PROTECTING ELECTIONS IN GHANA

Addressing Discrimination, Exclusion, and Gender-Based Violence in Electoral Processes

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ghana is widely recognized as a resilient democracy in West Africa, having sustained constitutional governance and conducted nine consecutive multiparty general elections since 1992. Strong electoral administration, judicial dispute resolution, an active civil society, political parties committed to democratic principles and well-informed electorates have enabled the country to manage electoral tensions and preserve institutional stability.

Despite these strengths, Ghana's electoral processes continue to face significant inclusion challenges. Women remain underrepresented in political decision making, and evidence from recent electoral cycles indicates persistent gender-based discrimination, intimidation, and both offline and online gender-based violence targeting women candidates and political actors. Persons with disabilities and other marginalized groups also encounter barriers that limit full and equal participation and representation. Underpinning these political inequalities are persistent gender norms and structural inequalities shaping access to political power.

This case study examines Ghana's institutional mechanisms and response capacity regarding the risks of exclusion, discrimination and gender-based violence in its electoral processes. International IDEA's Integrated Framework for Protecting Elections is applied in the analysis, meaning that three perspectives (or 'lenses') will be used: risk management, resilience-building and crisis management capabilities. The case study outlines key strengths and areas for improvement.

Evidence from recent electoral cycles indicates persistent gender-based discrimination, intimidation, and both offline and online gender-based violence.

Ghana has a strong electoral governance framework to manage generalized electoral violence and political contestation, which includes constitutional guarantees of universal suffrage, institutional safeguards administered by the Electoral Commission and preventive dialogue mechanisms such as the Inter-Party Advisory Committee. The institutional mechanisms that help ease electoral tensions and maintain political stability include coordinated multi-agency election security arrangements, the use of judicial processes to adjudicate electoral disputes and the active role of civil society organizations in election observation and peacebuilding. Coordinated security deployment during elections, established legal procedures for dispute adjudication and the active role of civil society in election observation all help to absorb political tensions and to sustain electoral continuity and public confidence in the electoral process.

Mechanisms specifically addressing gender-based violence and political exclusion are less well developed. Institutional responses to harassment, intimidation and online abuse are often fragmented and slow, partly because Ghana's legal framework does not specifically define or regulate gender-based violence in the electoral context. The preventive architecture that mitigates generalized electoral violence through legal safeguards, institutional coordination and dialogue mechanisms is insufficiently attuned to gender-based violence, digital harassment and informal political practices that disproportionately disadvantage women. Post-election responses tend to prioritize procedural stability over victim-centred remedies or addressing gendered harms. While legislation such as the Cybersecurity Act (2020) provides a general basis for addressing online abuse, it is not applied with an electoral or gender-responsive lens. As a result, women candidates who experience online harassment, reputational attacks and intimidation during campaigns often have limited avenues for accessing institutional support.

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Overall, Ghana's electoral system remains resilient in sustaining electoral continuity and managing generalized political contestation, but less effective in ensuring inclusive participation and protection from gender-based harm. Strengthening election protection therefore requires moving beyond strong electoral administration and reliance on civil society as a compensatory 'absorber' to embedding anti-violence and gender-responsive measures within electoral laws, institutional coordination and operational practice. Priority areas include clarifying and enforcing protections against gender-based violence in elections (including online abuse), establishing faster and more victim-centred reporting and response pathways, and strengthening accountability within political parties—particularly during party primaries where intimidation and exclusion are frequently reported. Without such deliberate reforms, Ghana risks preserving stability in form while allowing discriminatory practices that weaken democratic inclusion.

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

Ghana represents a significant case of democratic resilience in West Africa, having maintained constitutional rule and conducted nine consecutive multiparty general elections since the return to democratic governance in 1992, including multiple peaceful transfers of power between rival political parties (GNA 2024; Selormey and Akagbor 2025). Supported by an independent Electoral Commission and a well-established judicial dispute resolution system, this record positions Ghana as a regional democratic model. However, this procedural success coexists with persistent gaps in inclusion, safety and participation that challenge the quality of substantive democratic governance.

The most visible challenge is the political marginalization of women. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and recent legislative advances, women remain underrepresented in elected office. Women currently hold 14.9 per cent (41 of 276) of parliamentary seats. Representation in local assemblies stands at about 4.1 per cent, while women occupy less than 20 per cent of substantive ministerial positions (iKNOW Politics 2026; Apprey 2025). These figures persist despite the passage of the Affirmative Action (Gender Equity) Act 2024 (Act 1121), and the appointment of a female vice president. Post-2024 election outcomes indicate that structural and political barriers continue to constrain women's participation. This exclusion persists despite 72 per cent of Ghanaians supporting equal opportunities for women to be elected to political offices (Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny and Dome 2020).

