

Women Organising in Ghana: The Network for Women's Rights (NETRIGHT) and NGO Networking for Policy Intervention¹

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Introduction

Ghanaian women's agitations for economic justice have been a marked feature of their activism since pre-independence nationalist struggles, including the trade blockades of 1917 and 1918. Market traders mobilised resources for party activities and took part in disruptive civil acts that undermined the colonial economy and contributed to making political change possible (Awumbila, 2001; Manuh, 1993; Tsikata, 1989). Ghanaian women also contributed significantly to the success of the Convention People's Party (CPP) in national elections (Tsikata, 1989). Such political actions, however, were propelled by broad national interests and were not directed specifically towards women's rights and gender equality concerns.

During the early post-independence period, two dominant women's organisations – the Ghana Women's League and the Ghana Federation of Women (known earlier as the National Federation of Gold Coast Women) – merged to form the National Council of Ghana Women (NCGW). NCGW's activities were mainly educational policy campaigns, protest against international injustices, talks, demonstrations on nutrition, childcare and charity donations to deprived children (Awumbila, 2001; Tsikata, 1987). Because of its close alignment with the CPP, the NCGW was disbanded by the military junta which overthrew Ghana's first President, Dr Kwame Nkrumah, in 1966. From 1966 onwards, women's groups were mainly charity-oriented professional and religious associations, whose operations hardly questioned women's social status.

Broad-based national women's organisations emerged in the early 1980s: these were the Federation of Ghanaian Women and the 31st December

Women's Movement (DWM). Their interests initially were in presenting alternatives to existing feminine stereotypes. In addition, the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) brought discussions on women's rights into the public domain. The DWM, dominated by Nana Konadu Agyeman-Rawlings – the wife of the longest serving head of state and president of Ghana – was arguably the most visible of these organisations. Like the NCGW, the DWM suffered its demise when the regime within which it was embedded – the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC), then the National Democratic Congress – came to an end in 2000. Subsequently, a number of civil society groups working around women's rights emerged. Though their numbers kept growing, it was only FIDA that initially had some visibility and came close to the dominance enjoyed by DWM.

More recently, the Network for Women's Rights in Ghana (NETRIGHT) has played a vital role on the landscape of women's rights work. In 2017, NETRIGHT's membership includes some 81 organisations and 151 individuals across the country. Several of these organisations are representative organs, with members of their own. They include the women's wing of the main national trade union centre, the Trades Union Congress, Ghana, and some of its affiliated unions. This profile outlines how NETRIGHT reached this position, presenting a brief overview of events leading to its formation, its organisational structure, and the challenges and prospects faced by the Network. My perspective is shaped by my experience as the fifth convener of NETRIGHT, from January 2010 to December 2016.

The Formation of NETRIGHT

The preparations towards the United Nations' Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 raised doubts about the strength of civil society groups as effective organs for the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA). The preparations revealed the presence of numerous women's rights groups that generally worked in isolation and had little occasion to come together to undertake joint projects. They were constrained by their organisational capacity to form joint platforms for carrying out collective actions. In 1999, a study on gender training in Ghana (Acquaye-Baddoo and Tsikata, 2001) by the University of Ghana's Institute for Statistical, Social and Economics Research (ISSER) underscored this concern, noting that, despite the myriad women's rights groups in Ghana, their collective impact was minimal.

Constrained by their localised and uncoordinated approaches, they tended, the report noted, to work separately, offering little chance to harness collective efforts to have an impact on the policy space for women's rights and gender equality work in the country.

The Third World Network-Africa (TWN-Africa) called a meeting in Accra to discuss the findings of the ISSER study. At this meeting were a number of individuals and representatives of organisations working on women's rights and gender equality. They identified with the study's findings on the weak impact of isolated civil society actions and decided that a national body bringing together all groups would magnify their influence. The proposed body was envisaged as a network of organisations and individuals committed to women's rights and gender justice in Ghana.

NETRIGHT was thus formed in 1999. Its founders had in mind a network that would become a forum for sharing development concerns, providing alternative approaches to gender equality work and amplifying the voices of women's rights groups in order to influence national policy discourse. In setting up this unified platform, emphasis was placed on incorporating a human rights discourse into work on women's equality whilst also working towards economic justice for women in national policy-making. To date, the aims of NETRIGHT retain the core principles of its formation.

Organisational Focus

The feminist principles guiding NETRIGHT's organisational focus and operations derive from an understanding of women's experience of subordination as historical and context-specific. These principles place the emphasis on women's organising in order to confront such injustice, viewing this as an important strategy for building gender-equal societies. NETRIGHT's focus is women, an intentional bias deriving from a position that women's experience of gender discrimination lies at the core of all forms of existing disadvantage around the globe. As a network, NETRIGHT believes that years of discrimination and oppression of women inhibit Ghana's efforts at national development. These principles guide NETRIGHT's choice of activities on its key thematic foci: economic justice for women; gender and natural resources; and movement-building.

