

Profiles: Women Elected to the District Assembly

By Cheryl Rettig

The recent District Assembly Elections saw the emergence of several female leaders. While the number of women elected was not nearly as high as many had hoped, the fact that numerous women campaigned for office, overcame challenges and were elected to represent their Districts is encouraging.

Ms. Esther Simtim-Missah and Mrs. Aduoa Amoako are two women who won seats in the District Assembly on 26 September 2006. Though they differed in terms of previous political experience, goals and campaign strategies, both women are committed to making positive changes in their communities, overcoming obstacles and increasing women's participation on the issues that matter to them.

Ms. Esther Simtim-Missah

After being involved in politics for the past five years, Ms. Esther Simtim-Missah, 51, defied the odds to win last September's elections. Though she has never run for office before, she now represents Tema Municipal Assembly. Despite her success however, the Assemblywoman said in written statements to the Gender Centre that she has also experienced roadblocks in her quest to achieve this position.

"The principal challenge I faced during and after the elections is financial constraints," said Ms. Esther Simtim-Missah. "At the moment, I'm fighting hard to put some basic structures in place but I'm restricted by my lack of funds."

To rectify this situation, she has appealed to her Member of Parliament to come to her aid. Ms. Esther Simtim-Missah has also had some discussions with several Department Heads to ensure the execution of some of the projects in her electoral area.

Though there is stiff competition in most elections, Ms. Esther Simtim-Missah attributes her success to three main factors. They include personal comportsment, her long stay in the area, and clear-cut messages that were relevant to the electorates' well-being. Some of these messages involved a commitment to community development and empowering women and youth.

Her behaviour also differed from her male counterparts in significant ways. According to Ms. Esther Simtim-Missah, her male competitors allegedly utilized strategies that involved insults directed at her and buying votes. Furthermore, the attitude of some of the male politicians she has encountered has been demoralizing.

"They see themselves as the head of every institution, be it in the home or outside, and always want to marginalize women, and therefore treat them as subordinates," said Ms. Esther Simtim-Missah, in describing the mindset and actions of some male politicians.

The most challenging aspects of being a female politician, according to Ms. Esther Simtim-Missah, are poor financial standing and pressure from family members, both nucleus and extended family. However, mixed with the obstacles are many rewarding moments, such as the readiness of some members in her electoral area to help with communal labour. As well, the Assemblywoman is delighted by the massive support she always receives from the women and youth, especially in solving some of the problems in the area.

With regard to making changes in her district, Ms. Esther Simtim-Missah hopes to achieve a clean environment, as well as the empowerment of women and youth. She believes it is important that women are involved in politics to enable them to address their problems effectively at both the local and national levels. To this end, she supports the implementation of mandatory quotas for female politicians. In other words, she believes a certain number of seats in Parliament should be set aside for women.

To help women get more involved and rectify women's under representation in Ghanaian politics, Ms. Esther Simtim-Missah offers a few suggestions. She says that women should be educated on the need to be part of the decision-making process at the local and national levels. Furthermore, women should be empowered financially, such as with easy access to micro-credit.

Ms. Esther Simtim-Missah also believes that effective capacity building in the area of public speaking and access to basic education are necessary ingredients for women's increased political participation. Finally, she offers some advice to other women in politics or who are running for office. She encourages them to be focused, persevere and have the courage and confidence to "withstand all pressures that will militate against them in their pursuit to political prominence."

Mrs. Aduoa Amoako

Mrs. Aduoa Amoako is no stranger to competition and hard work. Elected to the Tema Municipal Assembly last September, the 46-year-old woman has spent the past 15 years in politics. Despite her successes however, the Assemblywoman admits there have been numerous challenges along the way. For example, a lack of funds and an inability to complete some of her projects were a few of her complaints in a written interview with the Gender Centre.

To solve these problems, Mrs. Amoako has lobbied the Chief Executive and also solicited funds from some of the opinion leaders and philanthropists in her electoral area. This support and funds are necessary, as part of her campaign was based on promises to restore street lights, build additional classrooms and clean the environment.

The woman who can boast two previous election wins says that her success is in part due to her campaigning on gender issues, sharing her experiences, and teaching how women can be effective at the local level. In addition, she sat down with her campaign team, planned with them how to identify some of the problems in the community, strategized and assigned them various tasks.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Amoako was disturbed by the behaviour she encountered from some of her male competitors. She said she was intimidated by some of the male contestants' insults and false accusations. As well, the opposition to her involvement in political life did not just come from male politicians and a lack of funds. According to Mrs. Amoaka, her greatest challenge came from inside her home when her husband did not support her running for office. However, this source of frustration eventually turned into one of her most rewarding moments.

"My rewarding moments were when my own husband took one week leave from his busy schedule to help me," said Mrs. Amoaka. "Secondly, I had a lot of support from both women and men."

The hard-working Assemblywoman has high hopes for her District. She wants her community to be clean to prevent mosquitoes and other diseases. As well, she wants all the children in her community of Sakumono to be educated by the year 2008.

According to the Interparliamentary Union, 25 women were elected to seats in the Lower House in Ghana in 2004, a mere 10.9% of all available seats. Due to her extensive political experience, Mrs. Amoaka has insight into why this number is so low. She cites poverty, lack of knowledge and marital problems as the three main barriers to women's increased political participation. To rectify this situation, she said it is imperative that more women be encouraged to enter the political arena.

Mrs. Amoaka also said it is important that women are involved in politics so they will be part of the decision-making body both locally and nationally. To achieve this end, the Assemblywoman supports mandatory quotas for female politicians in Parliament. This would ensure that female politicians are empowered. Finally, Mrs. Amoaka encourages women to work together to achieve their common goals.