

# Policy Paper

## Female Representation and Participation in Political Leadership Positions

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## Introduction

This report provides an overview of female participation and representation in leadership positions within the government in Kenya. In this context, we refer as participation to the active engagement of individuals in political and civic processes, regardless of whether they hold formal leadership positions and representation to the presence of individuals (here, women) in decision-making positions or roles within governance structures.

Generally, women have been disproportionately affected in their access, control and distribution over specifically political resources, namely the participation in decision-making structures and processes on the national and county level. Despite constitutional mandates, for instance the 2010 Constitution Article 27 (8), and Article 81 (b), women remain significantly underrepresented at a county governance level.<sup>1</sup>

To date, women's participation in leadership roles within governance processes in Kenya has seen significant growth over the past two decades. In 2024, the number of female Members of Parliament increased by 30% – yet women remain markedly underrepresented at all political and administrative levels.<sup>2</sup> The 2010 Kenyan Constitution marked a legal milestone through the introduction of the so-called Two-Thirds Gender Rule, stipulating that no gender should constitute more than two-thirds of the members of any public body.<sup>3</sup> However, despite this constitutional mandate, the representation of women in leadership remains alarmingly low. As of 2023, women held only 22.5% of the seats in the National Assembly, even though they represent over half of Kenya's population.<sup>4</sup>

Yet the issue goes beyond mere numbers: the pathways to leadership are hindered by numerous barriers, including gender-based violence, limited access to educational, financial, and political resources, patriarchal party systems, and cultural norms that restrict women's public engagement.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, women are often steered into symbolic or "soft" leadership roles that lack substantive power.<sup>6</sup> The underrepresentation of women carries profound social, political, and economic consequences. Greater diversity in leadership contributes to innovation, resilience in times of crisis, and social cohesion.<sup>7</sup> In contexts like Kenya – marked by socio-economic disparities, ecological vulnerability, and weak state institutions – female leadership becomes strategically important, as women often lead in a more inclusive, dialogue-driven, and sustainable manner.<sup>8</sup>

This policy paper will analyse and evaluate existing measures and programs, ultimately providing policy recommendations for complementary or alternative approaches.

## Barriers Preventing Women from Participation and Access

Multiple conditions prevent women from accessing leadership positions in governance, namely the structural and institutional, the socio-cultural, the political and economic, as well as the systemic position.

Firstly, patriarchal political party structures that do not implement internal gender quotes or gender-responsive financing. This in turn leads to maintaining patriarchal culture: "Political parties in Kenya remain male-dominated spaces where decisions are made informally and often exclude women from strategic

planning and nominations”<sup>9</sup>. Tokenism undermines the ability to effectively participate and legitimately represent. “Nominated female MCAs are frequently sidelined in budget processes, denied meaningful committee assignments, and dismissed as ‘token’ leaders”<sup>10</sup> as women are included in leadership through nominations which are mandated. Furthermore, failure to enact on legalisations such as the Two-Thirds rule violates the constitution and clarifies that women’s leadership is optional rather than necessary. Institutions are additionally not neutral, i.e. national governance as well as county assemblies operate without gender sensitive frameworks as they reproduce existing historical, cultural and traditional gender hierarchies, norms and rules.

The socio-cultural barriers are influenced by deep-rooted gender perceptions and stereotypes, especially the perception that leadership is masculine. During the colonial period, the British administration systematically appointed only male chiefs, thereby institutionalizing patriarchal governance structures and excluding women from formal leadership.<sup>11</sup> Religious bodies, patriarchal family systems, and clan-based structures continue to uphold male leadership as the norm. Women who manage to rise into leadership positions are subjected to disproportionate scrutiny—media often examine their personal lives, diminish their professional credibility, and subtly undermine their authority<sup>12</sup>. Essentially, politics has been masculinized through social influence and political barriers including violence, patronage, and power play. Political violence and political power are inherently male dominated as they are correlated to masculinity.

