

Participation Without a Voice: The Paradox of Epistemic Inclusion and Structural Exclusion in Women's Community Governance in Northern Ghana

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ABSTRACT : This study examines women's involvement, lived experiences, and opportunities in community governance in Northern Ghana, focusing on how socio-cultural norms and resource constraints shape participation and influence. Grounded in feminist standpoint theory and community development theory, it adopts a phenomenological qualitative design with an interpretative phenomenological analysis to generate in-depth insights into women's subjective experiences of governance engagement. Data were collected through focus group discussions from 23 purposively selected women engaged in varying forms of community governance participation. Findings show that women's participation is increasingly visible and embedded in everyday community life through engagement in meetings, associations, religious organizations, and informal leadership spaces. However, participation is largely experienced as having a voice rather than exercising formal authority, revealing a persistent gap between civic engagement and substantive decision-making power. Women's lived experiences position them as critical knowledge holders, particularly in relation to household welfare, sanitation, health, and education, yet these contributions remain underutilized. While participation fosters empowerment, confidence, and collective agency, entrenched patriarchal norms, limited financial resources, and identity-based exclusions continue to constrain women's participation. The study further highlights a paradox of inclusion, where increased visibility does not necessarily translate into meaningful influence. Integrating feminist standpoint theory and community development theory, it demonstrates both the transformative potential of women's participation and the structural barriers that limit it. The study concludes that achieving inclusive governance in Northern Ghana requires moving beyond tokenism toward transformative participation that institutionalizes women's experiential knowledge, redistributes decision-making power, and addresses socio-cultural and economic constraints for sustainable community development.

KEYWORDS: *Women's participation; Community governance; Northern Ghana; Feminist Standpoint Theory; Community development.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Women's participation in community governance has emerged as a central pillar of contemporary debates on sustainability and social equity. Despite expanding global commitments to inclusion, local decision-making structures continue to systematically marginalize women. This exclusion is rooted in entrenched patriarchal norms, unequal access to education, and constrained economic opportunities, which collectively limit women's capacity to influence governance processes (Owiso & Sefah, 2017; Frimpong et al., 2022). In response, international development agendas, most notably Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality, underscore the necessity of women's meaningful engagement in governance. Empirical evidence suggests that such participation enhances policy responsiveness, strengthens social cohesion, and fosters community resilience, particularly in times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Conduah & Ofoe, 2025; Frimpong et al., 2022). Nevertheless, across many low- and middle-income countries, women remain markedly underrepresented in local governance institutions.

Across Africa, gender-inclusive governance frameworks reveal a paradox of normative progress alongside persistent structural barriers. Instruments such as the African Women's Rights Protocol formally guarantee women's rights to political and communal participation; however, their implementation is frequently undermined by socio-cultural constraints, institutional inertia, and systemic inequalities (Owiso & Sefah, 2017).

In Ghana, policy initiatives including the Affirmative Action Bill signal growing political will toward gender parity but have yet to translate into substantive gains in women's representation. Structural disparities and enduring societal norms continue to circumscribe women's access to leadership and decision-making spaces (Apusigah & Adatuu, 2017; Namooog & Agyekum, 2024).

In Northern Ghana, intersecting cultural, economic, and institutional constraints shape women's engagement in community governance, making these challenges particularly pronounced. Patriarchal authority systems, customary land tenure arrangements, and socio-economic inequalities collectively restrict women's access to resources and limit their influence within governance structures (Ba-an et al., 2022; Dugasseh et al., 2021). While emerging interventions such as non-formal education initiatives and hybrid governance approaches that integrate indigenous knowledge with formal institutions have demonstrated potential to enhance women's agency and participation, their impacts remain uneven and insufficiently understood (Piennaah et al., 2024; Kosoe et al., 2025).

Notwithstanding these advances, a critical gap persists in the literature. Existing studies have largely focused on structural barriers and participation outcomes, offering limited insight into the lived experiences of women within community governance systems. In particular, there is a paucity of research examining how women actively navigate, negotiate, and potentially transform the socio-cultural and institutional constraints they encounter. Equally underexplored are community-level perceptions of the legitimacy and value of women's participation, an omission that constrains the development of contextually grounded and socially acceptable policy interventions. Without integrating women's experiential realities with broader communal perspectives, efforts toward gender inclusion risk remaining symbolic rather than transformative.

