

# She builds the future: Why Ghana cannot afford to leave women behind

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**A**CROSS Ghana and the wider global south, the sectors shaping national development — engineering, entrepreneurship, the built environment and law — remain overwhelmingly male-dominated.

Yet, these are precisely the spaces where decisions about infrastructure, economic access and governance are made. Who designs our cities, who builds our roads, who drafts our policies- these are not neutral questions. They determine whose needs are met and whose futures are prioritised.

At the She Builds Conference, convened by The Academic Woman Foundation, a diverse group of policymakers, academics, industry

leaders and emerging professionals came together with a shared concern: progress on women's inclusion in these sectors has been far too slow. But the conversations went further than identifying the problem. They exposed something more fundamental: women are not absent because they lack ambition or ability.

They are excluded because the systems governing these sectors were not designed with them in mind.

## System that selects, not one that includes

The narrative that women are "not ready" for leadership roles continues to persist in subtle ways. However, evidence from across industries tells a

different story. Women are qualifying, entering professions and contributing meaningfully. What they often encounter instead are structural bottlenecks: unclear promotion pathways, limited access to decision-

making networks and organisational cultures that reward visibility over merit.

Policies that aim to support gender inclusion do exist in Ghana and across Africa. The challenge lies in their implementation. Too often, they function as statements of intent

rather than enforceable frameworks. Inclusion becomes dependent on individual goodwill rather than institutional obligation.

One of the most striking gaps discussed at the conference was the absence of structured sponsorship.

## The She Builds Conference was clear in its direction: progress requires measurable, immediate action.

While mentorship programmes have become more common, mentorship alone does not shift power. Sponsorship does. It involves senior leaders actively advocating for women- putting their names forward for leadership roles, high-value projects, and strategic opportunities. Without this deliberate intervention, advancement remains uneven.

## Invisible majority: Informal-sector women

Beyond the formal workforce lies another critical oversight- millions of women operating in Ghana's informal economy. From small-scale construction support roles to micro-enterprises and informal legal assistance, these women form a substantial part of the country's economic backbone. Yet, they are rarely included in policy conversations.

This exclusion has consequences. Policies designed without input from those most affected often fail to address real challenges. For example, procurement systems that require complex documentation or financial thresholds unintentionally exclude smaller, women-led enterprises.

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Similarly, urban planning decisions may overlook the needs of traders, artisans, and service providers who operate outside formal structures.

True inclusion requires recognising that economic participation is not limited to formal employment. It demands that policymaking become more representative of lived realities.

## From conversation to action: What must change

The She Builds Conference was clear in its direction: progress requires measurable, immediate action. Several key recommendations emerged that can be implemented without delay.

First, transparency must become standard practice. Organisations and government institutions should publish gender-disaggregated data on hiring, promotion and procurement. When data is visible, accountability follows. Without it, inequality remains easy to ignore.

Second, sponsorship must be embedded into leadership expectations. Senior executives should be assessed not only on organisational performance but also on how effectively they develop and advance diverse talent. This shifts inclusion from a voluntary act to a professional responsibility.

Third, procurement systems need reform. Public contracts represent one of the most powerful tools for economic redistribution. By designing procurement processes that actively include women-led businesses, governments can influence representation at scale.

Fourth, enabling conditions must be prioritised. Flexible work structures, childcare support, and safe working environments are often dismissed as secondary concerns. In reality, they determine whether women remain in industries long enough to reach leadership positions.

Retention is as important as recruitment.

## Role of individual agency

While systemic reform is essential, the conference also emphasised the role of individual strategy. Women navigating these sectors must approach their careers with intentionality.

This includes actively developing specialised skills, documenting and communicating achievements and building professional visibility. Success is rarely accidental. It is often the result of deliberate positioning, consistency and resilience.

Speakers at the conference described this as cultivating an "internal engine"-a combination of self-belief, discipline and clarity of purpose. In environments that may not immediately recognise their contributions,

women must often advocate for themselves in ways that feel unfamiliar but are necessary.

However, it is important to emphasise that individual effort alone cannot dismantle structural barriers. It must operate alongside institutional change.

## Why this matters for Ghana's future

Ghana is at a pivotal moment. With ongoing investments in infrastructure, urban development and economic transformation, the decisions made today will shape the country's trajectory for decades.

Excluding women from these processes is not just a social issue-it is an economic one. When half the population is underrepresented in decision-making, innovation is limited, productivity is reduced and policies risk being incomplete.

Inclusive systems lead to more resilient outcomes. Cities designed with diverse perspectives are more functional. Legal systems informed by varied experiences are more equitable. Economies that draw on the full talent pool are more competitive.

## Building systems that reflect reality

The message from She Builds is both urgent and practical. Women are already contributing

to Ghana's development as engineers, entrepreneurs, lawyers and builders. What is missing is not participation, but recognition and reinforcement.

The path forward is clear:

- make gender outcomes measurable
- embed accountability into leadership
- include informal-sector voices
- design systems that support long-term participation

Inclusion should not be treated as an aspiration. It must be engineered into the structures that shape opportunity. Ghana's growth story is still being written. Ensuring that women are central to that story is not optional-it is essential.

## She Builds 2026 Conference

Join us again at the upcoming conference on September 9, 2026 at the UPSA hall. This will be a high-impact one-day event that brings together women leaders and changemakers to advance a vision of leadership centred on wellbeing, purpose and sustainable impact??? Click here???

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