

The discursive construction of solidarity by Ghanaian female parliamentarians

Kwabena Sarfo Sarfo-Kantankah, Richmond Sadick Ngula and Mark Nartey

Abstract

As research on discourses surrounding women has largely focused attention on power asymmetries, gender stereotypes, bias, (in)equality, (dis)empowerment, marginalization, gender polarization and sexism, there is limited work on the emancipatory efforts of women. To address this lacuna, the current study utilizes feminist critical discourse analysis to examine how Ghanaian female members of parliament (MPs) construct solidarity. The paper finds that, first, Ghanaian female MPs construct solidarity by positioning themselves as agents and the voice of (Ghanaian) women by using the inclusive-*we* and its variant form, *our/us*. Second, the MPs engage in solidarity formation for (Ghanaian) women empowerment by championing the cause of women and calling for female empowerment and the recognition of women's rights. Third, the MPs demonstrate solidarity through felicitations intended to highlight the achievements of (Ghanaian) women. Finally, the MPs enact solidarity by resisting discourses that discriminate against (Ghanaian) women. This paper highlights the need for marginalized voices to be centred in CDA research and contributes to the burgeoning scholarship on reparative critical practices.

Keywords: gender, solidarity, female members of parliament, parliamentary debates, feminist critical discourse analysis

Introduction

Research on gender and language continues to receive ample attention in political discourse analysis, media and communication studies, and gender studies. Some scholars have argued that the language difference between men and women gives an indication of their worldviews or how they approach their social worlds (Newman et al. 2008). Generally, the scholarship on gender and language has focused attention on dominance, difference, discursive, and deficit perspectives (cf. Tannen 1990; Cameron 2006; Coates 2016). This literature has shed light on men and women's use of metaphor in politics (Ahrens 2009; Semino 2021), the language of advocacy and political leadership of males and females (Nartey 2021; Homoláč and Mrázková 2021), the discursive strategies employed by male and female politicians (Nartey and Ernanda 2020; Hafner and Sun 2021), and the communication of crisis by male and female leaders (Jaworska 2021; Jones 2021), among others. The existing research has also illustrated how language contributes to gender stereotypes, bias, (in)equality, (dis)empowerment, marginalization, gender polarization, and sexism (Anderson et al. 2011; Sarfo-Kantankah 2021; Diabah and Agyepong 2022).

While the previous studies have illuminated our understanding of language and gender and related issues in different sociocultural contexts, there are still pertinent issues that need to be addressed.

For instance, there is little research on positive linguistic mechanisms as several studies have focused attention on exposing and resisting power asymmetries, especially in discourses surrounding women (cf. Menegatti and Rubin 2017). Given the concentration on discourses of repression and dominance as far as women are concerned, there is a dearth of research on their agency, especially how they articulate solidarity for group empowerment and sculpt a positive identity for themselves. We argue that such research from the point of view of female leaders from the Global South is useful in highlighting emancipatory discourses, the construction of resistance by marginalized groups, and the role of language in pursuing social justice advocacy. The present paper addresses the aforementioned gap by examining how the linguistic choices of Ghanaian female members of parliament (MPs) portray them as agents of solidarity.

Although gender-related language can be found in various quotidian text and talk as well as in many institutional contexts, we maintain that parliament, especially the Ghanaian parliament which has very low female representation, offers a key discursive site for the expression of solidarity since parliament is a deliberative institution. For instance, on every International Women's Day celebration, parliament debates issues affecting women. Such debates offer one of the most significant one-stop contexts for the provision of textual data on the use of language by women politicians and serve as a vehicle for studying their worldviews on matters of social practice and social change (Sarfo-Kantankah 2021, 2022). In investigating the construction of solidarity by Ghanaian female MPs, we contend that it is necessary to foreground non-dominant voices, especially Black voices, as part of efforts to (re)shape attitudes towards and worldviews on marginalized groups. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: the next section presents an overview of research on solidarity. Section three discusses feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) as the theoretical framework and highlights its intersectional dimensions that are relevant for this study. The fourth section discusses the data and analytical procedures. Section five presents the analysis and discussion and the final section concludes the paper by highlighting our key arguments and the implications of the study.

Research on solidarity

Generally, solidarity is perceived as unity or agreement of feeling or action typically among individuals with a common interest. It is an inclination to collective concern and action (Honohan 2008); it constitutes a form of fraternity that offers people an opportunity to defend their shared

interests (Gould 2007). Solidarity is also a shared consciousness, experience, history, or identity (Scholtz 2008). Shelby (2012) distinguishes between two types of solidarity: robust solidarity which compels people to act and expressional solidarity which provides a motivation for action but is not necessarily binding. Wallaschek (2020) also identifies seven types of solidarity, namely political solidarity, social solidarity, cultural solidarity, legal solidarity, economic solidarity, monetary solidarity, and misuse of solidarity.

Solidarity research can be divided into three main strands (cf. Wallaschek 2020). The first strand conceptualizes solidarity from a macro perspective and hence considers solidarity as a redistributive mechanism within institutional structures. The second strand takes a micro-behavioural perspective and considers solidarity as attitude. That is, it centres on individual behaviour and attitudes toward non-dominant social groups such as women, (im)migrants, and ethnic and religious minorities. The third strand views solidarity on the meso-level and examines its discursive construction. It is this third approach that is adopted in this paper.

