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# Queen Mothers and Cyberfeminist Movements in Ghana<sup>1</sup>

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## Background

It is a common practice for men to be perceived as tech experts in many households in Ghana. Tasks like changing light bulbs, fixing electronic devices, setting up new gadgets, and aligning TV antennas for better reception are typically assigned to them, reflecting the belief that men are more adept at handling certain technologies. This often encourages men to tinker with these specific technologies, while women are gradually discouraged from engaging with technology associated with men. This case study explores the influence of matriarchal cultural norms on women's engagement with technology and highlights the transformative role of cyberfeminism and traditional leadership in bridging gaps.

Ghana is a West African country with a population of 30.8 million (50.7% women and 49.3% men).<sup>2</sup> Women in Ghana have historically faced significant obstacles in taking on leadership roles and achieving empowerment due to stereotypes and restricted access to opportunities for education and economic growth.<sup>3</sup> The rapid advancement of digital technologies presents both opportunities and challenges for them. While the internet, social media, and emerging innovations in artificial intelligence and green technologies present new avenues for women's

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<sup>2</sup> Ghana Statistical Service 2021. 2021 Population and Housing Census. <https://statsghana.gov.gh/gssmain/fileUpload/pressrelease/2021%20PHC%20Provisional%20Results%20Press%20Release.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Sossou, M.-A. (2011). We Do Not Enjoy Equal Political Rights: Ghanaian Women's Perceptions on Political Participation in Ghana. Sage Open, 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244011410715>

empowerment, they can also worsen existing inequalities if women are not well-equipped to excel in the rapidly evolving global digital landscape.<sup>4</sup>

The concept of cyberfeminism underscores the importance of women actively leveraging internet technologies and digital tools to empower themselves, challenge gender inequalities, and shape narratives and interests.<sup>5</sup> A notable example is the #MeToo movement in the U.S., which gained global recognition through social media platforms in 2017, by enabling masses of women to publicly denounce experiences of sexual harassment and assault to engender urgent change. In Ghana, cyberfeminist movements visibly skyrocketed and took an interesting turn after the #MeToo movement gained popularity.

One very vocal group in Ghana's cyberfeminist movement is the Pepper Dem Ministries (PDM). The term "PepperDem," meaning "make them uncomfortable," gained popularity as feminists associated with PDM used social media to provoke thought and discomfort to challenge and reshape cultural and gender stereotypes that favor patriarchy. In response, groups like Sugardem Ministries emerged, advocating for a more conciliatory approach that respects traditional gender roles,<sup>6</sup> arguing that PDM's radical methods created unnecessary conflict. This dynamic illustrates the broader debate within Ghana's cyberfeminist movement about the best strategies to empower women in the post-#MeToo era. Parallel to that, organizations like SocietyAid, Songtaba, and TechNeedsGirls utilize digital technologies to mobilize local resources to empower women to access critical information, seek support, and promote digital literacy.

In this case study, we will understand how these efforts to amplify women's voices and enhance access to opportunities for economic and personal growth intertwine with Ghana's history and the Queen Mother tradition that emphasizes women's leadership. Queen Mothers leverage their respected positions to advocate for women's empowerment; navigating cultural hurdles to shape societal attitudes toward women making them critical to cyberfeminism in Ghana. In the next section, we will understand the transformative role of Queen Mothers in two programs in

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<sup>4</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2018). Bridging the Digital Gender Divide. <https://www.oecd.org/digital/bridging-the-digital-gender-divide.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Sweetman, Caroline, and Oxfam, eds. 1998. Gender and Technology. Oxford: Oxfam. <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/121125/bk-gender-technology-010198-en.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

<sup>6</sup> Darko, Sammy. 2018. Too much Peppering, too much Sugaring: Dilemma of Feminist Activism. <https://citifmonline.com/2018/02/much-peppering-much-sugaring-dilemma-feminist-activism-article/>

which they have exercised their leadership: the Girls-in-ICT and the Girls-in-Engineering initiatives.