This study addresses this gap by providing an empirically grounded analysis of women's participation in community governance in Northern Ghana, spanning informal engagements and formal decision-making arenas. Its novelty lies in bridging women's lived experiences with community perceptions to illuminate the dynamic processes through which inclusion is contested, negotiated, and realized. By advancing a more complex understanding of gendered governance at the community level, the study contributes to ongoing debates on sustainable community development, highlighting the transformative potential of women's agency in fostering inclusive, participatory, and resilient societies in Ghana and across the Global South.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly work underscores the complex relationship between structural constraints and women's agency in governance processes. Evidence indicates that women actively navigate restrictive environments through informal networks, community associations, and collective action strategies, thereby exercising agency within limiting contexts (Tagoe & Abakah, 2015; Abakah, 2018). Interventions such as non-formal education, leadership training, and participation in Community Resource Management Areas (CREMAs) have been found to enhance women's political literacy, confidence, and access to governance platforms (Namooog & Agyekum, 2024; Dugasseh et al., 2021). These findings highlight the transformative potential of targeted empowerment initiatives (Kassa, 2015; Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). However, the literature provides limited understanding of how these gains are sustained over time or how they translate into meaningful influence within formal governance institutions, particularly in contexts shaped by entrenched socio-cultural norms (Kabeer, 1999; Cornwall, 2016).

Researchers increasingly acknowledge the role of community perceptions in shaping women's governance participation, yet they have not sufficiently theorized or empirically examined it. Research shows that in some places, women's roles in managing natural resources, resolving conflicts, and improving community welfare are becoming more widely recognized (Awinpoka, 2021; Adjei et al. 2022). Furthermore, inclusive participation has been linked to improved distributive equity, participatory governance, and community cohesion (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Fung, 2006).

Nevertheless, governance spaces in many Northern Ghanaian communities continue to be perceived as male-dominated, reflecting deeply embedded gender norms and social expectations (Cornwall, 2016; Tseer et al., 2024). Existing research has yet to sufficiently explore how these perceptions are constructed, reinforced, or contested, or how they interact with institutional constraints to shape women's legitimacy and authority in governance processes (Coffey et al., 2020; Gaventa, 2004).

The literature reveals a need for more integrated and context-sensitive analyses that capture the complexity of governance systems and lived experiences. While women often operate within both customary and statutory governance structures, most studies examine these systems in isolation, thereby overlooking how women navigate and negotiate these overlapping institutional spaces in practice (Dugasseh et al., 2021; Ribot & Peluso, 2003). In addition, there is limited research that combines women's lived experiences with broader community perspectives to provide a holistic understanding of participation in local governance (Akurugu et al., 2023; Abakah, 2018).

As mentioned earlier, in addressing these limitations, this study builds on existing scholarship by examining women's understanding, engagement, and influence in community governance in Northern Ghana, while incorporating community perceptions to generate a more comprehensive and contextually grounded analysis (UNDP, 2022; World Bank, 2016). To this end, this current study contributes to ongoing debates on gender, power, and inclusive governance and advances global commitments to gender equality and sustainable development.

Theoretical Groundings

This study employs an integrated theoretical framework that combines Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) and Community Development Theory (CDT) to critically analyze women's participation in community governance. FST foregrounds the relationship between knowledge and power, positing that women's lived experiences within unequal social structures generate situated forms of knowledge that challenge dominant, male-centered governance perspectives (Van Allen, 1985; Harding, 2004).

In the context of Northern Ghana, this perspective enables a shift from viewing participation as mere inclusion to examining how women negotiate, reinterpret, and contest governance systems shaped by patriarchal norms and customary authority (Akurugu et al., 2023; Dugasseh, 2021). Complementing this, CDT situates participation within broader processes of collective action and development, emphasizing that meaningful engagement is central to achieving equitable and sustainable outcomes (Chambers, 1997; Pstross, 2014).