The meso-discursive approach to solidarity underscores communicative practices, discursive strategies, and meaning-making processes. It considers the interactions between socio-political actors in public to be situated between individual attitudes and state structures. The discursive construction of solidarity extends framing paradigms and thus highlights how certain messages can be accentuated or attenuated to highlight communicative power, express agency, and formulate a certain type of public discourse (Wallaschek 2020). In other words, the discursive construction of solidarity suggests the framing and interpretation of issues by socio-political actors. Hence, actors can use the term 'solidarity' to strategically argue for a certain position or to demand opposition. From a discursive standpoint, solidarity is associated with issues like legitimation, representation, stance, and responsibility and it suggests the nature of the relationship between text creators and their addressees (Alharbi 2018; Alharbi and Rucker 2023). Discursive solidarity can be performed by various lexico-syntactic and semantico-pragmatic resources that signal ideological position, power relation, types of identity, and forms of argumentation (Kampf 2016). It is an essential aspect of the language of politics because it can be exploited for socio-political participation, group mobilization, and social cohesion, and it lends credence to the role of language as an empowering and inspiring resource.

Previous research has examined the construction of solidarity in international relations (Alharbi and Rucker 2023), migration crisis (Wallaschek 2020), media discourse (Chen 2011), and policy-making processes and public debates (Wonka 2016). They have identified discursive practices of solidarity such as assimilation, appraisal, endorsement, storytelling, and representation and positioning among others. However, these studies do not investigate the articulation of solidarity by the members of non-dominant groups since they focused on institutions like the European Union, the media, and national bodies of specific countries. That is, they do not examine the interrelationship between solidarity and the voice and agency of non-dominant groups, which is the approach the current study adopts. By taking this approach, the present paper centres marginalized voices and demonstrates the importance of research on the discourse produced by non-dominant groups in their quest to extricate themselves from repressive social structures. Moreover, given that most of the existing research can be found in Western contexts, the present study builds on the scholarship on discursive solidarity by focusing on a setting underexplored in the literature.

Framework

This paper employs feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA), an approach that draws on critical feminism and critical discourse analysis to examine “the complex, subtle and sometimes not so subtle ways in which frequently taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged in different contexts and communities” (Lazar 2007, 142). It focuses on the broader feminist political project of female empowerment and social justice while acknowledging the differences in the manifestation of sexist attitudes in different societies. Consequently, FCDA maintains that feminist political action must be “inflected by the specificity of cultural, historical and institutional frameworks, and contextualized in terms of women’s complexly constructed social identities” (Lazar 2007, 149). FCDA is not simply the utilization of existing CDA frameworks to examine gender (issues) since FCDA it is informed by insights in feminist critical theory and is shaped by what Bell (1999) terms a feminist political imagination. Lazar outlines five main principles of FCDA as theory and praxis: (1) feminist analytical activism, (2) gender as ideological structure and practice, (3) complexity of gender and power relations, (4) discourse in the (de)construction of gender, and (5) critical reflexivity as praxis. FCDA offers a useful perspective for analyzing how Ghanaian female MPs enact solidarity given its intersectional approach and social justice orientation that confronts

assumptions in discourses that reinforce gendered social practices of inequality and injustice. As Lazar (2007, 141) explains, FCDA's intersectional dimension emphasises how social factors like "sexuality, ethnicity, age, (dis)ability, social class and position, and geographical location", as well as other ideological systems, such as patriarchy, interact to exclude and discriminate against women in the workings of society. In this paper, the approach helps us to focus on intersectional discrimination against women (e.g., gender, social class, and religion in our dataset) and how the solidarized voice of Ghanaian female MPs represents an important tool for them to project inclusivity, equality and the elimination of gender discrimination.

Data and method of analysis

The data for this study comprise parliamentary debates retrieved from the Hansards of the Ghanaian parliament (the Hansards are available here <https://www.parliament.gh>). As we were interested in the language of female MPs, we focused on deliberations and contributions made by all female MPs as part of discussions on women issues during the International Women's Day (IWD) celebrations. On 8th March every year, the world celebrates the IWD to honour and recognise the socio-politico-economic achievements and contributions of women to the development of humanity. Therefore, on every IWD celebration, the Ghanaian parliament raises key issues of women for deliberation, emphasizing a call to action for accelerating gender equality and parity. Our view is that since IWD is about women, solidarity among the female MPs is likely to be expressed during this celebration. We collected the 2015, 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021 IWD debates from the Ghanaian parliamentary Hansards and extracted all statements and contributions that were made by the female MPs. We selected these years as they were the only available IWD debates in the Hansards. The data amounted to about 28,000 words, that is, the total number of words that formed the female MPs' statements and contributions. From the First to the Eighth Parliaments of Ghana, that is, 1993-2025, the percentage representation of women has ranged between 6% and 14.5%, with men being between 85% and 93%, making women highly underrepresented (Sarfo-Kantankah, 2021). The data we considered covered the Sixth, Seventh and Eighth Parliaments, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Percentage representation of women in parliament 2013-2021

Parliament	Year	No. of MPs	Males (%)	Females (%)
Sixth parliament	2013-2017	275	245 (89.1)	30 (10.9)
Seventh parliament	2017-2021	275	239 (86.9)	36 (13.1)
Eighth parliament	2021-2025	275	235 (85.5)	40 (14.5)

The Hansards showed that eight female MPs contributed to the debate in 2015, seven contributed in 2018, ten in 2019, four in 2020 and nine in 2021. These contributions were the ones we used for the analysis.

