One of the first questions that spring to mind when examining the status of women in any given country is whether the women of that particular country have the right to vote. We may conveniently begin with that question in the case of Ghana.

**Voting Rights**

Have the women of Ghana the right to vote? If so, how long have they enjoyed this right?

In the former non-self-governing territory of the Gold Coast, equal universal sufferage was granted to men and women in 1950. In the former United Kingdom Trust Territory of Togoland, which became united with the Gold Coast prior to its independence in 1957, universal sufferage was granted to men and women in 1955.

The elections ordinance adopted by the Legislative Assembly on September 15, 1950, granted the men and women of the Gold Coast universal sufferage. It provided that "Every person, whether male or female, shall be entitled to be registered as an elector for a municipal electoral district and, when registered, to vote at the election of a member of the Legislative Assembly for such electoral district," if such male or female has attained the age of 21 years, and "for a period of at least six months immediately before the date of his application to have his name entered on the register has owned any assessed premises or has rented a living room in any assessed premises or has occupied any part of any assessed premises within the electoral district."

In the case of rural electoral sub-districts, the ordinance granted the right to vote to every male or female who had resided within the rural electoral sub-district for at least six months immediately before applying to be entered on the register, and who had paid the local rate or levy for the current or preceding year.

This right of men and women to vote in the municipal electoral district or rural electoral sub-district, as the case may be, was subject to the usual electors' qualifications.

The right of women to vote was confirmed by the Ghana Constitution when the Gold Coast became independent under the name of Ghana in 1957.

Article 1 of the Ghana Constitution states: The powers of the State derive from the people, by whom certain of those powers are now conferred on the institutions established by this Constitution and who shall have the right
to exercise the remainder of those powers, and to choose their representatives in the Parliament now established, in accordance with the remaining principles:

That without distinction of sex, race, religion, or political belief, every person who, being by law a citizen of Ghana, has attained the age of 21 years and is not disqualified by law on grounds of absence, infirmity of mind or criminality, shall be entitled to one vote, to be cast in freedom and secrecy.

The right to vote alone would not be enough. We have to ask therefore if the women of Ghana enjoy other rights, and if they do, what those rights are.

Other Rights of Women

Forming the laws of Ghana are enactments in force immediately before the coming into operation of the Ghana (Constitution) Order in Council (1957), the common law, and customary law.

Under one or other of these laws, the women of Ghana enjoy rights and privileges with regard to marriage, custody of children, inheritance, ownership of property, education, the professions, trading, and general participation in the life and activities of the community.

In many instances, statutory law, English common law, and Ghana customary law apply equally. Thus under the Marriage Ordinance of 1884 and its subsequent amendments, a Ghanaian woman may marry in a church or registry office in the same manner and with the same force of law as in western countries, or she may marry under Ghanaian customary law. In like manner, a married woman may obtain a separation or divorce. Where a divorce takes place, she is awarded custody of children who are minors, unless cause can be shown that she is incapable of looking after the children. Under marriage and a divorce by customary law, this question does not arise as a rule, since the woman returns to her original home where relatives help in bringing up her children.

But under the Maintenance of Children Act of June 1965, "where a father neglects to provide reasonable maintenance for his infant child ---- the mother of the child may apply to the minister of social welfare ---or such other person as may be directed by the minister in that behalf to persuade the father to make reasonable provision for the maintenance of the child or make such other award as the minister may consider appropriate in the circumstances in accordance with the provisions of this act."

However, a father in respect of whom such an application has been made, "may also apply to the minister to request the mother to give him custody of the child."

Where an application has been made either for the provision of maintenance by the father, or the giving of custody of the child to the father, the minister, may under the act, "appoint a committee consisting of such fit and proper persons as he may consider appropriate to inquire into the matter in relation to which the application has been made and to make recommendations."
Upon receiving the recommendations, the minister may, under the act, rule that the father make a reasonable allowance having regard to the means of the father and mother, or request that the father be given custody of the child.

The paramount consideration in making a ruling, is the welfare of the child.

If after a ruling, a father neglects to provide reasonable maintenance for his child, the mother of the child, may apply to the court for a maintenance order.

To obviate the woman alone being penalized, the Maintence of Children Act, 1965, provides that "A woman who is with child, or has been delivered of a child, may apply to the court for a summons to be served on the man alleged by her to be the father of the child."