Empirical evidence from community-based governance systems such as CREMAs demonstrates that women's active involvement enhances livelihood resilience, environmental sustainability, and social cohesion (Pienaaah et al., 2024; Kosoe et al., 2025; Dugasseh, 2021). Integrating FST and CDT thus enables a multi-scalar analysis that links women's lived experiences to development outcomes while exposing the persistent structural constraints that limit their influence. This combined framework provides a critical lens for understanding both the transformative potential of women's participation and the institutional barriers that continue to shape governance processes in Northern Ghana.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a phenomenological approach within an exploratory qualitative research design to examine women's lived experiences and interpretations of the factors shaping their participation in community governance processes. Phenomenology, rooted in van Manen's (2016) human science tradition, excels at capturing how individuals derive meaning from their daily social realities. Consistent with the qualitative research principles advanced by Creswell and Creswell (2017), the design emphasizes depth, contextual sensitivity, and the centrality of participants' subjective perspectives. This approach enables a nuanced exploration of the socio-cultural, economic, and relational dynamics that influence women's engagement in community governance.

Rather than focusing on quantifiable measures of participation, the study privileges an interpretive understanding of how women perceive, negotiate, and enact their roles within community decision-making spaces. This orientation is especially relevant in Northern Ghana, where governance systems are deeply embedded in patriarchal norms, religious expectations, and customary authority structures. Such conditions not only shape women's access to leadership positions but also influence the strategies through which they exercise agency and navigate participation within complex social hierarchies.

Data were generated through four focus group discussions from the demographic survey, providing both depth and contextual grounding. The survey, administered to 23 participants, captured key socioeconomic characteristics, including age, education, marital status, religion, ethnicity, and leadership roles, thereby offering a descriptive framework to support interpretation of the qualitative data. Participants for the focus groups were selected through purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of information-rich cases with direct experience of community governance (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The diversity of participants, particularly in terms of their levels of engagement in leadership and decision-making, enabled the emergence of varied perspectives. In line with qualitative methodological standards, data collection was guided by the principle of thematic saturation, continuing until no new conceptual insights emerged (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Patton, 2015).

Data collection was guided by a semi-structured discussion protocol that explored three key dimensions: women's understanding and participation in governance, community perceptions of women's legitimacy and agency, and the opportunities and constraints shaping women's community engagement. Discussions were conducted in accessible and contextually appropriate settings, such as community centers and office spaces, to foster open dialogue. All sessions were held in English, with the support of a trained research assistant proficient in local languages to ensure clarity and cultural sensitivity.

Ethical standards were rigorously upheld throughout the study. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the research, their rights, and the voluntary nature of participation, including the option to withdraw at any stage. Written informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, and confidentiality was maintained by removing identifying details, with findings reported using generalized descriptions of participants, contexts, and thematic patterns.

Table I: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N = 23)

Variable	Category	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
Age	18–35 years	19	82.7
	36–45 years	3	13
	46–60 years	1	4.3
	61+ years	0	0
Education	Tertiary	19	82.6
	Senior High School	2	8.7
	Junior High School	1	4.3
	No Formal Education	1	4.3
Marital Status	Married	15	65.2
	Single/Not Married	8	34.8
	Widowed	0	0
	Divorced	0	0
Religion	Islam	12	52.2
	Christianity	11	47.8
	Traditionalist	0	0
	Other	0	0
Ethnic Group	Dagomba	10	43.7
	Akan	2	8.7
	Bassare	2	8.7
	Bimoba	3	13
	Builsa	2	8.7
	Dagati	1	4.3
	Ewe	1	4.3
	Frafra	1	4.3
	Gonja	1	4.3
Positions Held	Local Governance Roles	7	30.5
	Student Governance Roles	3	13
	Community Roles	13	56.5

