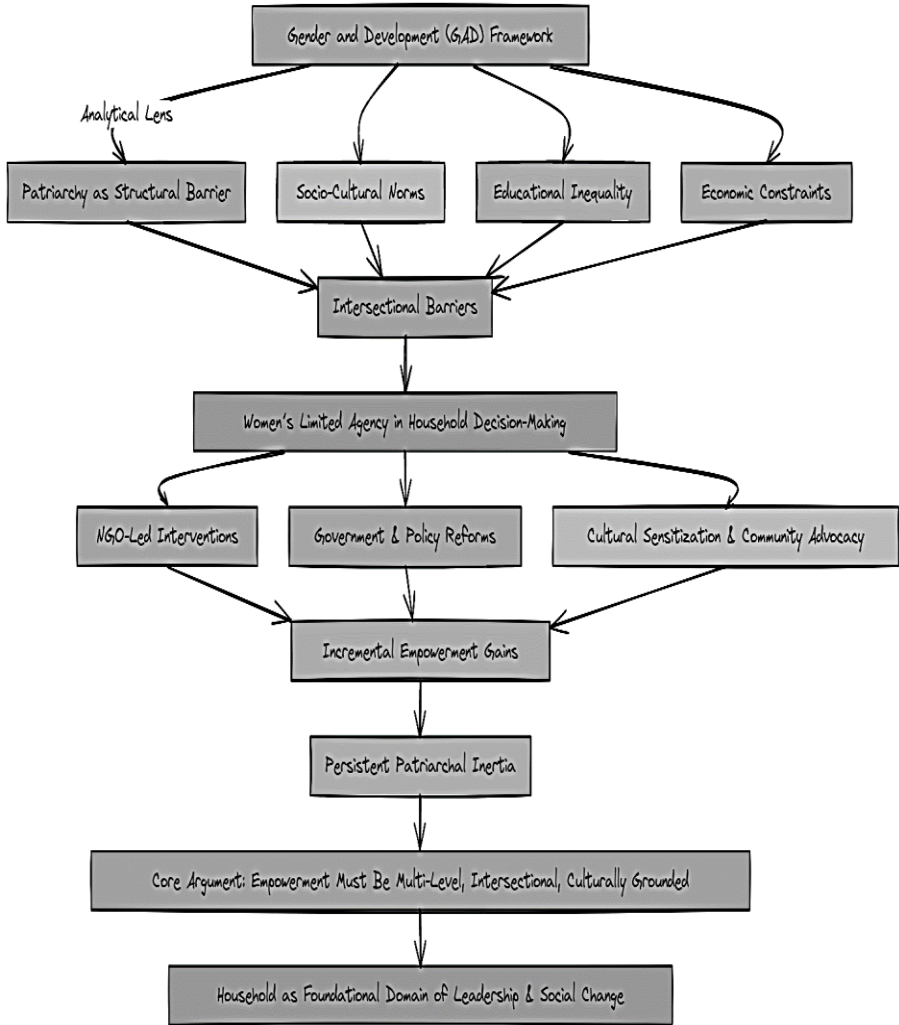


Figure 5 - Theoretical and Empirical Linkages of Women's Decision-Making in Northern Ghana

Discussion

The findings of this review underscore that women's empowerment and participation in household decision-making in Northern Ghana are shaped by interlocking systems of patriarchy, socio-cultural norms, economic inequalities, and institutional barriers. This intersectional web demonstrates that the marginalisation of women cannot be adequately

understood or tackled if it is divorced from its historical, political, and cultural contexts. Consistent with feminist and postcolonial analyses, gender inequality operates through overlapping economic, cultural, and structural dimensions, each reinforcing the other (Mohanty, 2003; Crenshaw, 1991).

Rethinking Empowerment through Intersectionality

Intersectional frameworks situate women's experiences within broader systems of domination, recognising that gender intersects with class, ethnicity, and geography to shape access to resources and decision-making (Crenshaw, 1991). In Northern Ghana, the subordination of women is exacerbated by the combined pressures of poverty, restricted access to education, and rural marginalisation. Literature highlights "positive defiance" among younger and economically independent women, revealing that empowerment is simultaneously personal, collective, and structural (Ganle et al., 2015). However, these acts of resistance remain constrained by systemic inequities that sustain male dominance in households and institutions.

Postcolonial Feminist Perspectives and Structural Dependence

Postcolonial feminist analyses highlight the enduring legacies of colonial rule in shaping gender hierarchies in Ghana. Colonial and postcolonial policies privileged male-dominated economic and political spaces while devaluing women's labor in subsistence agriculture and caregiving (Amadiume, 1997; Oyěwùmí, 1997). Patriarchal hierarchies have become institutionalised within governance and household structures (Adongo et al., 2023; Dako-Gyeke & Owusu, 2013). Feminist decolonial frameworks champion the concept of "reclaiming agency" by prioritising women's local knowledge, traditional leadership practices, and relational approaches to decision-making (Chilisa, 2012; Smith, 2021). Integrating Indigenous governance models, such as collective decision-making and matrilineal inheritance, offers culturally grounded pathways for transformation.

Household Empowerment as the Foundation of Structural Change

Household decision-making is a foundational domain of empowerment. The domestic sphere serves as a microcosm of wider societal hierarchies, and augmenting women's agency within the home creates positive ripple

effects that enhance community engagement, leadership, and the well-being of future generations (Ife, 2016; Cornwall, 2016). Programmes promoting shared decision-making, equitable labor division, and financial inclusion can disrupt dependency and redistribute authority (Salia et al., 2018; Yussif, 2021). Leadership mentorship that bridges household experiences with public governance further connects private and public empowerment.

