



Civic education and women's political participation



In brief

- Women face significant barriers to participation and leadership in Ghanaian politics due to social norms. A lack of direct representation reduces women's influence on community decisions and is more generally thought to hold back local economic development.
- In order to tackle this issue, Ghana's National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE) implemented a civic education campaign to encourage women to become active in grassroots politics, organising assemblies with community leaders called "durbars".
- This project investigated the impact of the NCCE campaign using a randomised evaluation method to determine whether the durbars changed both women's attitude to and participation in politics.
- The researchers found that the durbars failed to change rates of women's participation or change community members' attitudes about the appropriateness of women's participation. Neither men nor women in communities where durbars were held were more likely to have participated in local politics.
- The researchers suggest that, if used, future durbars should have simple and consistently-implemented messages. However, alternative methods of civic education may instead be more effective.

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Introduction

Women face significant barriers to participation and leadership in politics and government in many countries, including Ghana. When women are underrepresented, their influence on community decisions is limited, and they are less likely to have access to resources available to the politically active and well-connected. Recent research has also suggested that the exclusion of women from local decision-making positions can hold back local economic development.

These barriers include social norms that politics is a “man’s game” and that men, rather than women, should take on leadership roles. Public forums that aim to challenge these norms may be an effective way to lower barriers to women’s political participation. In the months leading up to Ghana’s December 2016 elections, the National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE) implemented a civic education campaign to encourage women to become active in grassroots politics and to address social norms against women’s participation. Assemblies with community leaders called *durbars* were held around these themes in 22 rural communities in the Eastern and Central Regions.

In partnership with the NCCE and Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA-Ghana), IGC researchers from the University of Michigan assessed the impact of the *durbars* through a randomised evaluation. The results of the trial suggest that the campaign did not achieve either of its goals. Women in the communities where the *durbars* were held did not participate in grassroots politics at significantly higher rates. Meanwhile, the *durbars* did not produce significant changes in community attitudes about women’s participation for either men or women. This lack of effects may be attributable to inconsistencies in the delivery of the *durbars*, community members’ misunderstandings about the *durbars*’ message, and low attendance.

Future programmes to encourage women’s political participation at the grassroots level may benefit from different civic education strategies.

Context

In Ghana, women are often underrepresented in local political party organisations, as well as in district assemblies. Researchers found a large gender gap in political participation in the communities surveyed for this study. Male respondents were 14 percentage points more likely to be political party members than female respondents (59% vs. 45%). There were also clear social norms against women in politics: 48% of the men and 37% of the women surveyed preferred that only men hold local leadership positions instead of having no preference about the gender of their leaders or preferring women leaders.

Survey data collected for the study suggests that these social norms against women's participation are important predictors of women's participation and that women in households holding more conservative gender attitudes participate in grassroots politics at lower rates.

In an effort to address these barriers to women's participation, the National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE) implemented a civic education campaign in the Eastern and Central Regions in the months before the December 2016 elections. The campaign consisted of durbars (community meetings) emphasising participation in local party organisations as a way for women to immediately become more involved in grassroots politics. The NCCE hoped that the communal nature of the durbar—a large proportion of the community would be exposed to the same messages in a shared setting, with the public endorsement of the community's traditional leaders, assembly member, and political party leaders—would show women that others in the community would support their greater participation and reduce common beliefs that women's political participation is socially inappropriate.

Evaluation

Researchers studied the NCCE's campaign using a randomised evaluation, the gold-standard social scientific method for programme evaluation. In total, 22 communities were randomly assigned to receive durbars, while 22 similar communities were randomly assigned to a comparison group. As a result of the random assignment of durbars, the durbar communities and comparison communities were similar in terms of political participation and norms prior to the durbars being held.

The programme was developed in consultation between IGC researchers from the University of Michigan, the NCCE Eastern and Central Region Directors, and six NCCE District Officers. The durbars were modeled on similar civic education interventions that are widely used to attempt to affect social change in the developing world and directly replicated many elements common to the NCCE's usual programming. Only one event was held in each community, in keeping with the NCCE's standard procedures in other civic education campaigns.