Data Analysis

Data analysis was guided by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which focuses on how individuals make sense of their lived experiences (Smith et al, 1999, as cited in Sossou, 2011). This approach was appropriate given the study's emphasis on women's subjective interpretations of participation in community governance within specific socio-cultural contexts. Consistent with qualitative principles of depth and contextual sensitivity (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), the analysis adopted an idiographic stance, beginning with detailed examination of individual accounts before identifying patterns across cases (Smith et al., 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Focus group discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure data accuracy and richness (Saldaña, 2021). The researchers engaged in repeated reading of transcripts to achieve immersion and interpretive familiarity (Patton, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2016), followed by iterative cycles of coding and interpretation. Exploratory notes were developed into emergent codes, which were then clustered into categories and refined into higher-order themes through constant comparison.

Attention was given to both convergence and divergence in participants' accounts, particularly regarding women's engagement, constraints, and opportunities in governance. Themes were defined by their recurrence, interpretive depth, and coherence across cases (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Smith et al, 1999). The process remained iterative and reflexive, ensuring that individual experiences were preserved while generating broader insights, with direct quotations used to anchor interpretations in participants' lived realities.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure methodological rigor, this study applied the criteria of trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, as outlined by Denzin and Lincoln (2011) and Creswell and Creswell (2017). Credibility was strengthened through sustained engagement with the data, iterative analysis, and the use of verbatim quotations to preserve participants' voices, while focus group discussions enabled

interactive validation of shared perspectives. Transferability was supported through rich, contextualized descriptions of the study setting and participants, facilitating assessment of relevance to comparable contexts.

Dependability was ensured through a systematic and transparent research process, with all stages of data collection and analysis clearly documented and supported by an audit trail. Confirmability was reinforced through reflexive practices, including the use of analytic memos and reflexive notes to minimize researcher bias and maintain fidelity to the data. Additionally, the use of verbatim transcripts and the involvement of a research assistant with local linguistic and cultural expertise enhanced the accuracy and neutrality of interpretations. Collectively, these strategies ensure that the study's findings are credible, robust, and firmly grounded in participants lived experiences.

Research Findings

The study identified three main themes: (1) It involves women having a voice in issues that affect their daily lives (2) Women experience community challenges differently from men and (3) Cultural norms and limited resources still hold us back.

It involves women having a voice in issues that affect their daily lives

In relation to the first theme, the findings from the focus group discussions indicate that women's participation in community governance is primarily constructed as "having a voice" in matters that directly affect everyday life, particularly in areas such as education, health, sanitation, and community development. Participants demonstrated a clear, practice-oriented understanding of participation, consistently describing it in terms of observable engagement, attending meetings, contributing to discussions, and engaging in decision-making within local committees, associations, and advocacy groups. In some cases, this extended to formal roles within unit committees and local assemblies. As one participant articulated:

"Women's participation at the local level means women actively taking part in community meetings, decision-making processes, leadership roles, and local governance structures. It involves women having a voice in issues that affect their daily lives, including education, health, sanitation, and community development." (Participant A).

This framing suggests that participation is experienced as a lived and embedded practice rather than an abstract political ideal.

However, women's participation was not confined to formal governance structures but extended significantly into socially embedded spaces. Participants frequently identified women's groups, religious organisations, local development committees, and voting processes as key sites of engagement, functioning as accessible entry points in contexts where formal political inclusion remains limited. As one respondent explained:

"Women participate mainly through voting, attending community meetings, joining women's groups, religious organisations, and local development committees... and influencing decisions behind the scenes." (Participant B).

These accounts highlight the importance of informal roles, such as mobilisation, mediation, and the organisation of social support which, while critical to community functioning, remain largely unrecognised within formal governance systems. This reveals a dual structure of participation, where women are highly active in community life yet positioned at the margins of institutional authority.

Despite the visibility of women's engagement, the findings point to an uneven translation of participation into influence. Participants consistently noted that while women play central roles as voters, organisers, and community actors, their representation in formal leadership positions, such as assembly members, councillors, or committee heads remains limited. This gap underscores a disjuncture between presence and power. As one participant observed:

"Women's political participation at the local level is visible but still limited in power and influence in many cases, women are the backbone of local civic life." (Participant C).