Economically, women face significant constraints that undermine their ability to engage in political processes and hold leadership positions. These barriers are rooted in gendered disparities in access to resources, education, employment, and financial systems. Seeking political office in Kenya requires significant financial investment, with aspirants often relying on extensive business connections and entrenched patronage systems to fund their campaigns. For women, the challenge is even greater; despite frequently outspending their male counterparts. As highlighted in the 2021 study, political competition in Kenya is not only intense but also commercialized, placing women at a distinct disadvantage in the absence of personal wealth or wealthy sponsors<sup>13</sup>. Furthermore, it is statistically proven that majority of women in Kenya work in the informal sector, have limited access to capital and landownership, both contemporary and historically, as well as have limited access to higher education. All factors necessary to acquire financial resources. On the more cultural level, if the bias of women as primary child giver and caregiver persist, this several burden them with unpaid care work which in turn restricts their time and energy to engage in politics.<sup>14</sup>

In summary, intersecting and multidimensional barriers limit the ability to engage in governance and hold leadership positions for women in Kenya. These barriers are interconnected and reinforce each other across five key domains.

## Analysis and Evaluation of Existing Policies

### Workshop Initiatives and Students Scholarship Program

As discussed, improving women’s educational foundation is essential to creating better career and leadership opportunities and this can be achieved by organising a scholarship to support female students enhancing their possibilities to achieve a higher level of education. Furthermore, workshop and training initiatives for specific (political) positions in decision-making or governance processes can help

women to enhance their political participation, knowledge and leadership as well as financial management skills. These should particularly help women to enhance their financial independence, political participation and leadership skills.

The UNDP's project, "Strengthening Women's Leadership in Political and Electoral Processes" (2022–2023) enhanced local capacities in governance and community mobilisation, particularly among women in marginalised counties like Turkana and Garissa. However, impact assessments showed that the short training cycle that could be insufficient for long-term empowerment. Participants reported increased awareness but limited opportunities to apply new skills due to lack of integration into political structures or follow-up mechanisms. Moreover, regional inequalities remained: rural women often faced greater logistical barriers (travel, childcare) compared to urban participants.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, in 2019, KAS initiated training workshops for designated female MCAs in Kajiado, Mombasa and Kisumu. These workshops encompassed 19 counties in Kenya and attracted a total of 58 participants. The enhancement of women's capacities in areas of legislation, representation and oversight was a key objective. This suggests that female MCAs are likely to be highly efficient, thereby enhancing their competitiveness in future elections. The overarching objective was to enhance female participation and representation in their respective county assemblies. It was also highly useful for female MCAs that are already in office. However, it was only limited to one-time event without a mentoring follow-up, and it is imperative to acknowledge that these individuals still require specialised training to participate in their full capacity. Furthermore, the training programme was exclusively administered to women who had already been elected, with only limited spillover effects to aspirants or grassroots female leaders observed in terms of enhancing broader political inclusivity.<sup>16</sup> In addition, KAS has implemented a scholarship programme to address the low rate of university graduates, particularly among women. By enhancing students' financial independence, opportunities are created to focus on achieving a higher level of education, which is particularly important for women to enhance their chances in competing for leadership position in governance processes.

### Mentoring, Networking and Civic Programmes

Mentoring and networking events, as well as civic programmes, are vital for improving women's access to social and financial resources and knowledge of political processes. This increases their potential in leadership positions and governance processes.

The Women Voices and Leadership Programme (2019–2024), initiated by CARE Kenya, provides support to approximately 120 women's rights organisations in the domains of policy advocacy and community outreach. This has resulted in an augmentation of their influence and organisational capacity, as well as the effectiveness of women's rights platforms. The development principles of inclusion, participation and empowerment in programming are being followed and an intergenerational approach, mentorship and guidance are being supported. Nevertheless, numerous groups persist in prioritising service delivery over systemic power, thereby giving rise to interrogations concerning policy enforcement.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, the Akili Dada Youth Leadership Programme combines mentorship, boot camps and civic initiatives in rural areas to empower young women through holistic development and community action. The organisation is guided by a set of core values, namely sisterhood, transformation, integrity, leadership and excellence. These values are embedded within three core programmes, the aim of which is to enhance intergenerational learning, mentorship and agency. The programme is particularly useful for developing individuals' capacity and enhancing local female leadership. However, its ability to be scaled up depends on sustainable funding and institutional support, both of which are essential for promoting broader, sustainable empowerment and a feminist movement.<sup>18</sup>

## Women's Quotas

The implementation of women's quotas in parliament and governance processes is a crucial strategy for enhancing the numerical representation and legislative presence of women.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, it should be noted that quotas can also have negative implications when employed inappropriately. For instance, they may result in the appointment of women of inferior calibre to positions for which they are not suitably qualified, solely based on their gender. The consequence of this is tokenism, which refers to the reinforcement of traditional values that are still stereotypically thought of in culturally traditional areas. These values are supported but not fostered. This phenomenon is indicative of a decline in credibility.<sup>20</sup>

As previously stated, Kenya's Constitution upholds the Two-Thirds Gender Rule, yet efforts to implement it have repeatedly failed.<sup>21</sup> While the enhancement of female leadership is undoubtedly facilitated by an increase in female representation, it is crucial to emphasise that the allocation of positions in parliament should not be exclusively determined by gender. Moreover, the absence of preparatory workshops and training is a matter of particular concern as it increases the risk of tokenism. Therefore, it is particularly problematic that there is no structural party reform, accompanied by merit-based selection and training.