A core principle of NETRIGHT is to avoid duplication among the activities of its members. With time, diverse constituencies have emerged in the

women's rights space in Ghana, seeking to address critical policy and legal reform vacuums. Such needs have led to the creation of the Domestic Violence (DV) Coalition and the Women's Manifesto Coalition (WMC) for Ghana. NETRIGHT leverages its voice and impact by bringing these national platforms together as the Three-Coalitions Platform.

In fact, NETRIGHT played an active role in the emergence of the DV and WMC coalitions. Key members of NETRIGHT participated vigorously in the production of the Ghana's Women's Manifesto, at the initiative of ABANTU for Development (Mama et al, 2005). The Women's Manifesto is a compilation of demands in ten thematic areas, providing useful documentation for making claims for women's rights in Ghana (The Coalition for the Women's Manifesto for Ghana, 2004). Dzodzi Tsikata, as convenor of NETRIGHT at the time of its production, as well as Patricia Blankson-Akakpo, then a senior programmes officer, served on the drafting committee. Elizabeth Akpalu, a steering-committee member of NETRIGHT, served on the WMC's steering committee. In the Central Region, I organised the consultations providing inputs on content areas of the Manifesto.

Towards the end of 1999, there was a terrible spate of murders of women in Accra and nothing was being done about these crimes. The serial killings of women led to NETRIGHT, together with Sisters' Keepers, organising a series of activities in early 2000. This platform later engaged in actions influencing the passage of the Domestic Violence Bill into law – seven whole years of campaigning later – in 2007. The Domestic Violence Coalition emerged to monitor implementation of the Domestic Violence Act. NETRIGHT used the Three Coalitions platform to engage the national machinery in the Ministry for Women and Children's Affairs, which was later restructured as the Ministry for Gender, Children and Social Protection.

At the regional level, NETRIGHT has organised joint advocacy platforms with the Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD), the Africa Women's Development and Communication Network and WoMin, an African regional platform for gender issues related to natural-resource extractive industries. On the international front, NETRIGHT has, since 1999, held meetings to review the Ghanaian government's commitments to the Beijing Platform for Action and feed the outcomes into the five-yearly Shadow Reports presented at the NGO Committee on the Status of Women (NGO/CSW) in New York. NETRIGHT has held side events at a number of CSW

meetings in New York. Other global-level engagements include collaborations with the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID); Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN); Women in Development Europe+ (WIDE+); *Coordinadora de la Mujer* (Women's Coordinator); Forum of Women NGOs, Kyrgyzstan; and Programme on Women's Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (PWESCR). NETRIGHT is a member of the Women's Major Group; Women's Working Group for Financing for Development; and the Feminist Sector of the CSOs' Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE). Patricia Blankson-Akakpo serves as one of the co-chairs of CPDE.

Geographical Spread in Ghana and Membership Mobilisation

Concerned about its survival and direction, NETRIGHT decided that its member organisations should take turns to host the Network. In the early years, hosting responsibilities included providing office space, administrative and logistic support as well as financial management. The host organisation served as an information clearinghouse, calling and organising meetings, and disseminating the outcomes to members. NETRIGHT's action plans were also implemented by the host organisation. The first organisational host was the Gender Studies and Human Rights Documentation Centre (The Gender Centre). The Third World Network-Africa (TWN-Africa) was next to host NETRIGHT. The rotational hosting ended when TWN-Africa offered NETRIGHT permanent office space: first, a shared office with TWN-Africa's Gender Unit in its main office block and, later, a three-roomed outhouse with independent facilities. NETRIGHT maintains this structure as its permanent office.

Reflecting feminist principles of equality and absence of hierarchies in women's rights activism, NETRIGHT began with a flexible organisational structure, locating core decision-making in the general body of members. The daily implementation of the Network's activities was supervised by a representative of the hosting organisation. The Gender Centre, the Network's first host, provided its first convenor: Dorcas Coker-Appiah. The second convenor was Takyiwaa Manuh, a faculty member at the University of Ghana and a member of the steering committee. Dzodzi Tsikata, a representative of TWN-Africa, was the third to convene NETRIGHT.