"Where a man has been adjudged the putative father -- the court may, if it thinks fit in the circumstances of the case," make an affiliation order against him for the maintenance and education of the child, "the expenses incidental to the birth of the child, and if the child has died before the making of the order, the child's funeral expenses."

When the husband of a woman who is subject to customary law but is married under the marriage ordinance dies intestate, his self-acquired property is so divided according to the provisions of marriage ordinance, that his widow receives two-thirds of it for herself and her issue by him, while one-third of the property goes to his family. Where there is no issue of the marriage, his widow receives one-third and his family two-thirds of his property.

Inheritance Customs and Laws

It may be of interest to consider patrilineal and matrilineal inheritance at this point.

Whether inheritance is patrilineal or matrilineal depends on the customary law of the particular ethnic group. Succession and inheritance among the Gas, Adanbes, Krobos, and Ewes, as well as among the Moslem inhabitants of the Northern and Upper Regions of Ghana, is patrilineal.

Among the Akans, who make up 44 per cent of the 7 1/2 million population of Ghana, succession and inheritance is matrilineal. The whole family -- immediate and extended -- is, as it were, a corporate body consisting of males and females, some of whom are entitled to a portion of property upon partition, and others dependants who are entitled to reside in the family house for life. These are sons and daughters whose residence in the family house is subject to good behavior.

The matrilineal system bears testimony to the traditional importance of women in Ghana. The actual line of matrilineal succession and inheritance is too complicated to go into here, but it would be worthwhile to consult J.M. Sarbah's work on Fanti customary law and Dr. J.B. Danquah's book on Akan laws.
and customs on the subject. Whatever percentage of her husband's self-acquired property she may inherit or have the use of during her husband's life time, there is no question as to the ownership of property acquired by her own industry. In the words of the Married Women's Property Ordinance (1890):

The wages and earnings of any married woman acquired or gained by her in any employment, occupation or trade, in which she is engaged or which she carries on separately from her husband, and all investments of such wages, earnings or property, shall be deemed and taken to be property held and settled to her separate use, independent of any husband to whom she may be married, and her receipts alone shall be a good discharge for such wages, earnings, money, and property.

However, most married women in Ghana are generous with their earnings to the extent of supplementing allowances made them by their husbands whether for housekeeping, the education, or other needs of their children.

The guarantees of the ordinance will be appreciated by those who are familiar with the Ghanaian woman trader. These traders deal mostly in foodstuffs bought direct from farmers and textiles usually taken on credit from the merchant firms, but almost any commodity can be found on their stalls in the markets where they hold a monopoly. Thousands of women traders are registered with the Accra Municipal Council, and regulate their affairs through the Market Women's Association. The turnover of some of these women is considerable, and many have sizable bank accounts.

Although the majority of the market women are illiterate, they are advanced enough in their thinking to support the various social welfare and community development schemes introduced by the government, and to see to it that their children take full advantage of the country's education facilities. They take an active part in politics, and avail themselves of their voting rights. Many of them now attend literacy classes.

The traditional importance of the Akan women of Ghana dates back to the earliest history of the country.

From the beginning of the founding of the clan or state, the Akan Queenmother was regarded as the embodiment of the Mother-goddess, who was believed to be the genetrix of the clan. As the representative of this genetrix, the Queenmother was the spiritual guardian, legal arbitrator, ruler, caretaker of the material needs of her people, and even leader of the army in given circumstances. The story of Yaa Asantewaa of Ejisu, the last Queenmother who led an army against the British in Ashanti in 1900, is well known. In all her tasks, the Queenmother was assisted by women elders, although in most matters the final decision was the Queenmother's.

With such a historical background, it is not difficult to understand why the women of Ghana command the respect they do and enjoy equal rights with men.
Discharging of Responsibilities

Rights, however, carry certain responsibilities. How, we may ask, are the women of Ghana discharging their responsibilities?

They realize that in these modern times of rapid development in Ghana, a solid formal education is a prerequisite to advancement in all fields of endeavor and service.

Time was when a bigger proportion of boys was sent to school, girls being kept at home to help, and being married off early. Since the introduction of free compulsory education in 1961, and encouragement towards secondary and university education aided by scholarships, this is no longer the case. Girls as well as boys are sent to school, and the important point is that the girls want to go to school. Up to the secondary level, boys and girls attend school in comparable numbers, and although there are more male young adults at the university level, more and more women are going on to universities and are being encouraged to do so. They are being encouraged to take up professions in which there were no women up to a few years ago.