We adopted an interpretive content analytical approach, that is, “*a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use [sic]*” (Krippendorff, 2004, 18). The approach enabled us to identify themes, linguistic resources and discursive strategies in the dataset that shed light on the construction of solidarity by Ghanaian female MPs. Our theme identification followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006, 87) six-step procedure, namely:

1. Familiarizing ourselves with the data: we read and re-read the data and noted down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes while conducting analysis: we systematically coded features of the data that related to the construction of solidarity and collated data that were relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes: we collated the codes into themes and gathered data relevant to each theme.
4. Reviewing themes: we reviewed the coded data under each category for consistency.
5. Defining and naming the themes: we defined and named each category in relation to their essence.
6. Producing the report: we produced a scholarly report with illustrative examples.

Each of the three researchers identified the themes and we held discussions to decide on the final categories. Informed by Lazar’s (2007) feminist critical discourse analysis, we interpreted the themes with recourse to the context of the debates and the broader sociocultural, political, and historical context of Ghana. We furthermore explained how the themes could be perceived

by the Ghanaian audience as far as women's rights and female empowerment in the country were concerned.

Analysis and discussion

The analysis revealed four themes that highlight how Ghanaian female MPs discursively construct solidarity: (i) the “we” in us: agency and voice as solidarity, (ii) solidarity formation for (Ghanaian) women empowerment, (iii) expressing solidarity through felicitations, and (iv) resisting discriminatory discourse against women. We discuss these themes in turn.

The “we” in us: agency and voice as solidarity

The analysis reveals that to show solidarity, Ghanaian female MPs position themselves as agents and the voice of women. One mechanism for achieving this is the use of the first-person pronoun *we* as demonstrated in examples (1) and (2).

(1): March 2015/Col.1479-1482

- (a) ... Mr Speaker, this percentage shows that even before the votes, **our** hope of achieving at least 30 per cent women representation in local governance level has been dashed again. But fighters as women are, **we** shall not give up!
- (b) ... Mr Speaker, **we** call for affirmative action, where 40 per cent of the Parliamentary seats would be contested by females only.
- (c) ... Mr Speaker, I will appeal to the media to drop sarcasm or ridicule in their reportage on sexual offenses against women. I appeal that women's issues should be discussed with passion and respect. **We** are life givers and **we** demand respect.

In 1(a), *our* in “our hope of achieving at least 30 percent...” and *we* in “But fighters as women are, **we** shall not give up!” indicate that the MP speaks for all Ghanaian women. She thus positions herself as an agent and a voice for all Ghanaian women. Similarly, in 1(b) and 1(c): *we* in “we call for affirmative action” and “*We* are life givers and *we* demand respect” includes all Ghanaian women. By presenting herself as the representative of Ghanaian women, the MP does not only solidarize with Ghanaian women, but also ascribes agency to them. That is, all Ghanaian women can be said to be making certain demands through the voice of the MP. When the plural pronouns are analysed in conjunction with predicates such as “call for affirmative action”, “shall not give up”, and “demand respect”, a strong sense of agency can be inferred from the statements. This

suggests that the MP presents Ghanaian women (including herself) as instigators of positive change and transformation through her enactment of solidarity. Hence, we assert that it is possible that Ghanaian women who hear these assertions will agree with the MP and be inspired by her message. As Kampf (2016) notes, solidarity can be performed by communicating involvement and concern in a way that maintains, affirms, and (re-)establishes a good relationship. The pronouns in the examples above enable the communication of such involvement and help the female MPs to identify with the grievances and demands of Ghanaian women.

(2): March 2015/Col.1486-1487

... **We** have made a lot of progress as women, but **we** have a lot more challenges that **we** face. Therefore, I believe I am right in saying that, **we** have a very long way to go, especially after 20 years of the Beijing Platform for action. Mr Speaker, 20 years ago, a lot of key areas were highlighted. Unfortunately, 20 years on, **we** still have not been able to get to where **we** would have wished to get to as women

Mr Speaker, we all know that the women of this world, specifically the women of Africa, and coming home, the women of Ghana are the people who make our economy strong. I say this because, without *our* women most economies would collapse. **We** are the people who own Micro-small-scale enterprises. **We** are the people who are farmers. **We** are farmers in our countries, especially in Africa. **We** are traders – the market women, the hairdressers, the dressmakers, the people who sell little goods on tables. **We** pay all the taxes and the tolls that resource our district assemblies and our economies.