In conclusion, the short-term impact of gains on figures is not indicative of a lasting influence. In the absence of fundamental reforms to the party system, access to knowledge, financial resources and professional networks may render quotas an ineffective instrument in Kenya. The most efficacious approach would be to combine quotas with capacity-building, networking and institutional integration.<sup>22</sup>

## Programmatic Patterns and Limitations

The overarching objective of these initiatives is to empower women through capacity-building. However, critical issues emerge: They reach mostly already-mobile, urban or peri-urban women. The efficacy of workshops and training programmes is contingent upon their universal accessibility to all women. On top of that, they improve individual capacity for those who can access but lack political integration. Furthermore, the sustainability of civic programmes is contingent upon the implementation of structural reforms. For instance, issues such as restricted access to funding, inadequate legal protection and political blockades require resolutions.

While holistic programmes like Akili Dada show strong individual results, sustainable institutional linkages are lacking. These structural deficiencies result in the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles and governance processes, despite their training and qualifications.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, women's quotas need to be coupled with structural party reforms, mentorship programmes and leadership pipelines in order to have a sustainable influence.

Hence, it is evident, that the effectiveness of programmes is embedded in local contexts, take intersectional differences into account and are designed for the long term, the higher their degree of effectiveness. The combination of political training, economic empowerment and institutional reform appears to be particularly effective.<sup>24</sup>

## Recommendations

In order to achieve long-term sustainability, we propose the following:

### 1. Establish a National Mentorship and Leadership Pipeline Programme

Mentorship has proven to be a powerful mechanism for building women's confidence and capacity, particularly in environments where leadership remains male-dominated. Programmes like Akili Dada offer valuable examples, but they lack systemic reach. A national programme, linked to educational institutions and governance bodies, could create a structured path into public office. This pipeline would begin in secondary education, continue through university political engagement and internships and culminate in formal leadership mentoring by experienced female politicians. Such a programme should include regional representation to address urban-rural divides. It would also facilitate the transfer of informal knowledge, often excluded from formal political training. By embedding this pipeline institutionally, Kenya could build sustainable and diverse female leadership from the ground up.

### 2. Expand Pre-Electoral Political Training in Rural Areas

While training has been a central focus of many programmes, access remains uneven – particularly in rural and marginalized regions. Women in such areas face distinct challenges: less media exposure, weaker civic infrastructure and cultural taboos. Regional training centers or mobile units could address these disparities through tailored curricula that reflect local realities. Topics should include public speaking, policy drafting, voter engagement and navigating male-dominated spaces. Moreover, sessions should be offered in local languages and include childcare support to increase participation. By decentralizing training, the political empowerment of rural women could be significantly expanded. This measure would foster more inclusive governance and leadership diversity.

### 3. Create a Public Fund for Female Political Candidates

Financial exclusion remains one of the most consistent barriers to women's political participation in Kenya. Women often lack access to party patronage networks, donors and campaign resources, leading to lower competitiveness. A public campaign fund specifically targeted at female candidates would level the playing field and ensure that political ambition is not constrained by gendered poverty. The fund should be transparently managed and tied to eligibility criteria such as a community-based nomination process or completion of leadership training. This would prevent tokenism and strengthen legitimacy. Additionally, financial support should be accompanied by budget literacy and expenditure training. Combined, these steps would increase the quantity and quality of female political participation.