Toward Culturally Grounded and Sustainable Interventions

Effective interventions are participatory, multi-scalar, and contextually embedded. NGO-led programmes engaging local leaders, women's associations, and traditional authorities demonstrate greater success than externally imposed models. However, sustainability is often compromised by a heavy dependence on donor financing and the presence of bureaucratic inertia within government-led policy initiatives (Akurugu et al., 2023; Fiattor, 2024). Developmental social work perspectives emphasize integrating economic inclusion, social participation, and cultural recognition (Midgley, 2014; Ife, 2016). Programmes such as shea butter cooperatives, literacy initiatives, and women's agricultural networks exemplify relational, community-based empowerment aligned with SDGs 1, 5, and 10, though institutional support, long-term funding, and policy accountability are crucial.

Decolonizing the Discourse of Empowerment

Finally, the discourse of "empowerment" itself warrants critical reflection. Scholars such as Cornwall (2016) and Kabeer (1999) warn that the language of empowerment risks being co-opted by neoliberal frameworks that prioritise economic productivity over social justice. In the Ghanaian context, empowerment must be reframed not as an individualistic pursuit of economic success but as a collective process of redistribution, recognition, and relational care. Decolonizing empowerment entails privileging Indigenous epistemologies, women's lived experiences, and community-defined indicators of well-being rather than externally imposed metrics of progress (Smith, 2021).

In summary, the discussion underscores that gender inequality in Northern Ghana is systemic, intersectional, and historically situated. Addressing it requires simultaneous interventions across cultural, institutional, and economic dimensions. Empowerment must be reframed

as a relational, context-sensitive, and decolonial process rooted in community knowledge and supported by structural reform. A multidimensional and inclusive approach is essential for evolving women's influence in both household and public spheres, ensuring genuine equality and a sustainable transformation of society.

Practical Implications

This review highlights critical implications for policymakers, practitioners, development partners, and community leaders aiming to promote gender equity in Northern Ghana. Patriarchy is deeply embedded in cultural narratives, social institutions, and everyday practices, requiring interventions that prioritise long-term normative transformation rather than short-term behavioral change. Programmes must go beyond awareness campaigns to adopt community-driven strategies that challenge gendered assumptions about leadership and caregiving, involving sustained engagement with traditional leaders, educators, and religious figures (Adongo et al., 2023; Dako-Gyeke & Owusu, 2013).

Gender-Responsive Educational Reform

Educational policies must address barriers such as early marriage, financial exclusion, and sexual harassment. Targeted interventions including scholarships, mentorship, and safe learning spaces support retention, leadership development, and civic participation (Bassit, 2018; Adongo et al., 2023). Reforms should also mitigate the “double burden” of unpaid domestic labor through parental leave, childcare support, and equitable community arrangements, enabling sustained participation in public and professional life.

Economic Empowerment

Microfinance and entrepreneurship programmes must secure women's decision-making power alongside resource access. Structural reforms, joint land titling, female representation on land boards, and financial literacy programmes promote collective ownership, reduce dependency, and challenge patriarchal property regimes (Salia et al., 2018; Yokying & Lambrecht, 2020).

Institutionalising NGO and Civil Society Contributions

While non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have played a crucial role in promoting women's rights and empowerment, it is essential that their contributions are integrated into formal national development frameworks. Building durable partnerships between state agencies and civil society organisations can ensure the continuity and scalability of effective interventions. Embedding successful NGO models—such as leadership training, legal literacy, and livelihood programmes—into public service delivery can enhance sustainability and mitigate vulnerability to donor funding fluctuations.

Integrated and Multi-Level Strategies

Overall, achieving gender equity and inclusive decision-making in Northern Ghana requires coordinated, multi-level, and gender-conscious strategies that align policy, education, economy, and culture. This involves integrating gender analysis into all levels of planning and implementation, ensuring accountability mechanisms for gender commitments, and fostering community ownership of change processes. Systems advancing equality and shared leadership can only succeed if structural barriers are removed through consistent, inclusive, and intersectional strategies that empower women at all levels.

Conclusion

This study offers a multidimensional analysis of the systemic barriers that constrain women's leadership and decision-making authority within households in Northern Ghana. Drawing from a PRISMA-informed review of 22 empirical studies, the analysis reveals how patriarchy, sociocultural norms, economic dependency, and educational disparities intersect to limit women's agency in domestic and public domains. Together, these structures create self-perpetuating systems that reinforce gender hierarchies and restrict women's participation in leadership and governance.

While state-led policy measures and NGO-driven programmes have made some gains, the resulting revolutionary transformation remains both limited in scope and permanent in nature. Traditional patriarchal and institutional impediments prevent symbolic improvements from

empowering. It requires contextualized, long-term, politically prioritised, culturally based, and well-funded programs.

The data show that household decision-making empowers people. Gender-inclusive development entails enhancing women's home autonomy and reimagining the family as a place of leadership and equity, according to the research. Thus, policies and efforts must address structural inequalities and promote local gender reform ownership with community leaders, educators, and women's organisations.

Therefore, this review advances existing scholarship by positioning the household as a central and underexplored site of women's empowerment, rather than a secondary outcome of economic or educational change. It further offers a fresh perspective on how cultural, patriarchal, educational, and economic elements function as a cohesive system, alongside a proposal for a decolonial and intersectional model that bridges the gap between domestic agency and systemic transformation transformation.

Future research should evaluate how intersectional and decolonial feminist theories affect community-based women's empowerment. Longitudinal and mixed-methods research can illuminate cultural change and institutional reform. Sustainable gender equity in Northern Ghana and other global South contexts requires economic inclusion, education, and social recognition within relational and communal empowerment.

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