In example (2), the MP uses the pronoun *we* to inclusively speak for all women. *We* in “We have made a lot of progress as women” makes a cataphoric reference to “women”. Using *we*, she submits herself as part of the progress women have made as well as the challenges they face. It is instructive to note how the MP shifts between the use of *I* (“I believe I am right in saying that...”; “I say this because...”) and *we* (“**We** have made a lot of progress as women, but **we** have a lot more challenges that **we** face”; **we** have a very long way to go”, etc.) to indicate when she speaks as an individual but on behalf of all women. The MP constructs encompassment and partibility (cf. Rumsey 2000) using the expression *women of Ghana* and *our economy* (“the women of Ghana are the people who make our economy strong”). While *women in Ghana* indicates that women are a subset of Ghana, *our* in “our economy” refers to an economy that belongs to all Ghanaians, a collectivisation (Kemmers 2017). Positioning herself as an agent and a voice of women, the MP uses the inclusive *we* to express the voice of women: **We** are the people who own Micro-small-scale enterprises; **We** are the people who are farmers; **We** are traders ... **We** pay all the taxes and

the tolls ... Inclusive pronouns can be used to show solidarity in a way that implies a relationship based on similarity or even sameness and hence devoid of power (Fajr 2019). Hence, even though the MP has more power than most Ghanaian women, her use of *we* helps her to ingratiate herself with the masses and to identify with “ordinary” Ghanaian women, including farmers, traders, hairdressers, dressmakers, and market women. The inclusive use of *we* enables the MP to reinforce her identity as a Ghanaian woman who is affected by the gender imbalance in Ghanaian society. She does not only empathize with the women and express their sentiments as an “outsider” with a higher social standing but as one of them. Such a posture can be interpreted as a form of positive self-presentation that suggests that the MP is not only advocating for or on behalf of Ghanaian women but advocating with them. We submit that this posture can have a positive effect on Ghanaian women as they are likely to relate with the MP’s message. It is also instructive to note that the occupations mentioned by the MP are typically associated with people with low social status in Ghana. This indicates how gender and social class combine to put Ghanaian women at the periphery of society. We therefore argue that by highlighting the low status of Ghanaian women even though they “pay all the taxes and the tolls that resource our district assemblies and our economies”, the MP implies the need for a holistic approach in addressing gender inequality. As Lazar (2014) observes, gender intersects with other systems of power to disenfranchise women, and this makes it necessary to acknowledge the diverse and multiple identities of women while pursuing the broader feminist political project of emancipation and social justice for women.

Personal pronouns such as *I, we, us, our, they* allow speakers to construct relationships between themselves, addressees, and third parties (Sarfo-Kantankah 2019), formulate agency (Rumsey 2000), and establish solidarity (Kuo 2002). Hence, their use in the examples above is strategic and serves the purpose of voicing collective agency and solidarity. By positioning themselves as agents and the voice of (Ghanaian) women in their construction of solidarity, the MPs underscore the important role of language in the (de)construction of gender. That is, they show how “language and other forms of semiosis contribute to the reproduction and maintenance of the social order, and also in the sense of resisting and transforming that order” (Lazar 2007, 150). Consequently, they use their communication in parliament to carve a positive identity for women and promote inclusiveness; they condemn the derogatory use of language against women, and they call on the media to be sensitive, mature, and balanced in their reportage on sexual offenses against women. Their discursive construction of solidarity, we contend, achieves a social justice objective that

exposes gender imbalance in social arrangements, promotes critical awareness, and advocates radical, social transformation and emancipation needed for creating fairer and more egalitarian societies.

Solidarity formation for (Ghanaian) women empowerment

To show solidarity for women, the MPs underscore the common interests of women and champion their cause by calling for female empowerment and the recognition of women's rights as shown in the examples below.

(3): 10 March 2015/Col.1476

Mr Speaker, *empowering* women is about *equipping women* with the needed resources and skills to be self-sufficient to attain their God given potentials. It is also about eliminating barriers that enable women to access opportunities.

(4): 10 March 2015/Col.1484-1485

On this day, let us picture a world where all women are *empowered* and have equal access to economic, social and political opportunities; the obvious result would be the empowerment of the whole humanity.

In examples (3) and (4), the expressions 'empowering', 'empowered', 'empowerment', and 'equipping' highlight the MPs' framing of a discourse of empowerment for (Ghanaian) women that borders on solidarity. The construction of women as the mainstay of society is succinctly captured in the oft-cited statement that if you educate a man, you educate an individual, but "if we educate a woman we educate a nation" (10 March 2020/Col.053) as well as the MPs' position that "women's issues are national issues" and "we [women] are the nation and we are the people who make things good for the nation" (8 March 2018/Col.2126). This assertion can be analysed as a positive-identity construction aimed at appealing to the conscience of society to support women. It can also be interpreted as an intensification mechanism that echoes the plight of not only Ghanaian women but also African women and women across the globe. This view is reinforced by the following declaration in one of the debates that constitute our dataset: "By supporting women's equal representation in leadership positions in communities, in politics, in business and in religious institutions, we will build a more just, peaceful and secure world" (10 March 2015/Col.1478). The connection made between the empowerment of women and the empowerment of humanity is noteworthy as it connotes that female empowerment must not be viewed as the task of only women but as the responsibility of everyone in the world. It will

therefore not be far-fetched to state that the solidarity enacted by the MPs indirectly puts a moral imperative on all persons to act in ways that support women and eliminates constricting gendered practices. By underscoring women empowerment and their equal access to economic, social, and political opportunities, we assert that (3) and (4) constitute feminist analytical activism that critiques power relations that systematically privilege men and disadvantage, exclude, or disempower women (Lazar 2007). That is, the MPs contest the social status quo in favour of a feminist human vision of a just society in which gender does not determine people's worth, who they are or might become and what they can achieve (Grant 1993). Women's equal access to resources, opportunities, and privileges in society is an integral aspect of social justice advocacy (cf. Awumbila 2006; Anyalebechi 2016). Therefore, the MPs' call for equal access, through their discourse, aligns with the feminist objective of emancipation and a just social order.