Intersecting structural barriers sustains this representation gap. Women are more likely to have lower levels of formal education and limited access to financial resources—there is a 19-percentage-point gender gap in bank account ownership—restricting their capacity to finance campaigns. A 17-point gender gap in regular Internet use further marginalizes women from online political engagement and campaign visibility (Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny and Dome 2020). These constraints operate within persistent gender norms and structural inequalities that shape perception of political leadership and access to decision-making roles. Recent evidence indicates that female politicians face multiple gender-specific barriers, including targeted online harassment, ridicule and threats that stigmatize and intimidate women but not their male counterparts (MFWA 2024; Madsen, Shingirai and Mandiedza 2025; Asare and Agomor 2023; George and Braimah 2021).

In the digital era, exclusion increasingly manifests as online gender-based violence (OGBV). Female politicians and aspirants face coordinated attacks including hate speech, cyber harassment and image-based abuse (MFWA 2024). Notably, 48 per cent of comments on online news stories about female politicians contain elements of OGBV, higher than abuse recorded on their personal pages—suggesting that women's visibility in formal political spaces triggers targeted hostility (MFWA 2024). These patterns align with global evidence on technology-facilitated violence against women in politics (UN Women 2025). Sustained abuse contributes to self-censorship, psychological distress and withdrawal from political engagement.

Ghana represents a significant case of democratic resilience in West Africa.

Strong institutional capacity for electoral administration and dispute resolution exists alongside systemic exclusion and emerging digital violence.

Ghana thus presents a democratic paradox: strong institutional capacity for electoral administration and dispute resolution exists alongside systemic exclusion and emerging digital violence that suppress meaningful participation. The analytical focus therefore shifts from preventing electoral breakdown to safeguarding electoral quality, inclusivity and equity. Ghana provides a useful case for examining how democracies confront embedded inequalities.

This study applies International IDEA's Integrated Framework for Protecting Elections to Ghana's management of exclusion, discrimination and gender-based violence (GBV) in its electoral process. It assesses the electoral ecosystem's capacities for prevention, resilience and recovery against these challenges. Drawing on Ghana's legal framework, institutional strategies and empirical studies on political participation and online violence, the analysis identifies systemic strengths and critical gaps. The purpose is to generate evidence-based insights for strengthening electoral integrity, offering transferable lessons for Ghana and similar democracies confronting the challenge of safeguarding not just electoral processes, but equitable participation within them.

1. PREVENTION

Ghana's preventive architecture against electoral exclusion, discrimination and GBV is grounded in a combination of formal legal-institutional frameworks and informal, dialogue-based mechanisms designed to manage electoral risks before they escalate. The foundation is established by the 1992 Constitution of the Republic of Ghana.

Legal and constitutional safeguards

The Constitution outlines provisions for inclusivity and non-discrimination in electoral participation (Ghana 1992). Article 42 guarantees voting rights to every citizen aged 18 years or older and 'of sound mind' who has registered with the Electoral Commission. This constitutional guarantee establishes universal adult suffrage as a justiciable right and provides the benchmark against which implementation must be assessed. In practice, Ghana has consistently operationalized this provision through nationwide voter registration exercises and periodic general elections. To minimize exclusion arising from the constraints of biometric registration, the Electoral Commission of Ghana has adopted accommodation measures for persons with amputated upper limbs or missing fingers, allowing facial-only identification on election day. However, administrative challenges during voter registration and occasional disputes over voter eligibility demonstrate that constitutional guarantees require continuous administrative reinforcement to ensure their full realization.

The Electoral Commission Act 1993 charges the Electoral Commission of Ghana with administering free and fair elections. Under this act, the

Commission has implemented several measures to improve fairness, such as institutionalizing the Inter-Party Advisory Committee (IPAC) to foster consensus; and the use of biometric verification devices (BVD) to prevent multiple voting. These measures have contributed to reducing overt electoral malpractice. The Commission's vision, articulated in its Strategic Plan 2016–2020, commits it to becoming a 'World class, trusted and independent' body and explicitly links electoral integrity to public trust and inclusivity (Electoral Commission 2016).