## Case Study

### Queen Mothers

Discussions about Ghanaian women's empowerment are incomplete without mentioning Yaa Asantewaa, the revered Queen Mother of the Edweso clan of the Ashanti people in the late 19th century, who was responsible for resisting colonial rule and leading an army of around 4,000 men into the Ashanti-British "War of the Golden Stool" in 1900. Her rallying cry has become a celebrated quote embodying the spirit of women's strength and resistance against oppression: "Is it true that the bravery of Ashanti is no more? I cannot believe it. It cannot be! I must say this: If you, the men of Ashanti, will not go forward, then we will. I shall call upon my fellow women...We will fight till the last of us falls on the battlefield."<sup>7</sup>

With roots in this legendary past, Queen Mothers have become important community leaders in modern Ghana. In a country that is culturally diverse with numerous ethnic groups, practices, and social systems, women are affected differently by cultural norms. In societies with a matriarchal tradition, women hold significant roles in the political, economic, and social domains. The concept of the Queen Mother is a prime example of such a role.<sup>8</sup> This system is distinct from patriarchy, a globally disseminated social system that privileges men and assigns them exclusive dominance in roles of authority and power, including in Ghana.

**Queen Mothers** are traditional women leaders who rule alongside men chiefs, forming a dual-gender system of leadership responsible for community governance in Ghana.

Nana Amba Eyiaba I, a Queen Mother from Cape Coast, the capital of the country's Central Region, explains that they are called Queen Mothers because, as queens, they partner with the chiefs, and as mothers, they care for the entire community.<sup>9</sup> Queen Mothers hold varying levels

<sup>7</sup> Deutsche Welle 2018. Yaa Asantewaa, the Asante Warrior Queen. Dw.com. <https://www.dw.com/en/yaa-asantewaa-the-asante-warrior-queen/a-42968725>

<sup>8</sup> Stoeltje, Beverly J. "Asante Queen Mothers : Precolonial Authority in a Postcolonial Society." Research Review of the Institute of African Studies 19 (2004): 1-19

<sup>9</sup> Brocklebank, Emily 2015. The Formidable Queen Mothers of Ghana. <https://centreforglobalequality.org/news/formidable-queen-mothers-ghana/>

of authority based on the customs and traditions of their communities; in some cases, they collaborate with chiefs, in others, they can be the sole leaders.

The process of appointing a Queen Mother varies across Ghana; typically, they are chosen from a royal lineage,<sup>8</sup> often being a sister or another close female relative of the chief. Their selection considers qualities like character, wisdom, and leadership capabilities. However, in other communities, Queen Mothers are appointed by community members in conjunction with community leaders based on their exemplary traits, accomplishments, and potential to unite the community and also influence younger women positively. There has been a growing trend toward selecting well-educated women as Queen Mothers, recognizing the value of merging formal education with traditional knowledge in tackling modern-day problems.

Maintaining strategic partnerships and meaningful engagement with other members of the community, they navigate cultural hurdles to achieve progress and ensure the long-term sustainability of initiatives. This is evident in the involvement of Queen Mothers in key community development initiatives sponsored by national and multinational organizations like The United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the United Nations (UN) in areas such as conflict resolution, COVID-19 mitigation efforts, maternal and child mortality, and achieving sustainable development goals.

Ambassador to Ghana, Virginia Palmer, describes Queen Mothers as the “backbone of many Ghanaian communities, providing leadership, support, and guidance.”<sup>10</sup> By providing leadership and active engagement with communities, Queen Mothers break social and cultural barriers and encourage women to pursue their goals and dreams in tech.

### **Girls-in-ICT**

According to the UN Development Program, women make up 30% of tech professionals in Sub-Saharan Africa and 28% globally<sup>11</sup>. Recognizing the importance of digital literacy for women's empowerment, Queen Mothers have partnered with state institutions, international and

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<sup>10</sup> U.S Embassy Ghana. 2023. “Queen Mothers are the backbone of many Ghanaian Communities”. Facebook . February 16, 2023.

[https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=572006811630153&id=100064625174300&set=a.294486969382140&locale=ar\\_AR](https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=572006811630153&id=100064625174300&set=a.294486969382140&locale=ar_AR)

<sup>11</sup> UNDP 2019. Creating a Level Playing Field for Women in Technology in Africa.

<https://www.undp.org/africa/press-releases/creating-level-playing-field-women-technology-africa>

local NGOs to implement digital literacy programs in their communities. These initiatives provide training in areas such as coding, internet navigation, online safety, mobile banking, and social media marketing. One such initiative is the Girls-in-ICT (GIICT) project, which aims to encourage and support girls' participation in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, or STEM fields. Queen Mothers have played a vital role in sensitizing communities about the importance of this initiative, using their influence to challenge gender stereotypes and encourage families to support their daughters' education and career aspirations in technology.