The durbars included three central elements, each of which specifically emphasised joining a political party as a way to be heard in community political affairs:

- First, the NCCE District Officer in each district delivered a keynote speech that emphasised the importance of including women in community decisions, described examples of local women who have successfully participated in public life, acknowledged and argued against common criticisms women face for becoming politically active, and encouraged women to become more involved during the election.

- This was followed by a drama presentation by local secondary school drama troupes. In the drama, a woman successfully overcomes the skepticism of male community members, including that of her own husband, to join a political party and make a positive impact in her community through a community clean-up exercise.
- Finally, local leaders from each political party—chairmen and women’s organisers—gave speeches encouraging women to become active members of their parties. The goal of the speeches was to connect durbar attendees to immediate political participation opportunities and to provide them with female role models already active in politics.

A two-wave household survey tracked changes in attitudes and women’s participation over time. The initial survey was conducted in October 2016 with a random sample of women and a close male relative in the same household from each community. The durbars were then held in late October. A subsequent survey followed up with the same respondents in February 2017. In total, nearly 2,000 individuals were interviewed in each survey wave across the 44 communities. In addition, researchers collected data on the events and conducted a separate two-wave panel survey of polling station-level political party leaders in each of the 44 communities.

Results

Overall, the durbars failed to change rates of women’s participation or change community members’ attitudes about the appropriateness of women’s participation. Researchers found that neither men nor women in communities where durbars were held were more likely to have participated in local politics. Meanwhile, the durbars also failed to have a statistically significant effect on the attitudes of either men or women toward women’s political participation. These results suggest that the durbars were unsuccessful at achieving the project’s main goals.

On the other hand, the study found no evidence that the durbars sparked a backlash against women’s participation. In other settings, some initiatives aimed at increasing the local representation and participation of women have engendered backlash from men and had negative effects, but this does not appear to have been the case here.

Understanding the lack of impact

There are several reasons why the durbars may not have been effective. Most importantly, the planned programme was inconsistently implemented. In many communities, local NCCE officials did not fully implement the planned durbar activities. Moreover, in most communities, the full slate of local party leaders did not speak, particularly the female party leaders meant to serve as role models for local women. When they did speak, one quarter of the party leaders spoke off-topic and did not invite women to participate in their party branches even though they had

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been explicitly invited to speak at the durbar in order to do so. Local party leaders appear to have been unwilling to participate as planned in communities that were electorally competitive or where community members held particularly conservative attitudes about women's participation at baseline. In these communities, it may have seemed as too dangerous for local party leaders to publicly espouse messages in favour of women's empowerment, for fear of sparking an electoral backlash.

Partly as a result of the inconsistent implementation, some attendees misunderstood the main message of the durbars. In end line surveys, many responses indicated that they thought the durbars were about peaceful elections (33%) or voting procedures (42%), while only 18% noted women's participation. Moreover, 15% of self-reported attendees thought the durbar's main message was about sanitation, perhaps as a result of the drama presentation including a community clean-up exercise.

Conclusion & policy lessons

The findings suggest that community durbars may not be an effective way to change social norms and behaviours around controversial social issues. This is especially the case in contexts where local organisations whose cooperation is needed for the intervention to be successful may not want to participate because of the risks of being associated with a controversial social message.

Going forward, this research suggests that if durbars will still be used, they should have simple and consistently-implemented messages. The multiple elements of these durbars were designed to repeat and reinforce the same message. Nevertheless, attendees were confused about the main message of the durbar. It may also be necessary to have multiple durbars in a community over a much more sustained period of time.

Alternative methods of civic education may instead be more effective. Stronger interventions could include those in which: the messages can be more tightly controlled, rather than risk being implemented differently in each community at the discretion of local actors; messages can be delivered over a longer period of time with a much wider reach, as is possible via the mass media; and messages are more subtle, and thus less likely to provoke backlash from local actors.