Complementing these institutional safeguards, Ghana's electoral management body (EMB) has introduced inclusive voter education strategies that take into account language diversity, literacy levels, disability status and gender. Illustrated and pictorial educational materials are used to enhance comprehension among low-literacy voters, while simplified ballot design—featuring horizontally aligned candidate photographs, party symbols and voting boxes—facilitates participation for these and other voters with reading difficulties. Nonetheless, periodic political contestation surrounding voter register revisions and procurement processes indicates that perceptions of EMB neutrality and public trust remain politically sensitive.

To address participation gaps affecting persons with disabilities (PwDs), the Persons with Disability Act 2006 mandates the EMB to make polling stations and voting materials accessible. Similarly, the Representation of the People Law 1992 guarantees accessible voting facilities for all Ghanaians. In implementing this, the Commission has introduced priority voting for pregnant women, lactating mothers, the aged and PwDs; redesigned polling booths to accommodate wheelchair users; selected registration and polling sites with improved physical accessibility; and provided tactile ballot jackets to support visually impaired voters, thereby enhancing ballot secrecy and independence. The EMB also engages sign language interpreters during voter education programmes and has developed an election lexicon in Ghanaian Sign Language for hearing-impaired citizens. However, accessibility for PwDs remains uneven across polling stations, particularly in rural or resource-constrained areas. This suggests that although statutory intent is being actively implemented, full compliance is constrained by financial, logistical and enforcement limitations.

Another significant legislative advance for inclusion is the enactment of the Affirmative Action (Gender Equity) Act 2024 (Act 1121), which establishes mandatory representation thresholds for women in elected and appointed public offices (Parliament of Ghana 2024).

In parallel, the EMB has undertaken sensitization workshops for women's groups and, for the 2024 general elections, introduced partial waivers of filing fees for female candidates and candidates with disabilities. Yet the broader transformative impact of the act will depend on the development of clear regulations, enforcement guidelines, monitoring mechanisms and sustained funding. Without these steps, the law's ambitions cannot be fully realized.

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Institutional and dialogue-based prevention mechanisms

The cornerstone of Ghana's preventive dialogue infrastructure is the IPAC, a formal consultative forum convened by the Electoral Commission with all registered political parties. IPAC serves as a pre-emptive conflict mitigation mechanism, building consensus on electoral calendars, regulations and procedures before disputes escalate.

The EMB further engages in a multi-stakeholder approach, collaborating with the National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE) on voter education and with state security agencies on joint election planning—recognizing that electoral integrity requires coordinated action beyond a single institution (Electoral Commission 2016). In addition, targeted sensitization engagements with women's groups, disability organizations, youth groups and other civil society actors function as supplementary preventive platforms: by reducing misinformation, strengthening participation awareness and addressing potential grievances before election day.

Gaps nevertheless remain in addressing identity-based risks, particularly concerning gender. While the Affirmative Action Act 2024 (Act 1121) addresses representation, complementary legislation targeting electoral violence remains absent. The Cybersecurity Act 2020 (Act 1038) provides a general legal basis for addressing online harassment, but is not applied with a specific electoral or gendered lens and enforcement is reportedly weak (MFWA 2024). No law specifically defines or penalizes gender-based violence in the electoral context, leaving identity-driven intimidation—particularly OGBV—not yet fully covered by Ghana's electoral framework.

Management safeguards: Mandate and implementation

An analysis of the Electoral Commission's 2024–2027 Medium-Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF) Programme-Based Budget suggests that inclusion objectives are not consistently reflected in dedicated budgetary allocations. Most resources are allocated to the core operational programmes (Management and Administration and Electoral Services), with no discrete funded programme for gender inclusion, GBV prevention (online or otherwise) or accessibility (Ministry of Finance 2023). Related activities are subsumed under generic categories, limiting prioritization.

From a management safeguards perspective, effective prevention requires institutionalized planning, dedicated budgeting and mandatory compliance mechanisms. As we have seen, these are not yet embedded.

Formal prevention mechanisms issued by the EMB do not currently mandate interventions addressing discriminatory norms.

Specifically, formal prevention mechanisms such as electoral regulations, administrative directives, interparty agreements and operational guidelines issued by the EMB do not currently mandate interventions addressing discriminatory norms. There is no requirement for gender-sensitivity training for the EMB's approximately 300,000 temporary election officials, nor for security personnel deployed during elections. Enforcement of political parties' internal codes of conduct—to sanction members who perpetrate harassment or discrimination—appears uneven. This allows patriarchal attitudes, identified

as root causes of OGBV, to persist (MFWA 2024). Female politicians continue to face character assassination and stigmatization (MFWA 2024), while institutional frameworks remain inadequately equipped to address such gendered political violence (Schneider and Carroll 2020).