To illustrate the need for solidarity formation for women empowerment, the MPs highlight the discrimination, destitution, and marginalisation suffered by women and the need for these to be resisted as shown in example (5).

(5):

- (a) Mr Speaker, women have been tried, marginalised and discriminated against in all aspects of society and leadership as well as politics. I believe the era of marginalisation and discrimination against women in politics and leadership is far from over. This is because *women continue to be at the receiving end of unwarranted treatment, insinuations and perceptions from male colleagues even within the highest law making bodies in the country.*
- (b) ... it is an undisputable fact that Ghanaian women, like the majority of women in the developing world, suffer from discrimination, destitution, underrepresentation and marginalisation. (8 March 2017/Col.2296)
- (c) ... I wish to say ayekoo! to all women, gender activists, institutions and non-governmental organisations – ABANTU, WiLDAF, et cetera - that are spearheading gender equality and women empowerment in this country. To all women who have been very supportive in the fight for our cause. We say Ayeeko! to all Ghanaian women. (8 March 2018/Col.2117)

In 4(c), the metaphorical use of “fight” suggests fierceness in the way women approach their empowerment, and it emphasizes the enormity of the problems women, especially Ghanaian women, face. The use of this metaphor has ideological implications (cf. Ngula 2021) as “fight” can be further interpreted as a solidarity expression aimed at commending individuals and groups

at the forefront of gender equality issues as well as rallying more support for such issues. Furthermore, the verb “spearheading” suggests a struggle to eliminate problems that have been created by societal norms. The reference to different groups that are spearheading the cause of women highlights the extent of unfairness faced by women. This makes it necessary for gender (in)equality issues to receive the support of society in general, especially men. As noted by one MP, “we do need to have the support of the men, ... we must ensure that ... we involve the men and make sure that they understand the value of empowering women in our societies” (8 Mar 2018/Col.2126). Such an instantiation can be considered as a form of solidarity inclined towards collective concern and action for women (cf. Honohan 2008). This call for action is aimed at social emancipation, which Lazar (2007) rightly notes is the main aim of a feminist political critique of gendered social practices and relations. By highlighting the predicament of women due to patriarchal ideology, the examples show how the workings of power sustain oppressive social structures and the need for contestation and positive change. That is, the MPs dispute the notion of gender as an ideological structure that enforces hierarchical relations of domination for men and subordination for women and they raise critical awareness about the taken-for-grantedness and normalcy of knowledge that obscures gender ideology (cf. Lazar 2005).

Political participation, particularly parliamentary representation, is one area where women can be effectively empowered; yet, women are grossly under-represented in this area, especially in Africa (Sarfo-Kantankah 2021; World Economic Forum 2020). In Ghana, women’s parliamentary representation over the years has been extremely low, ranging between six percent and 14.5 percent (cf. Madsen 2018; Sarfo-Kantankah 2021). Hence, Ghanaian female MPs continue to call for change, including affirmative action, as shown in example (6).

(6):

- (a) Mr Speaker, we call for affirmative action, where 40 per cent of the Parliamentary seats would be contested by females only” (10 March 2015/Col.1481).
- (b) Mr Speaker, as we speak, in Parliament, we are only 10.9 per cent as women and when you look at the chart which shows women participation in Parliament throughout the whole world, Ghana ranks 107. (10 March 2015/Col.1486).

Affirmative action “refers to policies that provide preferences based explicitly on membership in a designated group ... ranging from ‘soft’ forms that might include special recruitment efforts to

'hard' forms that might include reserving a specific number of openings exclusively for members of the preferred group" (Kennedy 1985: 1). Since 1998, Ghana has made attempts to promulgate an Affirmative Action Policy without success, and women's groups and civil society organisations (CSOs) through coalition building and solidarity actions have pushed for the adoption of affirmative action (Abantu for Development, n.d.). In our dataset, one female MP states that "we have gone beyond justifying women representation; it would be more illuminating and helpful to the House if Hon Members would bring concrete suggestions towards the Affirmative Action Bill" (8 Mar 2019/Col.2165). The demand made by the MPs for 40% of parliamentary seats to be reserved for women is a 'hard' form of affirmative action (Kennedy 1985), highlighting the serious posture taken by the MPs as far as female empowerment in Ghana is concerned. The call for action also finds expression in statements such as: "It is about time our voices were heard and we got the fullest support from our male counterparts" (8 March 2018/Col.2122) and "it is about time we came out as women. We have to be self-confident, get more women in Parliament..." (March 2018/Col.2124). These pronouncements can be analysed as expressions of solidarity that seek to foreground the concerns of a marginalized group in order to promote their collective interest and call for positive change. The message they convey can inspire confidence in Ghanaian women to persevere and remain together in the pursuit of gender equality, social justice, and female empowerment. One of the main aims of a feminist political critique of gendered social practices and relations is to amplify issues of access to forms of discourse that can be empowering for women's participation in public domains (Lazar 2007). Consequently, the female MPs' call for an increase in parliamentary representation for women, including affirmative action, can be viewed as solidarity with Ghanaian women to pursue social justice intended to eliminate social barriers and advance equal economic, political, and social rights and opportunities. Again, their discursive positioning demonstrates the crucial role of language in how gender ideology and gender relation of power are negotiated and countered in text and talk.