As the Network's tasks expanded and its operations became more complex, some organisational re-ordering became necessary. First, there was the need for an independent secretariat to take up implementation of NETRIGHT's

action plans and maintain contact with members. With the acquisition of a permanent office space, the basis for convening had to be delinked from hosting to enhance organisational efficiency. Thus, ABANTU for Development took up the convening of the Network under Rose Mensah-Kutin and the secretariat remained in the permanent office space provided by TWN-Africa. The fourth convenor, Rose Mensah-Kutin, served for six years, during which time she oversaw an institutionalisation process that specified a fixed three-year term, renewable once, for the positions of the convenor, deputy convenor and membership on the steering committee. The convenor and the deputy were to be elected from the steering committee. This arrangement allowed NETRIGHT to benefit from the wide range of its membership in the country and in different locations in the struggle for women's rights. I served as the fifth convenor, bringing an additional dimension to the structure. As a faculty member of the University of Cape Coast, my election meant that convening would now take place beyond the confines of the national capital where the secretariat was located. This further affirmed NETRIGHT's national base. Dorcas Coker-Appiah was the deputy-convenor. The current convenor, its sixth, is Pauline Vande-Pallen of TWN-Africa, with Adwoa Sakyi as the third deputy.

The unique feature of NETRIGHT is its national presence in all of Ghana's ten regions. "Focal points", individual or organisational members in the regions, carry out the regional activities and mobilise members for the Network. There are nine such focal points. The secretariat assumes responsibility for the Greater Accra Region, the national capital, where it is located. To date, the main governing and policy-setting body remains the annual general meeting (AGM), supported by the steering committee which interprets the decisions of the AGM and oversees the work of the secretariat. The latter implements decisions of the Network and works under the daily supervision of the convenor and deputy convenor. The convenors are in turn supported by the steering committee. NETRIGHT maintains a women-led structure, notwithstanding its national spread and diverse membership. Male members cannot take up leadership positions. Some men carry out the day-to-day activities of the Network and intervene in public spaces. However, they are barred from taking up positions within the steering committee or serving as focal points.

The initial structure was informed by two concerns. The first was to enhance members' ownership by avoiding a structured bureaucracy. The

second was to ensure organisational survival and encourage NETRIGHT's organisational independence in setting its own agenda. The latter informed the hosting arrangements, which were also about facilitating cost-sharing among members. Members volunteer their expertise and time to undertake programme activities. Convenorship and deputies, membership of the steering committee as well as focal points are non-remunerated positions.

NETRIGHT's Activities and Organisational Impact

The three key thematic focus areas that underpin NETRIGHT's activities – economic justice for women, gender and natural resources, and movement-building – are outlined in turn below.

i. Economic Justice for Women

NETRIGHT's economic-justice work is geared towards influencing macro-economic and social policies in order to secure and enhance women's livelihoods. NETRIGHT does this through policy dialogue and lobbying, by providing a gendered perspective on development financing and its effectiveness as well as national and local government development policies. The Network also strives to incorporate a gendered dimension into the policies and practices of Ghana's informal economy, particularly cross-border and local trade as well as market spaces.

NETRIGHT's activities that are designed to shape economic policy-making at the national and local government levels include gender analyses of the first and second Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy (GPRS 1 and 2), district-level development plans as well as the national social-protection schemes. In November 2001, NETRIGHT organised a well-attended seminar on the GPRS Paper, drawing participants from all the ten regions of Ghana. The seminar highlighted the absence of a gender focus in the GPRSP as well as the flaws inherent in its neoliberal agenda for eradicating poverty in Ghana. Using the outcome of the seminar, NETRIGHT made a presentation at a World Bank-sponsored forum on the subject later that year. The occasion was used to restate the Network's position on the inability of the GPRS Paper to deal with the gendered systems and structures underlying women's poverty in Ghana. NETRIGHT refused to endorse the GPRS process, yet documentation on the process states that the Network's members provided technical support.

Other activities within the economic justice thematic focus are gender budgeting initiatives at the local and national government level. NETRIGHT's position is that there is a need to promote and expand the critical engagement of women's rights groups in economic policy-making. Accordingly, NETRIGHT organised an Economic Justice Capacity Building training workshop from 30 May to 6 June 2010 to build the capabilities of members and grassroots women to engage effectively in national, sectoral and local government budget processes.

ii. Gender and Natural Resources

The gender and natural resources thematic area aims at protecting women's livelihoods, with particular emphasis on land access and ownership. This includes monitoring the impact of the extractive industries' land use and acquisitions on women's health and economic and social wellbeing. The activities consist of research and advocacy in the oil and gas and gold-mining sectors. NETRIGHT undertook research on the announcement of Ghana's oil find, documenting women's concerns about the possible effects of oil drilling on health and livelihoods in fringe communities (NETRIGHT, 2004). The findings were used to engage parliamentarians and other actors during the development of legislation to govern Ghana's infant oil and gas industry. NETRIGHT's activities in 2014 led to the formation of women accountability committees in selected districts to engage actors in the oil and gas sector.

iii. Movement-building

Movement-building is a core pillar of NETRIGHT's organisational activity, since it underpins the Network's existence and capacity to engage policy; it is also the basis for NETRIGHT's legitimacy in claiming to promote women's rights. Through mobilising and activism, NETRIGHT works at all times to multiply its organisational platforms in order to expand its reach and enhance impact. Multilevel strategies are adopted, with the choice of activities being directed by the belief that information-sharing, regular membership meetings, partnerships, collaboration and networking with similar-minded organisations will maximise resource utilisation to achieve results. Specific activities include those designed to strengthen the Network's internal capacity; raising the secretarial staff knowledge base; and an expansion of policy engagement platforms.