### 4. Mandate Gender-Sensitivity Trainings for Political Parties

Political parties remain one of the most entrenched barriers to women's leadership due to internal patronage systems and patriarchal attitudes. To reform these dynamics, gender-sensitivity training should be mandatory for party officials, candidates and campaign staff. The content should challenge

stereotypes, confront unconscious bias and promote equitable recruitment and nomination practices. These trainings can be facilitated in partnership with organizations like FEMNET and include follow-up monitoring. Over time, such measures would cultivate internal accountability and increase female candidate retention.<sup>25</sup> Institutionalizing gender training would also help shift political culture from resistance to inclusion. Parties play a gatekeeping role – this reform is essential to unlock structural change.<sup>26</sup>

### **5. Implement Mandatory Monitoring, Evaluation and Accountability Mechanism for Quota Outcomes**

While the constitutional Two-Thirds Gender Rule is symbolically important, its effectiveness remains undermined by poor implementation. A robust monitoring framework is needed to assess not only compliance but impact. This should include annual public reporting on gender representation across all levels of government, coupled with qualitative indicators such as budget access and leadership influence. Non-compliance must carry political or financial consequences, such as funding conditionality or electoral penalties. Civil society should be included in oversight to ensure transparency and credibility. Monitoring mechanisms transform quotas from formalities into tools for structural reform. They also strengthen citizens' trust in democratic accountability.<sup>27</sup>

### **6. Institutionalize and Publicize**

Pass legislations, enact and set clear penalties for non-compliance on all levels of engagements, such as banning political parties from participating in elections if gender threshold is not met. Parliament to take the initiative in creating a well-defined legal framework to ensure compliance with the two-thirds gender rule in both elective and appointive roles. Depict and position women as effective leaders and role-models in marketing, political campaigns, and other public initiatives.

Kenya must pass binding legislation that operationalizes the Two-Thirds Gender Rule and sets clear penalties for non-compliance. Political parties should be required by law to meet gender thresholds in their nomination lists; failure to comply should lead to disqualification from elections and loss of public funding.

The IEBC, ORPP, and NGENC must be mandated to monitor compliance, publish annual gender audits, and apply sanctions consistently. This institutional framework would ensure that gender parity becomes a legal obligation, not a political choice. By embedding these requirements into electoral and governance systems, Kenya can create lasting structural change that guarantees women's full participation in leadership.

### **7. Promote Women-Friendly Workplaces to Support Women's Political Participation**

The Government of Kenya, in partnership with the private sector, should promote the adoption of women-friendly workplace policies as a strategy to increase women's participation in leadership and politics.

Workplace policies that address structural gender inequalities, such as the unequal burden of unpaid care work, limited parental leave, and entrenched gender stereotypes, can significantly improve women's ability to ascend to leadership positions. In Kenya, women perform over three times more

unpaid care work than men, severely limiting their capacity to pursue careers in leadership, including political office.<sup>28</sup> Evidence shows that such interventions are effective. A global study of over 22,000 companies across 91 countries found that offering paid paternity leave correlates with a greater share of women in board-level leadership.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, employer-supported childcare increases both the retention and promotion of women in the workplace.<sup>30</sup>

## Discussion and Conclusion

Despite legal progress and a vibrant civil society, the advancement of female leadership in Kenya's governance processes remains fragmented and structurally constrained. While constitutional mechanisms such as the Two-Thirds Gender Rule provide a legal mandate, enforcement is weak and often symbolic. Existing programmes tend to prioritize capacity-building over systemic transformation and most operate in isolation. Structural barriers such as financial exclusion, patriarchal party structures and cultural stigmas remain deeply embedded and insufficiently addressed by current interventions. There is a disconnect between grassroots innovations and formal political power, limiting the transfer of local leadership capacity into governance institutions.

Efforts that combine mentorship, institutional integration and civic engagement – such as Akili Dada or the CARE-led Women Voices and Leadership Programme – show strong results when embedded in community contexts. However, they often lack continuity and scale. Conversely, top-down policies like quotas remain ineffective without implementation mechanisms and political will. The discussion reveals that sustainable progress requires a multi-level approach: structural reform within political institutions, long-term funding for female candidates, decentralized training and the cultural redefinition of leadership. Most critically, future programmes must be intersectional, inclusive and embedded in national policy frameworks.<sup>31</sup>

Transforming Kenya's leadership in governance processes demands more than symbolic reforms or donor-funded training cycles. It requires strategic investments in political education, accountability structures and cultural transformation. Female leadership must be understood not only as a tool of inclusion but as a critical asset for resilient, dialogue-oriented and future-facing governance. Governments, parties and civil society must collaborate to turn isolated success stories into a national movement for inclusive leadership and government. Only then can female leadership contribute to the structural renewal of Kenya's political system – and only then will democracy live up to its promise of genuine representation and transformative power.

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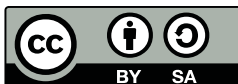
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