**Figure 1. Bechemhema and Mamponghema (Queen Mothers of Bechem and Mampong, respectively) with U.S Ambassador to Ghana, Virginia Palmer, in the middle.<sup>12</sup>**



The GIICT initiative was introduced in 2014 by the Ministry of Communications and Digitalization of Ghana as a part of the International Telecommunications Union global campaign to encourage girls and young women to pursue careers in information communication technology (ICT) and build a community of female ICT professionals. The GIICT initiative has implemented several programs in Ghana, including training workshops, mentorship programs, and awareness campaigns, particularly in communities where gender gaps in access and utilization of digital technologies are much more pronounced. The initiative is targeted at girls between the ages of 13 and 18, and provides girls with practical skills and knowledge in areas such as coding, website development, and social media marketing.

<sup>12</sup> Credits: U.S Embassy Ghana Facebook Page.

The GIICT initiative has trained more than 7,000 girls and 500 teachers in basic computer skills and coding since its inception in Ghana.<sup>13</sup> The girls who participate in this program are also motivated through rewards, mentorship, and exposure to female industry players in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) careers. The GIICT program has been successful in increasing the number of girls who choose to study and pursue careers in STEM, as well as providing opportunities for girls to network with STEM professionals. The exposure to female industry players serves as a source of inspiration and motivation for the girls and helps to debunk the notion that STEM fields are the preserve of males.

Leveraging cultural influence is just one of the many ways Queen Mothers help bridge the gender digital divide in Ghana. Many of their duties center around grassroots mobilization and employing tact in dealing with problems faced by their communities, including cultural barriers. Queen Mothers' understanding of their communities makes them adept at uniting people for a common cause. By working closely with local women's groups, community elders, religious leaders, and other stakeholders, Queen Mothers identify specific needs and tailor programs accordingly, highlighting the long-term benefits of investing in girls' education and nurturing their interests in technology. This bottom-up approach ensures that interventions are culturally relevant and address the unique challenges faced by girls and women in their respective communities. These challenges may include limited access to educational resources, especially in rural areas, teenage pregnancy, early marriages, restrictions placed on women by some male heads of families, or digital gender-based violence and harassment, including non-consensual sharing of private images, and cyberbullying.

### **Girls-in-Engineering Initiative**

Mining is a significant and controversial economic driver in the region and across Ghana, providing jobs and stimulating local businesses, while also being associated with health and environmental concerns such as water pollution, deforestation, and soil degradation. Mining activities in Ghana produce minerals like gold, manganese, bauxite, diamond and lithium,<sup>14</sup> supplying critical raw materials for industries worldwide, particularly in the technology and jewelry sectors. This positions Ghana as an important player in the global supply chain, especially for electronics manufacturing, in countries like China, the United States, and Japan.

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<sup>13</sup> Ministry of Communication and Digitalisation. 2022. Evaluation of Girls-In-ICT Initiative. [https://moc.gov.gh/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Girls-in-ICT\\_Impact-Assessment-Report.pdf](https://moc.gov.gh/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Girls-in-ICT_Impact-Assessment-Report.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> International Trade Administration. 2023. Ghana – Country Commercial Guide. <https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/ghana-mining-industry-equipment>

Figures 2 and 3. Snapshots from the Girls-in-Engineering Initiative<sup>15</sup>



As essential materials for producing lithium-ion batteries, manganese and lithium play a crucial role in global supply chains for consumer electronics such as smartphones, computers, and electric vehicles. As the demand for digital and green energy technologies continues to rise globally, the need for a steady supply of these minerals faces high demand,<sup>16</sup> making the mining sector one of the most lucrative sectors in the world. Currently, many girls in Yamfo (a town in the Ahafo region of Ghana) are involved in the mining sector, but they are limited to performing ancillary jobs like food vending and washing mineral ore in the small-scale, usually illegal, mining operations popularly referred to as *galamsey*. Empowering these girls through education and training in engineering will enable them to take on more significant roles in this scenario, thereby enhancing their career prospects and contributing to their communities and the country.