Digital and political finance risks

Prevention of electoral risks is notably weak in the digital arena, where electoral discourse is increasingly located. Although digital technologies can ideally enhance both electoral communication and transparency, regulation remains critically underdeveloped, leaving them open to widespread misuse. This includes amplifying harmful narratives, including by framing stories about female politicians in ways that provoke abusive public commentary (MFWA 2024). More generally, social media platforms can be weaponized for coordinated disinformation campaigns. Research indicates that female politicians are disproportionately targeted by character assassination strategies that draw on gender stereotypes and manipulated narratives to undermine their credibility and political legitimacy (Rusidze 2019). As in many countries, the Ghanaian EMB's strategic focus on positive use of digital technology for efficiency and innovation has not been matched by initiatives to prevent its malicious use by other electoral actors.

Another phenomenon deepening gender gaps in political participation is the significant role of financial resources in political competition. While bribery is criminalized under the Representation of the People Law 1992 (PNDCL 284) where money or gifts are given to induce voting, broader monetization of political competition often goes unpunished. These informal financing practices operate outside preventive oversight mechanisms. Women, who often have less access than men not only to campaign funds but also to the networks, patronage ties, visibility and institutional support through which political finance is mobilized and exchanged (and sometimes 'paid back' in non-monetary ways), are disproportionately disadvantaged by these practices, narrowing their opportunities within party primaries and electoral contests.

In summary, Ghana has established a functional preventive infrastructure capable of mitigating large-scale electoral violence and managing interparty competition through formal dialogue and law. The passage of the Affirmative Action Act (2024) represents a critical evolution in this framework. However, the preventive system remains insufficiently attuned to gender and other social dimensions of risk. While it effectively safeguards the procedural continuity of electoral processes, it does not adequately ensure the safety and equitable participation of all citizens.

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2. RESILIENCE

This section examines Ghana's institutional and societal capacity to absorb and adapt to incidents of exclusion, discrimination and GBV and to continue functioning when these occur during electoral periods.

Ghana's resilience is most visible during periods of heightened electoral tension.

Institutional response to electoral violence and tension

Ghana's resilience is most visible during periods of heightened electoral tension, when localized violence and intimidation threaten electoral processes. Historical elections, particularly in 2008 and 2012, recorded clashes between party supporters, destruction of campaign materials and intimidation at polling stations (WANEP 2021). During such periods, the National Election Security Taskforce (NESTF), led by the Ghana Police Service, plays a central coordination role. Anchored in the Public Order Act, 1994 (Act 491), the NESTF deploys security personnel to hotspots, conducts joint patrols and operates situation rooms for real-time monitoring (WANEP 2021).

Security services trained to protect polling stations and electoral materials have generally succeeded in maintaining physical order and preventing escalation. However, gendered limitations remain evident. Female candidates and voters frequently report that police personnel lack training to address gender-based intimidation, often dismissing harassment as 'political rivalry' rather than criminal behaviour (Bob-Milliar 2014; MFWA 2024). Evidence from the 2016 and 2024 elections indicates that some female aspirants in Greater Accra were physically blocked from party meetings or threatened during primaries by male rivals and party foot soldiers (Addae 2024).

Judicial resilience and election dispute resolution

The judiciary constitutes a major pillar of electoral resilience. The 2012 presidential election petition, *Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo and Others v. John Dramani Mahama and Others*, demonstrated the Supreme Court's capacity to adjudicate high-stakes disputes transparently and peacefully. The proceedings of the eight-month long adjudication process were televised to enhance legitimacy and reinforce the constitutional order (Nkansah and Gawu 2020). At the parliamentary level, election petitions adjudicated at the High Court further illustrate the judiciary's stabilizing function, as provided for under the 1992 Constitution of Ghana and the Representation of the People Law (PNDCL 284). These pieces of legislations establish formal legal procedures for contesting electoral outcomes and resolving disputes through the courts.

However, judicial resilience is less effective in addressing gender-based electoral violence. Legal processes concerning harassment or intimidation of female candidates are often costly and protracted, with judgments delivered long after electoral cycles conclude. As a result, women and marginalized groups rarely obtain timely protection or remedy (MFWA 2024; Schneider and Carroll 2020). Judicial mechanisms largely restore procedural legitimacy but do not adequately redress gendered harm experienced during campaigns and primaries.