This characterization reflects a broader pattern in which women sustain community governance processes without occupying positions of decision-making authority.

The analysis further identifies intersecting structural and socio-cultural constraints that shape these outcomes. Cultural norms, gendered expectations, financial limitations, and domestic responsibilities were consistently cited as barriers that restrict both the extent and confidence of women's participation. These constraints not only limit access to leadership roles but also influence how women's contributions are valued within community governance spaces. As one participant noted:

"Women's participation is gradually increasing, but cultural norms and a lack of confidence often limit it." (Participant D).

As a result, the findings reveal a complex dynamic in which women's participation in community governance in Northern Ghana is both expanding and constrained, characterised by increasing visibility and engagement, yet limited in its capacity to translate into substantive decision-making power.

Women experience community challenges differently from men

In line with the second theme for this study, the findings from the focus group discussions reveal a strong consensus that women experience community challenges in ways that are distinct from men, and that this difference underpins the substantive value of their participation in community governance. Participants consistently emphasised that women lived experiences, particularly in relation to family welfare, maternal health, sanitation, education, and social development, generate critical insights that are often overlooked in male-dominated decision-making spaces. As one participant noted:

"Women need to be part of local decision-making because women experience community challenges differently and often understand issues related to family welfare, education, and social development more closely." (Participant E).

This framing positions women's participation not simply as descriptive representation but as an epistemic contribution that enhances the relevance and responsiveness of governance processes.

Participants further highlighted that women's involvement contributes to more inclusive and equitable outcomes by broadening the range of perspectives considered in decision-making. Women were widely perceived as bringing context-specific knowledge that enables governance processes to better reflect diverse community needs. As one respondent explained:

"Women bring a unique perspective and experience to the table, leading to more inclusive policies, better representation, and solutions that address diverse community needs." (Participant F).

These accounts suggest that women's inclusion strengthens governance quality by expanding both the scope and sensitivity of policy deliberations.

The findings from this theme also underscore the practical consequences of women's exclusion from governance. Participants observed that decisions made without women's input frequently fail to address essential social needs, particularly those related to sanitation, child welfare, and household wellbeing. Illustratively, one participant noted:

"It is important because women and, to an extent, their children suffer overall from decisions that turn out to be wrong in the community. For example, if there is an opportunity to choose between getting toilet facilities and markets, women should be allowed to express their opinions, for they would not be psychologically okay to engage in open defecation." (Participant G).

Such examples highlight how gendered experiences shape development priorities and demonstrate the risks of policy misalignment when women's perspectives are absent. More broadly, participants emphasised that exclusion can reproduce inequalities by disproportionately disadvantaging women and children.

Beyond these material implications, women's participation was also associated with broader social benefits, including enhanced social cohesion, mediation, and collective problem-solving. Participants described women as key actors in fostering dialogue and balance within community processes, thereby contributing to transparency and fairness. As one respondent observed:

"Women's inclusion promotes fairness, transparency, and more balanced development outcomes." (Participant H).

Consequently, these findings demonstrate that integrating women's distinct experiences into governance is not only a matter of equity but a critical condition for achieving inclusive, context-responsive, and sustainable community development.

Cultural norms and limited resources still hold us back

The findings from the third theme, indicate that women's participation in community governance is increasingly visible and socially acknowledged, yet still shaped by persistent cultural and structural constraints. Participants emphasized that *"women are getting more involved, but cultural norms and limited resources can still hold them back,"* reflecting a clear tension between progress and limitation. Participation is broadly understood as engagement in community meetings, associations, and development discussions addressing everyday issues such as education, health, sanitation, and social welfare. As one respondent noted, participation involves...

"having a voice in issues that affect their daily lives, including education, health, sanitation, and community development," (Participant I) while another described it as *"the foundation of inclusive democracy where women engage as community leaders, activists, and representatives." (Participant J).*

Overall, participation is experienced mainly as civic engagement within everyday community life rather than formal authority.