The Paramount Queen Mother of Yamfo, Nana Darkowaa Ampem II, is spearheading a transformative initiative aimed at empowering young girls in her community to pursue engineering careers. This bold move, marked by the launch of the Girls-in-Engineering Initiative, seeks to address the gender disparity in the engineering field, where women constitute only 7%

<sup>15</sup> Credits: Nana Darkowaa Ampem Kyerewaa II Facebook Page

<sup>16</sup> Bridges, L.E., Burrington, I., Chen, A., Cooper, Z.G.T., Macherera, M., Mangwana, J., Maphosa, V., Zezai, D. (2023). Geographies of Digital Wasting: Electronic Waste From Mine to Discard and Back Again. [Multimodal Exhibit]. <https://doi.org/10.17613/xjcx-7b43>.

of the workforce in Ghana.<sup>17</sup> In partnership with the Newmont-Ahafo North Mine, other Queen Mothers, and educational institutions, the initiative not only nurtures the ambitions of these young women but also equips them with the skills needed to tackle unique challenges in mining operations.

Being the youngest Queen Mother in the region, Nana Darkowaa is using media outlets and digital technologies like Facebook, TikTok, Instagram and YouTube to amplify her efforts, ensuring a wider reach and impact creating a supportive environment for the next generation as well as complementing government efforts to promote STEM education among young women.

## Processing Questions

- a) What is cyberfeminism?
- b) What is a matriarchal system and how does it differ from a patriarchal one?
- c) What are Queen Mothers and in what ways do they influence the acceptance and integration of digital technologies within their communities?
- d) What are some of the unique challenges women in Ghana face in accessing and utilizing digital technologies? What strategies do Queen Mothers use to help overcome these barriers?
- e) What is the role of mining in the technology industry?

## Thematic Reflection and Discussion

### Leveraging Technology for Gender Equality

Cyberfeminism sees technology as a means for women's self-determination and collective action, rather than merely a neutral tool. Cyberfeminists argue that women can use the internet and digital technologies to “resist repressive gender regimes and enact equality.”<sup>18</sup> However, cyberfeminist frameworks have been criticized by some for reducing the problem of inequality to merely a question of material access to equipment and technical training, which is hardly enough to change broader social problems.

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<sup>17</sup> JoyNews. “Girls Empowerment: Yamfo Queen Mother Launches Girls in Engineering Initiative”. Youtube Video, 3:54. April 25, 2024. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_ItLu0S15-k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ItLu0S15-k)

<sup>18</sup> Daniels, Jessie. 2009. Rethinking Cyberfeminism(s): Race, Gender, and Embodiment. In *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly*, Volume 37, Numbers 1 & 2, Spring/Summer, pp. 101-124. The Feminist Press DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/wsqr.0.0158>, P. 101

- a) Based on the country that you live in and/or are most familiar with:
  - i. What are the main challenges to address gender inequalities in STEM?
  - ii. Give examples of cyberfeminist interventions that you think could maximize women empowerment while minimizing the reproduction of existing inequalities in STEM in such a cultural context.

### **Community Engagement**

While deeply rooted gender stereotypes and patriarchy are major barriers to women's engagement with digital technology usage in Ghana, successful initiatives have found ways to leverage cultural values, the matriarchal tradition and target the intrahousehold gender dynamics to promote women's technology adoption. For instance, some women's empowerment programs have targeted not just women, but also their husbands, traditional leaders and other members of the community to shift cultural gender norms. Such programs have also focused on designing technology interventions that are tailored to specific demographic needs of women, rather than treating them as a homogenous group.<sup>19</sup> These initiatives should be tailored to target not just women but other members of the community to address power dynamics and encourage women to break barriers.

- a) How can cultural considerations and gender inequalities be a barrier to the development of cyberfeminism initiatives?
- b) Why may cyberfeminism programs need to focus not only on women but on the whole community? What kind of negative effects do these programs try to avoid?

### **Cultural Sensitivity in Technology Design**

A large portion of the science and technology studies literature emphasizes the significance of examining the contextual social, cultural, and political factors that shape the design, development, and application of technologies. This includes understanding how gender norms, power relations, and societal attitudes toward women shape the development and application of technologies. Factoring cultural sensitivity is a crucial step in countering norms and practices that serve as barriers limiting the impact of technologies.

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<sup>19</sup> Nartey, Portia, Ozge Sensoy Bahar, and Proscovia Nabunya. 2023. "A Review of the Cultural Gender Norms Contributing to Gender Inequality in Ghana: An Ecological Systems Perspective." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 25, no. 7  
<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A773935164/EAIM?u=anon~416dd802&sid=sitemap&xid=2d176e3c>

- a) In what ways could technology developers and policymakers incorporate cultural sensitivity into their approaches to ensure that new technologies effectively address gender disparities in Ghana?
- b) How might this cultural consideration in the design process help overcome barriers?