Civil society as a shock absorber

Civil society organizations (CSOs) serve as adaptive buffers within Ghana's electoral ecosystem. The Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (CODEO) has played a particularly important role. During the 2012 elections, CODEO conducted a large-scale observer mission and implemented parallel vote tabulation (PVT), independently verifying presidential election results and

countering misinformation in the immediate post-election period (CODEO 2012; Gyimah-Boadi and Yakah 2012). The PVT approach has since been institutionalized within Ghana's broader electoral reform framework (Electoral Commission 2016).

Peacebuilding CSOs such as the West African Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) and the National Peace Council (NPC) further contribute through early-warning systems, community-level conflict monitoring and preventive mediation. They facilitate dialogue among local party actors, promote peace pledges and de-escalate tensions before they intensify (WANEP 2024; NPC 2024). Reports from the 2024 elections suggest these interventions were particularly effective in competitive constituencies in Greater Accra and Northern Ghana (Addae 2024).

Electoral resilience extends beyond results management to protecting marginalized political actors. Gender-focused CSOs such as ABANTU for Development build resilience through mobilization and capacity support for women candidates (see Annex A.1). They also reinforce accountability through election observation and documentation (see Annex A.2), while channelling grievances into formal democratic mechanisms, including courts and mediation, to mitigate escalation (see Annex A.3).

Resilience gaps

Despite operational strengths, Ghana's electoral framework remains insufficiently resilient to gender-based exclusion, especially in the digital sphere. As already noted, female politicians are disproportionately targeted with online harassment, hate speech, and gendered disinformation, which undermine their political participation and visibility (MFWA 2024; Rusidze 2019). Aiming to silence and delegitimize women in politics, these attacks often target (or purport to target) morality, competence and personal identity.

Although the Cybersecurity Authority (established under Act 1038 2020) provides a statutory framework for digital protection, enforcement remains slow and reactive (MFWA 2024). During the 2024 elections, Daily Graphic and Citi News reported coordinated smear campaigns against female parliamentary and municipal candidates in Greater Accra and Ashanti regions. In the absence of swift institutional intervention, many affected women relied on self-help strategies, including temporary withdrawal from digital platforms and reliance on informal networks to report abuse (see MFWA 2024 and linked Monitoring Report). This dynamic reflects that responsibility for resilience responses often falls to individuals, indicating a need for more institutionalized support mechanisms.

Additionally, Ghanaian society is shaped by gendered norms and power structures in which men are more likely to occupy positions of authority, to influence political leadership and moral decision making, and to enjoy control over productive resources. This deeply entrenched structure is not merely a system of governance but a cultural blueprint that shapes values and behavioural expectations across all levels of interaction; these norms influence

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how power is distributed and maintained. For instance, men are often seen as primary decision makers and providers, while women are frequently relegated to caregiving and domestic responsibilities, regardless of their capabilities or aspirations.

Within the political space, Ghana's patriarchal society accounts for the low representation of women in Ghana's Parliament (Amoah 2024). Legal reforms (particularly, the effective implementation of the Affirmative Action Act), community engagements and women's empowerment initiatives have been identified as necessary to break this barrier.

Resilience deficits are also evident regarding PwDs. Although accessibility measures exist (as discussed), observer reports indicate that when specialized aids were missing or polling staff were under-trained on their use, no 'fallback' protocols were activated, resulting in the direct disenfranchisement of vulnerable voters (CODEO 2022).

Political party conduct and internal resilience

Ghana's political parties demonstrate limited internal resilience against discriminatory practices. Female aspirants frequently report intimidation, smear campaigns and financial sabotage by male competitors, patterns consistent with the concept of 'low-intensity violence' (Bob-Milliar 2014). These tactics, though not always overtly violent, effectively reinforce male dominance within party structures.

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Empirical research shows that party primaries constitute major barriers to women's advancement. Monetized competition, weak enforcement of internal rules and tolerance of intimidation undermine accountability (Bauer and Darkwah 2021). Thus entrenched, party dynamics explain Ghana's stalled progress in women's parliamentary representation despite overall democratic stability (Bauer 2019).