Expressing solidarity through felicitations

The MPs also demonstrate solidarity through goodwill messages and praise for the achievements of women. During International Women's Day celebrations, Ghanaian female MPs praise Ghanaian women for their contribution to the development of Ghana as illustrated in example (7).

(7):

- (a) Mr Speaker, ... *I would like to wish all women happy International Women's Day in Ghana and in particular, women in Abirem Constituency [Hear! Hear!] (2015)*
- (b) Mr Speaker, on behalf of the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, *I wish to add my voice to the Statement ably made by our Caucus leader, and my mentor, Hon Hajia Boforo, to congratulate all women on the occasion of International Women's Day. (2015)*
- (c) Mr Speaker, ... *it is a time to reflect on progress made to call for change and to celebrate acts of courage and determination by ordinary women who have played extraordinary roles in the history of their countries and communities. (2015)*

In example (7), the predication “wish all women happy International Women’s Day”, “congratulate all women on the occasion of International Women’s Day”, and “celebrate acts of courage and determination by ordinary women” can be considered expressions of sisterhood that highlight shared experiences. According to Searle (1976), congratulatory messages express a speaker’s psychological attitude towards a situation. They indicate a social act that conveys camaraderie (Saleem, Saleem and Aziz 2022). Hence, such felicitations can be said to constitute a form of solidarity that provides motivation for action (cf. Wallaschek 2020). Kochovska’s (2013) opines that people who achieve feats that have social or political importance expect congratulations from the people they consider friends. Hence, the articulation of congratulations and goodwill by the MPs demonstrates their shared experiences, common interest, and emotional agreement with Ghanaian/African women especially and women across the globe. The use of the phrases “all women” and “ordinary women” is instructive since they enable the MPs to frame a relationship devoid of power and based on sameness, thereby reinforcing their enactment of solidarity.

In addition to congratulating all women during International Women’s Day celebrations, the MPs acknowledge the achievements of specific women who have held or currently hold key positions in government and other sectors as illustrated in example (8). We submit that the special mention of these women is intended to highlight the qualities and capabilities of women in Ghanaian society. It constitutes a positive-image building mechanism that suggests that women contribute significantly to the socio-political and economic development of Ghana/the world and hence must have equal access to opportunities and resources. As one MP states “[Gender equality] is also about eliminating barriers that enable women to access opportunities” (10 March 2015/Col.1476). Therefore, we contend that the special mention of these women leaders functions as a solidarity mechanism that can inspire other women to aspire for (political) leadership and it underlines the

need to address issues of access to forms of discourse that can be empowering for women's participation in public domains (Lazar 2014). The felicitations offered by the MPs illustrate the use of appraisal (specifically, to appraise and praise the "self" or one's support) in solidarity discourse to foreground common interests and challenges, shared identities, and communality (Alharbi and Rucker 2023). Kampf (2016) also avers that solidarity can be enacted by expressing a compatible stance and showing appreciation for others' character and achievements. Hence, the felicitations reinforce the sisterhood idea created by the MPs and the mention of women in key positions contribute to the visibility of women, which is an essential aspect of disrupting gendered norms.

(8): 8 March 2018/Col.2127

We are very fortunate to have the *Chief of Staff* being a woman, the *Chief Justice* also being a woman, various *Hon Ministers and Hon Deputy Ministers* also being women. *Chief Executive Officers (CEOs), Board Chairs* and other positions are also held by women, some of whom are *Ambassadors*. ... Mr Speaker, I would also take this opportunity to commend our various women who are into various works be it formal or informal and those who are *military and police officers*.

Resisting discriminatory discourse against women

The MPs also enact solidarity in their explicit resistance to discriminatory discourses. As stated by one MP, "women continue to be at the receiving end of unwarranted treatment, insinuations and perceptions from male colleagues even within the highest law-making bodies in the country" (8 March 2019/Col.2189). Consequently, the MPs strongly oppose discriminatory discourses against women as part of their construction of solidarity. Example (9) explicates this point.

(9): 8 March 2017/Col.2317

Mr Speaker, the Hon Minister is misleading this House on the issue that women are by-products of men. The most unfortunate thing is that – Women can never be by-products, they have never been by-products and they would not be by-products. I refuse that and I would want that he withdraws because we all know that by-products are nothing ... to reckon with. We are women; we are not a waste and he should withdraw and apologise to all women.