Beyond visibility, participation is also described as a pathway for empowerment and personal transformation. Women reported that involvement in community-based organisations, youth groups, and advocacy platforms strengthens confidence, leadership capacity, and collective agency. One participant stated that through engagement in community decision-making she had “*redeemed her confidence*,” highlighting its transformative effect on self-efficacy and leadership development. Others described contributing to community dialogues and mobilising residents on issues such as women’s rights, education, and health, showing how women actively shape local development agendas. These accounts suggest participation is not symbolic but a developmental process that builds skills and strengthens belonging within governance spaces.

That said, significant barriers continue to limit women’s full participation in decision-making spaces. Cultural expectations, limited financial resources, and weak community support were repeatedly identified as constraints. One respondent noted that:

“Women are getting more involved, but cultural norms and limited resources can still hold them back,” while another added that *“cultural norms and lack of confidence often limit it.”* (Participant K).

These patterns show how entrenched gender norms restrict women’s movement into leadership roles, confining many to informal or supportive participation despite growing involvement at the grassroots level.

In addition, social identity and perceptions of belonging further shape access to participation spaces. Some respondents described exclusion linked not only to gender but also to outsider status, limiting their engagement in community affairs. One participant explained that despite long-term residence, she was still viewed as an outsider and faced resistance when attempting to participate. Overall, the findings show that women’s participation is shaped by intersecting forces of gender norms, resource constraints, and social belonging, with women increasingly central to civic life yet still constrained in translating participation into meaningful influence.

IV. DISCUSSION OF THE STUDY

This study examined women’s involvement, experiences, and opportunities in community governance in Northern Ghana, with particular attention to how participation is understood, enacted, and constrained within everyday governance spaces. The findings both confirm and extend existing scholarship on gendered governance by demonstrating that women’s participation is largely experienced as “having a voice” in everyday community issues rather than exercising formal decision-making authority, reflecting patterns of informal, embedded participation in the Global South (Cornwall, 2008; Gaventa, 2004). This distinction between presence and influence supports critiques that participatory spaces often expand visibility without redistributing power, thereby producing inclusion without substantive authority (Agarwal, 2001).

From a theoretical perspective, Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) offers a critical lens for interpreting these dynamics by foregrounding how women’s lived experiences generate situated knowledge that challenges dominant governance priorities (Harding, 2004; Van Allen, 1985). In Northern Ghana, women’s emphasis on caregiving, sanitation, health, and household wellbeing illustrates how experiential knowledge shapes more contextually grounded governance concerns, consistent with evidence that women’s participation often shifts priorities toward social welfare and basic services (Agarwal, 2001; Beall, 2001). The finding that women experience community challenges differently from men further reinforces this epistemic contribution, as their priorities around sanitation, maternal health, and child welfare reflect the differentiated impacts of policy decisions. This aligns with empirical studies showing that women’s inclusion improves the equity and responsiveness of public goods provision (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Razavi, 2012), extending these insights to micro-level community governance contexts where decisions directly affect everyday survival and wellbeing.

Community Development Theory (CDT) further situates these findings within broader processes of participatory development and collective action, where local knowledge and grassroots engagement are central to sustainable outcomes (Chambers, 1997; Pstross, 2014). In this study, women’s participation in community groups, informal leadership, and mobilisation activities reflects not only instrumental involvement but also transformative outcomes, including increased confidence, agency, and leadership capacity. This supports Kabeer’s (1999) conceptualisation of empowerment as the expansion of meaningful choice and agency in contexts of prior constraint.

Despite these gains, the findings reveal persistent structural and socio-cultural barriers that limit women’s transition from informal participation to formal authority. Patriarchal norms, economic constraints, and gendered expectations continue to restrict access to leadership roles, consistent with broader literature on gendered exclusion in Sub-Saharan Africa where customary and formal governance systems reinforce male dominance (Doss, 2001; Tsikata & Yaro, 2014). Ribot and Peluso’s (2003) theory of access further clarifies how participation and influence are mediated by unequal power relations embedded in social identity, resources, and institutional structures.