In the 2024 primaries, media reports documented cases in Accra where women withdrew due to sustained harassment and lack of credible internal dispute resolution mechanisms (Addae 2024). Such withdrawals align with findings that hostile electoral environments reduce women's political participation (Umar 2017). Comparative evidence further indicates that exposure to intimidation negatively affects women's long-term legislative representation (Wood 2024).

These patterns reveal that political parties themselves often do not yet fully function as resilient institutions capable of protecting their members. Internal party dynamics therefore contribute to systemic exclusion and constrain the broader resilience of Ghana's electoral democracy.

3. **RECOVERY**

This section examines Ghana's formal and informal frameworks for recovering from crises arising from exclusion, discrimination and GBV in elections. It assesses preparedness, responsiveness, recovery mechanisms and the extent of institutional learning and reform following such incidents.

Formal legal and institutional mandates for post-election recovery

Ghana's principal formal recovery mechanism for major electoral crises is the constitutional and legal framework governing election petitions and dispute resolution. The Public Elections Regulations 2020 (CI 127) provide the legal pathway for challenging parliamentary and presidential election results through the High Court and Supreme Court, respectively. This structured judicial route anchors post-crisis restoration of legitimacy and confidence in the constitutional order. Resolution of the aforementioned presidential election petition in 2012 drew attention to the capacity of constitutional adjudication to absorb political conflict and restore institutional stability (Nkansah and Gawu 2020; Braimah and Bawah 2019).

Beyond the judiciary, the EMB's mandate under the Electoral Commission Act 1993 (Act 451) includes ongoing review and reform of electoral processes. Following past challenges, the Commission has undertaken internal reviews and strategic planning exercises framed as recovery responses. After the disputed 2012 polls, its 2016–2020 strategic plan considered the need to address prior weaknesses by identifying reputational risk and proposing a comprehensive 're-launch' of internal systems (Electoral Commission 2016).

Nevertheless, this formal recovery architecture concentrates predominantly on procedural legitimacy—counting, dispute resolution and results transmission—while placing less emphasis on recovery processes related to exclusion and gender-based harm.

Post-crisis reforms and institutional learning: Successes and limitations

Ghana has demonstrated procedural learning following electoral disruption. After the widely observed irregularities in the 2008 elections, the country transitioned to biometric voter registration and verification systems to strengthen voter identification and reduce multiple voting (Electoral Commission 2016). Following the 2012 petition, it expanded training for election officials and explored electronic transmission systems to improve transparency and efficiency in results management. These reforms have been embedded in successive iterations of the Public Elections Regulations, evolving from CI 15 (1996) to CI 127 (2020), reflecting incremental legislative and regulatory adaptation (Gbati 2024).

However, institutional learning has remained narrowly framed around administrative and technical integrity rather than social inclusion or protection from gendered harm. Technical reforms are politically less contentious because they do not disrupt entrenched power relations (Bauer 2019; Wood 2024). By contrast, reforms aimed at dismantling exclusionary practices,

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such as expanding women's electoral participation, are likely to encounter resistance within political and institutional hierarchies. Consequently, Ghana's recovery trajectory reflects robust procedural stabilization without equivalent transformation in addressing structural discrimination.

The critical gap: Recovery and support for women targeted

A key opportunity to strengthen Ghana's recovery framework lies in addressing the absence of formal support systems for victims of electoral violence and discrimination. When female politicians are subjected to coordinated online attacks, threats or harassment, state systems provide no dedicated mechanisms for psychosocial recovery, legal assistance or protective intervention. Monitoring by the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA 2024) documented substantial digital abuse against women political actors during the electoral cycle. Affected individuals largely relied on personal coping strategies, including digital detoxification, moderation of online engagement and informal support networks.

This pattern mirrors weaknesses in Ghana's response to GBV more generally. Research on women's rights and judicial practice indicates that recovery from violence, whether domestic or political, remains individualized, with institutions slow to establish integrated support systems (Dowuona-Hammond, Atuguba and Tuokuu 2020; Bazaanah and Ngcobo 2024).

Beyond online abuse, recovery pathways are limited for groups systematically excluded from participation. PwDs, for example, report inconsistent access to accessible voting arrangements and materials such as tactile ballot jackets. Even where accommodation measures exist, implementation is uneven and frequently overlooked in high-pressure electoral environments, effectively disenfranchising affected voters (Amoah 2024). These patterns point to broader institutional gaps in supporting equitable participation and may limit meaningful recovery from episodes of exclusion.