During a debate on the 2017 IWD celebration in Parliament, a male MP and minister made the following remark: "Mr Speaker, religiously, women are a fine by-product created out of the rib" of man. Finding the statement inappropriate, a female MP retorted using the extract above. The

metaphorical use of “by-product” does not only depict women as unequal to men, but also as a group whose very existence must be less important and dependent on men. It is therefore not surprising that resistance to this male-enforced marginalisation of women (Lazar 2019) is expressed by both men and women. In the current instance, the First Deputy Speaker (a male) asked the MP to withdraw his statement, but he refused and proceeded to give Biblical and Quranic reasons to defend his statement, illustrating how gender combines with religion to marginalize women. The female MP described the minister’s statement as unfortunate. To foreground her resistance, she uses the parallel structure “Women can never be by-products, they have never been by-products and they would not be by-products”. This three-part list has been found to be a useful rhetorical strategy in political discourse and it is typically employed for emphasis and memorability (Partington and Taylor 2018). The female MPs retort can thus be viewed as a strong criticism of sexist gender norms and gender oppressions that derive from patriarchy. Further, she is vehement when says “I refuse that”. While rejecting the minister’s statement, the female MP casts women in a positive light by asserting “We are women; we are not a waste”. She uses the inclusive *we* to refer to all women and hence presents herself as the voice of women. That is, she enacts solidarity based on shared experience with women and frames a worldview that she believes all women share in. By calling for the minister to apologise to all women, the MP advocates for women and projects a form of fraternity that offers an opportunity to defend and promote the shared interests of women (Gould 2007). We argue that the female MP’s response to the minister’s remark realizes an emancipatory objective aimed at promoting social transformation and dismantling repressive social structures that reinforce constricting gendered ideologies. Hence, her discourse and action of solidarity with (Ghanaian) women can be analysed as a pursuit of social justice, emancipation and transformation in the face of a blatant expression of hegemonic masculinity.

Discussion: Contradictory voices in the construction of feminist solidarity: seeking equality or reversal?

A major subject often highlighted in feminist discourse is the imbalance or inequality of social opportunity that favours men over women, which, especially in less developed societies, is often attributed to asymmetrical gender relations and/or hegemonic masculinities (Lazar 2018; Littler and Rottenburg 2021). In our dataset, this is a recurring discourse. There are several uses of presupposition that indicate how the MPs acknowledge men as being more privileged, as wielding more power, and as dominating the institutional structures of society. We take presupposition here

to mean an understanding or a truth that is not explicitly stated but that is implied in the use of a particular word or expression (cf. Huang 2014). Presupposition is evident in the equality discourse promoted by the MPs via expressions such as “collectively achieve gender parity in this country”, “spearheading gender equality”, “ensure the achievement of gender equality”, “fight against gender inequalities”, and “ensure women are portrayed ... equally”. One of the IWD celebrations also had the theme “Think equal”. Such lexicalization emphasizes a unified force by the MPs to achieve gender parity. Yet, it is apparent from the data that other MPs offer an extended solidarity voice for what can be construed as seeking a reversal of the prevailing status quo. That is, their enunciation suggests that it should be acceptable for men to be at the receiving end of gender imbalance. As example (10) indicates, the MPs’ construction of solidarity for women does not only promote gender equality, but also implies an imbalance that privileges women.

(10):

- (a) Mr. Speaker, 15 years ago, I was the only woman Telecommunication Companies (Telcos) Chief Executive Officer (CEO) when the CEOs of Telecommunication Companies met to deliberate on issues. *Today, there is only one man in the Telecoms Chamber when Telco CEOs meet to deliberate on issues. And I am happy to note that women have replaced men as CEOs in Airtel-Tigo and Vodafone.* (8th March 2019, P. 15)
- (b) Mr. Speaker, ... we celebrate this day because *women are seen to be very important in society even though men are also important.* ... We must honour and acknowledge *the great role that women and our male Hon Colleagues play in this House.* (8th March 2019, P.8)
- (c) We are not a threat, we are supporters. We are just people who would want to say that what men can do, *women can do equally and even better.* (8th March 2019, P. 6)
- (d) 27th Feb – *Cooking competition for males* (8th March 2020, P. 3)

These extracts suggest a discourse of reversal rather than one of equality. For instance, in (a), the MP is “happy” that in the telecommunication sector, women now dominate men (note the use of “replaced” to suggest a take-over). In (b), the MP does not position the genders equally as she puts women in a priority position over men. She foregrounds women over men using the qualifier “very” in the adjectival phrase “very important” while acknowledging a second-place importance of men (“... even though men are also important”). The use of “and even better” in (c) further supports an imbalance to favour women. In (d), the MP is listing the activities for the 2020 IWD celebration