Importantly, the study highlights social belonging as an additional dimension shaping participation, as some women experienced exclusion linked not only to gender but also to perceptions of outsider status. This

finding extends intersectionality theory, which emphasises how overlapping identities shape differentiated experiences of inclusion and exclusion (Crenshaw, 2013), and aligns with Cleaver's (2005) argument that participation is embedded in complex social relations rather than purely institutional arrangements. As a result, the findings reveal a persistent paradox of participation: women are increasingly visible in community governance spaces, yet their influence remains constrained by structural, cultural, and relational barriers, producing what may be described as "participation without proportional power" (Cornwall, 2008; Agarwal, 2001).

The integration of FST and CDT provides a comprehensive framework for understanding this tension by linking women's epistemic contributions to broader development processes while exposing the institutional conditions that limit their transformative potential. As such, although women in Northern Ghana are central to everyday community governance, their lived experiences and contributions are not fully translated into formal decision-making authority, underscoring the need for structural and cultural reforms to advance inclusive and sustainable community governance.

Implications for Policy and Community Development

The findings indicate that advancing women's participation in community governance requires moving beyond symbolic inclusion toward genuine redistribution of decision-making power, as increased presence alone does not ensure meaningful influence within institutional structures (Agarwal, 2001; Cornwall, 2008; Gaventa, 2004). A key implication is the need to recognise and institutionalise women's experiential knowledge in development planning, given its proven contribution to more effective and context-relevant outcomes in health, sanitation, and social welfare (Chambers, 1997; Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Razavi, 2012). This necessitates structured mechanisms that systematically integrate women's perspectives into governance processes rather than relying on informal or intermittent inclusion.

The study further highlights the importance of addressing persistent structural and socio-cultural constraints, including unequal access to economic resources, restrictive gender norms, and the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work, all of which limit women's agency in governance (Doss, 2001; Kabeer, 1999). Responding to these barriers requires integrated strategies that combine economic empowerment with sustained efforts to transform gender norms and expand resource access.

In addition, strengthening linkages between informal and formal governance systems is essential to ensure that women's contributions in community-based spaces are effectively translated into formal decision-making arenas (Cleaver, 2005; Ribot, 2003). To this end, the study calls for an intersectional and multidimensional approach that integrates power redistribution, institutional reform, and socio-cultural transformation to promote inclusive and sustainable community development.

V. CONCLUSION

This study examined the involvement, lived experiences, and opportunities of women in community governance in Northern Ghana, with a focus on how socio-cultural norms, institutional arrangements, and resource constraints shape their participation. Using a phenomenological qualitative design with an interpretative phenomenological analysis, it provided an in-depth understanding of how women perceive their roles, navigate exclusionary structures, and contribute to community governance and development processes.

The findings show that women's participation is increasingly visible and embedded in community life through engagement in meetings, associations, religious groups, and informal leadership spaces. However, this participation is largely experienced as "having a voice" rather than holding formal authority, meaning that women's contributions remain significant but are often positioned at the margins of formal decision-making structures. This reveals a persistent gap between civic participation and actual governance influence.

Overall, the study concludes that women lived experiences represent a vital but underutilised source of governance knowledge, particularly in relation to household welfare, health, sanitation, and education. While their participation is expanding and fostering empowerment, entrenched cultural norms, patriarchal structures, limited resources, and identity-based exclusions continue to constrain their transition into formal leadership roles. The integration of feminist standpoint theory and community development theory demonstrates that meaningful gender-inclusive governance requires moving beyond symbolic inclusion toward transformative participation that recognises women's authority, integrates their experiential knowledge, and addresses structural inequalities to achieve sustainable community development.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its methodological strengths and rich qualitative insights, this study has few limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. The researchers acknowledged that, the small, purposively selected sample of 23 women limits generalizability, particularly to more marginalized women not involved in governance structures. Focus group discussions may have influenced openness due to social desirability and

group dynamics, and the exclusive focus on women restricts triangulation with other key stakeholders, limiting a fuller understanding of governance processes. Nonetheless, the study's strength lies in its in-depth qualitative design and interpretative phenomenological analysis, which provide rich, context-sensitive insights grounded in women lived experience.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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