Informal and multi-stakeholder recovery practices

Where formal, state-led mechanisms are insufficient, informal practices mediated by civil society and traditional institutions play a compensatory role. The NPC organizes post-election dialogues involving political party leaders, traditional authorities and faith actors to calm tensions and promote unity after contentious polls. Similarly, the NCCE's Inter-Party Dialogue Committees (IPDCs), established across all 276 districts, provide platforms for addressing localized election-related tensions.

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While these mechanisms mitigate elite-level conflict and symbolically restore calm, they rarely address grassroots experiences of discrimination or gender-based harm. This is largely because these platforms prioritize 'soft' mediation and social cohesion over the legal accountability required to punish perpetrators of gender-based political violence (Thalin 2025; Addae 2025)

The CSOs also contribute to informal recovery through independent observation and reporting. Groups such as CODEO and WANEP publish

post-election analyses documenting exclusion, violence and procedural irregularities. For instance, CODEO's election observation highlights the underrepresentation of women among polling officials, reflecting persistent gender imbalances in electoral administration (CODEO 2021). These reports function as shadow recovery pathways, generating public pressure for institutional accountability. Sustained advocacy from the Affirmative Action Bill Coalition was instrumental in the historic passage of the Affirmative Action (Gender Equity) Act 2024 (Act 1121), which mandates a 30 per cent threshold for women in public appointments, ensuring political inclusion.

Preparedness and future-oriented learning

The forward-looking dimension of recovery lies in preparedness: the integration of lessons from past crises into preventive systems. The EMB's strategic planning acknowledges the importance of institutional learning, including proposals for a Knowledge and Training Centre to institutionalize electoral best practices (Electoral Commission 2016).

However, 2024 Programme-Based Budget updates indicate that these initiatives remain incomplete, with continuing emphasis on administrative capacity rather than structural reforms. Transformative recovery would require measures currently absent, including mandatory gender and inclusion audits of electoral processes, gender-sensitive training for security personnel and rapid-response protocols for OGBV.

Academic literature reinforces these imperatives. A scoping review of GBV interventions in West Africa concludes that without targeted, multi-stakeholder approaches that engage law enforcement, EMBs and CSOs, gendered harms are likely to persist across electoral cycles (Agu et al. 2025; Thwala and Gana 2023).

Ghana's recovery framework is therefore effective in managing political and legal crises that threaten immediate electoral stability, primarily through judicial resolution and technical refinement. However, it remains limited in its capacity to address the social and discriminatory crises that undermine long-term electoral inclusivity.

The EMB's strategic planning acknowledges the importance of institutional learning.

4. CONCLUSION

This case study has examined Ghana's electoral system by highlighting the gaps and positive lessons for preventing, mitigating and dealing with exclusion, discrimination and GBV in electoral processes. Ghana's democratic trajectory remains a notable achievement within the West African subregion. The conduct of nine consecutive multiparty elections since 1992, including peaceful transfers of power in competitive elections, demonstrates a strong capacity for procedural continuity and institutional endurance. Electoral administration, judicial dispute resolution and civil society engagement have

collectively contributed to preventing electoral breakdown and sustaining public confidence during periods of heightened political tension.

However, the analysis shows that democratic resilience in Ghana is uneven. While the system is robust in managing generalized electoral violence and intense political competition it is less developed in addressing gender-based discrimination, exclusion and violence. Women's political participation and representation continue to be constrained by structural inequalities, discriminatory party practices, patriarchy, economic barriers and, lately, technology-facilitated abuse (OGBV). Evidence from recent elections indicates that online harassment, disinformation and intimidation have become normalized features of political competition. These disproportionately affect women candidates and are a hindrance to participation in public life; representation in electoral processes; and access to leadership and decision-making positions at all levels. These forms of harm rarely trigger timely or effective institutional responses, revealing a resilience gap that allows electoral processes to function while targeted exclusion persists.

As evidenced by this case study, Ghana's recovery mechanisms are primarily procedural and legalistic. Judicial adjudication of election disputes and post-election technical reforms have been effective in restoring political order and improving administrative efficiency. However, recovery from GBV and exclusion remains largely individualized. Victims of intimidation, harassment or political marginalization receive little formal psychosocial, legal or institutional support. As a result, the underlying conditions that enable discrimination are reproduced across electoral cycles, undermining inclusion in the electoral process.