and notes one of them be a “cooking competition for males”. A possible underlying ideology here is that the inclusion of such a competition is intended to show that contrary to stereotypical beliefs in many societies, including those of Ghana, cooking in the home should not be seen as an activity solely for women. We aver that if feminist activism aims to make the point that both sexes are partners in development and that such a partnership can only be fruitful in the context of equal and fair opportunities, then, perhaps, the message of balance will be communicated more effectively with a cooking competition for both sexes rather than for only males. A “cooking competition for males”, within the context of celebrating women and promoting women empowerment, seems to advance a notion that seeks to reverse stereotypical roles between women and men rather than create a balance between them. As the excerpts above indicate, it appears the MPs do not only engage in activism aimed at eliminating gender bias, but they also depict themselves as agents of solidarity who want to change the status quo in favour of women. This finding resonates with critical views in gender and feminist studies that contend that such trends, if intensified, could create a “hegemonic femininity” (cf. Mullany 2007) that will attract onto itself the very criticisms that have been levelled against hegemonic masculinity. We contend that the construction of feminist solidarity that takes cognizance of issues and (discursive) practices of equality and reversal will enhance the efforts of feminist organizations and women’s rights groups, especially in Africa, as far as gender equity, women empowerment, and social justice are concerned.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how Ghanaian female MPs discursively construct solidarity by analyzing their contributions to parliamentary debates during the International Women’s Day celebrations. It highlights how the MPs portray themselves as agents and voice of (Ghanaian) women as part of their solidarity construction. To buttress their calls for the empowerment of women, the MPs construct women as victims of discrimination and marginalisation, a solidarity construction that seeks to foreground the need for female empowerment. They validate this call for empowerment by depicting women as the backbone of society, thereby implying that the empowerment of women can be equated to the empowerment of society. To portray themselves as representing the interests of women, the MPs present women as a collective using the plural pronouns “we” and “our”. The paper also shows that to construct solidarity, the MPs applaud (Ghanaian) women for their achievements and contributions to national development. Additionally, the MPs perform solidarity by resisting discourses that discriminate against (Ghanaian) women. The paper furthermore reveals

that in their advocacy for gender equality, the MPs engage in a reversal discourse that seeks to overturn the tide of gender imbalance in favour of women, echoing Mullany's (2007) view on the need for feminist organizations and women's rights groups to be aware of the possibility of (unconsciously) promoting hegemonic femininity in their advocacy. Even though CDA research examines how unequal power relations are established and reproduced as well as how dominance is challenged and disrupted by people, there is scope for more research on the latter objective (Macgilchrist 2016; Nartey 2022). There is therefore a dearth of studies on the voice of non-dominant groups, including their solidarity formation for group empowerment. Such research on the dismantling of the status quo is necessary to highlight emancipatory discourses and the reconstruction of resistance as an objective of CDA research less emphasized in the literature (cf. Nartey 2023). This paper addresses the research gap mentioned above and thus contributes to the growing scholarship on reparative critical practices. By focusing on the voice of Ghanaian female MPs from their own perspective, this paper centres marginalized voices and holds implications for the conceptualization of critique in critical discourse studies. That is, while the critique of dominant power structures and abusive or exclusionary practices in CDA research must continue, work on reparative critical practices (e.g., resistance to dominance, the voice and agency of marginalized people, emancipatory efforts of non-dominant groups) must also be considered integral to critical discourse studies. This dual approach will help to highlight both the importance of dismantling hegemonic structures as well as building other worlds or new, fair, and inclusive communities. We submit that viewing the two approaches as complementary rather than contradictory will further enhance CDA's social justice orientation.

Acknowledgements

We sincerely thank two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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Authors

Kwabena Sarfo Sarfo-Kantankah (Corresponding Author)

Department of English

Faculty of Arts

College of Humanities and Legal Studies

University of Cape Coast

Cape Coast, Ghana

esarfo@ucc.edu.gh

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5662-2886>

Kwabena Sarfo Sarfo-Kantankah is an Associate Professor of Discourse Studies at the Department of English, University of Cape Coast, Ghana, where he teaches English language courses. His research interests include corpus approaches to the study of discourse, (critical) discourse analysis, political/parliamentary discourse and pragmatics. He has previously published in journals such as

Language, Discourse & Society, Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis Across Disciplines, Contemporary Journal of African Studies, Ampersand and Journal of Pragmatics.

Richmond Sadick Ngula

Communications and Study Skills Unit
Centre for Academic Development
University of Botswana
Private Bag 0022
Gaborone, Botswana
ngular@ub.ac.bw
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3499-4480>

Richmond Sadick Ngula is a lecturer in the Communication and Study Skills Unit of the Centre for Academic Development, University of Botswana (Botswana). His areas of research interest are (critical) discourse studies, academic communication and literacy, corpus approaches to studies of language, and English in Ghana. He has published in SCOPUS-indexed, peer reviewed journals such as *Word* (Routledge), *Nordic Journal of African Studies* (NARN), *Burno Studies in English* (Masaryk University), and *Language, Discourse & Society* (Research Committee of the ISA).

Mark Nartey

2S303, School of Arts
University of the West of England
Frenchay Campus
Coldharbour Ln, Bristol BS16 1QY
United Kingdom
narteynartey60@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8386-6616>

Mark Nartey is Lecturer in English Language and Linguistics at the School of Arts, University of the West of England. He is an interdisciplinary scholar who investigates semiotic phenomena at the intersection of language, culture and society. He has published extensively in applied linguistics, discourse analysis and communication/media studies. The titles of his recent books are *Political Mythmaking, Nationalist Resistance and Populist Performance* (2023) and *Communicative Perspectives on COVID-19 in Ghana* (2024), both published by Routledge.