Beyond its mandatory internal, membership and steering committee meetings, NETRIGHT serves as a broad front for mobilising women. The Network was thus responsible for mobilising women's groups to make inputs into the Constitutional review process, participating in the ongoing discussion of bills related to spousal and property rights in marriage and affirmative action. Moreover, NETRIGHT holds an end-of-year event to present and discuss a review of local, regional and global events affecting women's lives during that year. The 2003 and 2008 reviews have been compiled and published (NETRIGHT, 2009). The events provide a broad forum reaching beyond NETRIGHT's members and expanding the basis for developing focus areas for the following year. This forum has also served as a mobilising platform.

Setting Up for Survival: Challenges and Prospects

One struggle facing NETRIGHT is funding and organisational flexibility in its structure. NETRIGHT was envisaged as a membership-owned network dependent on the internal resources – financial, material and human – of its members, devoid of donor support. This was a decision that founding members felt was necessary in order to maintain NETRIGHT's independence and retain its political focus. The expansion in the focus of the Network and recognition of its role as the lead organ of women's rights and gender equality work in Ghana brought demands that the voluntary approach could not meet. Funds from membership dues were simply inadequate. First were the demands on their time as members advanced in their fulltime careers and assumed senior-level responsibilities. Second was the nature of some demands requiring specialised skills outside the pool of members, a necessity since it was important to maintain the credibility that NETRIGHT had developed over time. Such expertise often had financial implications. An additional challenge was legitimacy within the Ghanaian legal framework for the operation of civil society groups. These demands were a clear signal that some element of structure was important.

The need for a permanent secretariat to manage NETRIGHT's affairs saw the appointment of the first programme officer, hired to take charge of the daily administrative tasks, which had previously been the responsibility of the hosting institution. Patricia Blankson-Akakpo has held the position since the second convenor assumed office. Other programme staff have

been Afua Ansre, Selina Owusu, Ruth Grant Antwi, Joyce Nyame, Amba Mensah-Forson, Cynthia Sunu, Grace Quarshie and Samuel Pappoe. In 2015, as part of wide-ranging institutional reform, the position of executive director was created to take up additional responsibility hived from the role of the convenor, thus reducing the latter's supervisory duties. Patricia Blankson-Akakpo was appointed to this position. Her wealth of institutional memory and political commitment smoothed the transition. The drawback, however, has been a reduction in the direct engagement of members in NETRIGHT's implementation activities. What this portends, in terms of members' connectedness with the Network, remains a question for future events to reveal.

The second thorny issue remains financing, bringing with it an additional requirement, that of formalising NETRIGHT's status within Ghanaian law. In 2004, the question of registration was raised and shelved. Later, however, NETRIGHT was registered as a limited liability organisation. Slowly, the steering committee moved into raising funds from a very select group of funders of women's rights work, such as the African Women's Development Fund. But as opportunities for institutional funding shrink, NETRIGHT has found itself having to pursue project funding. Although the choice has always been selective, focusing on its thematic areas, the demands have sometimes reduced NETRIGHT's spontaneity to act on critical emerging issues on the national landscape. Even more critical has been the health of its member organisations and their ability to hold onto *their* thematic focus in the women's rights space, making additional demands on NETRIGHT to expand its remit.

At the beginning of 2017, there were four paid staff members working for NETRIGHT: the executive director, two part-time officers and one intern. Funding to enable NETRIGHT to maintain its independence and secure its space within the national women's rights front remains a real challenge, which appears difficult to resolve in the short term. The survival of NETRIGHT calls for a re-conceptualisation of women's rights activism in ways that seem to require a bureaucratic structure that retains mobilising possibilities. Right now, the secretariat remains the face of the Network and serves as a pillar in NETRIGHT's survival.

NETRIGHT has a vibrant record of women's organising since the 1990s. Current expectations of the network have expanded, even as the material

base for its work has constricted. NETRIGHT's participatory research with women in communities affected by oil and gas extraction provides an example of how women's voices and change-making potential have been amplified through the formation of structures for engagement with key actors in the oil and gas sector. Addressing NETRIGHT's prospects for the future raises the question of how to organise in a way that creates a balance between structure and broader participation. *How* this strategic balance is to be achieved will call for innovative thinking and deepening our conceptions of appropriate organisational functioning for the collective advancement of women's rights and gender equality.

Endnotes

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