The CSOs emerge as critical shock absorbers within this landscape. Through election observation, parallel vote tabulation, peacebuilding initiatives and advocacy, they have helped stabilize the electoral environment and maintain public trust during moments of uncertainty. Yet, reliance on civil society to compensate for institutional weaknesses highlights a deeper structural challenge: that of formalizing and institutionalizing resilience within the electoral governance framework. Political parties in particular exhibit low internal resilience; party primaries remain spaces where intimidation, exclusion and gendered violence are tolerated or inadequately addressed.

A resilient electoral system must also protect the rights, safety and participation of all stakeholders.

The findings suggest that resilience should not be assessed solely by the absence of large-scale violence or electoral collapse. A resilient electoral system must also protect the rights, safety and participation of all stakeholders, especially those historically marginalized. Similarly, recovery should extend beyond restoring political stability to include restorative justice, institutional learning and reforms that address power imbalances and discriminatory social norms and practices.

Overall, Ghana's electoral system is resilient in maintaining continuity but less so in ensuring inclusivity and safety. Without deliberate efforts to integrate anti-violence and gender-responsive measures into electoral legislation and governance, democracy risks becoming strong and stable in form but

weakened in substance. Strengthening resilience therefore requires a shift from managing elections successfully to ensuring that elections are genuinely fair, safe and accessible to all citizens.

ABBREVIATIONS

CODEO   Coalition of Domestic Election Observers

CSO   Civil society organization

EMB   Electoral management body

GBV   Gender-based violence

IPAC   Inter-Party Advisory Committee

NCCE   National Commission for Civic Education

NESTF   National Election Security Taskforce

NPC   National Peace Council

OGBV   Online gender-based violence

PVT   Parallel vote tabulation

PwDs   Persons with disabilities

WANEP   West Africa Network for Peacebuilding

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ANNEX A. INTERVIEW EXTRACTS

A.1. Mobilization and capacity building

What we do is to work with the women for them to offer themselves to be elected. When you want to do that, it means that you have to mobilize, build capacity and also protect and secure their well-being. The mobilization is not easy because you have to go round the country, down to the district assembly level, identify those who are interested, bring them together, and support them. We help them understand what it means to stand for elections and how to prepare themselves. (KII, CSO)

A.2. Observation and documentation

Because of the work we've done on elections, we were supported by ECOWAS to be part of the young people's observation of the elections. We also support other organizations working on elections. On election day, we were often the first point of contact for organizing women to share their experiences,

whether the process was smooth or whether they faced challenges. We believe documenting these experiences is very important. (KII, CSO)

A.3. Democratic dispute resolution and mediation

In Ghana, civil society is vibrant. We try to use democratic means to resolve whatever challenges come. That includes using the courts, setting up committees, mediation processes, and drawing on the international community because they come for election observation. We rely on their reports to address some of the challenges that arise during elections rather than allowing issues to escalate. (KII, CSO)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Henrietta Asante-Sarpong is a research scientist, gender and inclusion practitioner and programme management specialist with a PhD in Development Studies. She has close to a decade's experience in conducting citizen-based pre-election studies, election observation and civic engagements on participatory democracy. In 2021 she led the development of a maiden Gender Policy for Ghana's National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE) to enhance inclusivity in the Commission's work. Currently, Dr Asante-Sarpong is the Director of the NCCE's Research, Monitoring and Evaluation Department. In this capacity, she leads and coordinates all research, monitoring and evaluation assignments of the NCCE and also serves as primary focal person for gender and inclusion.

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ABOUT INTERNATIONAL IDEA

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization with the mission to advance democracy worldwide, as a universal human aspiration and enabler of sustainable development. We do this by supporting the building, strengthening and safeguarding of democratic political institutions and processes at all levels. Our vision is a world in which democratic processes, actors and institutions are inclusive and accountable and deliver sustainable development to all.

What we do
In our work we focus on three main impact areas: electoral processes; constitution-building processes; and political participation and representation. The themes of gender and inclusion, conflict sensitivity and sustainable development are mainstreamed across all our areas of work.

International IDEA provides analyses of global and regional democratic trends; produces comparative knowledge on democratic practices; offers technical assistance and capacity building on reform to actors engaged in democratic processes; and convenes dialogue on issues relevant to the public debate on democracy and democracy building.
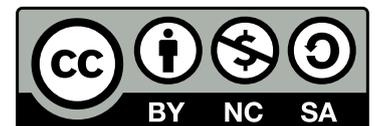
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Our headquarters are located in Stockholm, and we have regional and country offices in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe, and Latin America and the Caribbean. International IDEA is a Permanent Observer to the United Nations and is accredited to European Union institutions.

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