For some years now, Ghanaian women have served their communities as teachers, nurses, doctors, and lawyers. Many more are entering the professions of medicine and law; others are venturing into new fields.

In February of 1965 a woman research officer of the Entomological and Parasitological Research Unit of the Ghana Academy of Sciences was appointed director of the new Institute of Aquatic Biology. The institute is a part of the Academy of Sciences, and is responsible for research into the biology of streams, rivers, ponds, lagoons and intermittent as well as permanent bodies of water. The director of the institute, who studied at the Universities of Liverpool and Birmingham in England and at the University of Michigan, is the first Ghanaian woman to obtain a doctorate (in entomology). In February 1965 a woman was appointed district commissioner for Half Assini in the Western Region of Ghana, thus bringing the number of women district commissioners to two.

Effect was given to the Representation of the People (Women Members) Act (1960) which repealed the Act of 1959, when 10 nominated women were voted into the National Assembly.

The Act provides that:

In addition to the seats otherwise provided by law, there shall be 10 seats in the National Assembly for women members of Parliament under this act.

Three of the said seats shall be allocated to the Northern Region, two each to the Eastern and Western Regions, and one each to the remaining Regions.

......any two or more members of Parliament representing electoral districts in a Region may nominate a person, being a woman who is qualified for election in accordance with Section 4 of the National Assembly Act, 1959.
Soon after they entered Parliament, two of the women were appointed deputy minister of education and deputy minister of social welfare and community development, respectively. The former deputy minister of education has been, since January of 1965, minister of social welfare. Since the elections of June 1965 the number of women in the Ghana National Assembly of 198 members has risen to 19.

A number of the women members of Parliament have represented their country at conferences in many parts of the world, and at the United Nations. Seven of the original 10 members are on the Boards of State Enterprises, six in the capacity of chairman.

The sense of community solidarity as well as of family closeness is strong in the traditional life of Ghana. This has been translated into modern terms, and many of the country's women belong to voluntary organizations such as the Girl Guides, Young Women's Christian Association, and the Red Cross.

There is also an over all organization of women which concerns itself with the fostering of unity and understanding among the women of the whole of Ghana, namely the National Council of Ghana Women. The council was inaugurated in September, 1960 when the Federation of Ghana Women and the Ghana Women's League merged.

The council co-ordinates the efforts of the women of Ghana, and provides and avenue through which joint consultation can be held and action on social, economic, educational, cultural and political matters affecting women can be taken on a national level.

The inauguration membership of the council was 6,656. Within a year membership rose to 20,000, a sure indication that the women of Ghana realized their responsibility and were taking it seriously.

Another way in which the women of Ghana are demonstrating their sense of responsibility and readiness to progress with the rest of the country is in their response to the Mass Education and Community Development Program.

If we accept that a person with a sound mind cannot get very far without a sound body, then we accept the importance of a competent woman in the home. Cleanliness and hygiene, good living conditions, and good food for building sound bodies depend to a great extent on the woman in the home. Unless a woman is knowledgeable and able to provide these in the home, a family suffers mentally as well as physically.

Realizing this, the Department of Social Welfare and Community Development launched a program in 1954 especially for women, and devised a syllabus which included health and sanitation, food and nutrition, child care, better homes, needlework and handicrafts to be taught by trained women, particularly in the rural areas. The women responded, and today, there are more than 600 women's groups all over the country attending classes where they learn through talks,
demonstrations, discussions, films, and practical work how to improve their homes and how to use their local resources to achieve better living conditions. They are encouraged to take up vegetable gardening and poultry keeping to supplement their families' diet, and how to prepare or cook available food-stuffs in order to get the maximum benefit from them. They are also encouraged to attend literacy classes so that they may thereafter continue to learn through the written word.

Annual exhibitions of the needlework, handicrafts, and kitchen garden produce of the women attending these classes are organized to add interest to their educational activities, and to encourage other women in their communities to participate.

In a number of rural areas, women have undertaken construction projects that have successfully helped to build roads and community centers where their mass education activities take place, and where they can leave their children for the day while they are working on their farms or in the markets.

There is no doubt that the Social Welfare and Community Development program is of real value. It has been successful, and women have played a great part in its success, resulting in a better and healthier life for many families.

Taking the areas surveyed into account, it must be agreed that the women of Ghana have contributed and continue to contribute to the development and progress of their country through the responsible discharge of their duties, in recognition of the full and equal status they enjoy with the men of the land.