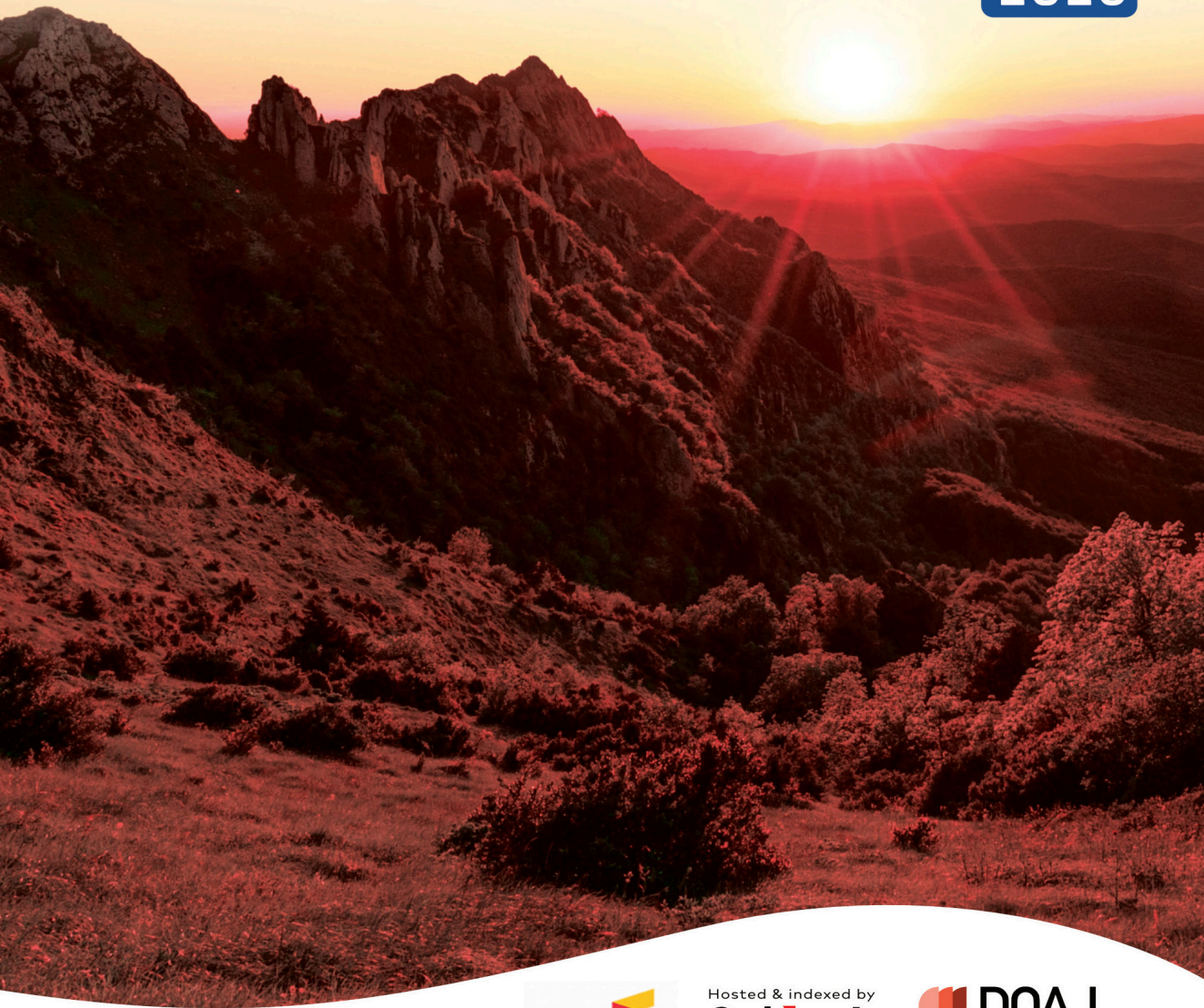


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The Intersection of Culture and Gender in Local Governance: A Case of Zimbabwean Rural Women

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Abstract

This study examines the intersection of culture and gender in shaping women's participation in local governance in Zimbabwe against the backdrop of persistent gender disparities despite constitutional guarantees of equality in leadership and decision-making. Employing a sequential qualitative research design, the study draws on a desk review, secondary data from an earlier study conducted in Mutoko District, and key informant interviews. Guided by Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991), it investigates how patriarchal cultural norms intersect with kinship relations, gendered social expectations, marital status, socio-economic conditions, and spatial inequalities to constrain women's participation in local governance. Thematic analysis generated three interrelated themes that demonstrate that women's marginalisation is produced through multiple, overlapping, and mutually reinforcing forms of discrimination rather than gender alone. The findings reveal that relational discrimination, embedded within familial hierarchies, kinship networks, marital relations, and community power structures, operates alongside prescribed gender roles and intersecting social identities to limit women's political participation. These constraints are further intensified by weak political party mobilisation in rural communities, limited economic opportunities, and persistent rural–urban inequalities in infrastructure, digital connectivity, and access to public services. The study recommends a multidimensional policy approach that leverages Zimbabwe's devolution agenda to strengthen women's participation through economic empowerment, gender-responsive local governance institutions, improved rural infrastructure and digital inclusion, institutionalised gender-sensitive social services, and sustained civic education aimed at transforming patriarchal norms.

Keywords: local governance, intersectionality, social identities, culture, gender

Introduction

Despite constitutional guarantees promoting gender equality in leadership and decision-making, women remain significantly underrepresented in local governance in Zimbabwe. The proportion of elected female councillors declined from 19% in 2008 to 16% in 2013 and further to 14% in 2018 (Gender Links, 2019), highlighting a persistent and widening gender gap despite progressive legal and policy reforms. This paradox raises important questions about the effectiveness of formal equality measures and suggests that barriers to women's political participation extend beyond legal and institutional arrangements.

Existing scholarship largely attributes women's exclusion from local governance to patriarchal cultural norms, discriminatory gender stereotypes, unequal access to resources, and broader socio-economic inequalities (Chabaya et al., 2009; Maphosa et al., 2015; Zikhali, 2018). While these studies have generated valuable insights, they predominantly treat gender as an isolated category of analysis, paying insufficient attention to how gender interacts with other social identities and relational structures to produce complex and mutually reinforcing forms of disadvantage. Relatively little is known about how familial relationships, kinship hierarchies, marital status, socio-economic position, and community power relations intersect with patriarchal cultural norms to shape women's opportunities for political participation. This paper conceptualises the intersecting relational processes as relational discrimination, referring to exclusion that is embedded within familial and community power hierarchies rather than formal institutional arrangements.

The study employs Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Carastathis, 2014; Alexander et al., 2018) as its theoretical and analytical framework. Intersectionality provides a robust lens for examining how multiple social identities and systems of power interact to produce context-specific patterns of exclusion. Rather than viewing gender inequality as a singular axis of disadvantage, the study argues that women's underrepresentation in Zimbabwean local governance results from multiple, overlapping and mutually reinforcing forms of discrimination operating simultaneously across cultural, relational, economic and spatial dimensions. By foregrounding relational discrimination, the paper extends existing applications of intersectionality to demonstrate how everyday family and community power structures regulate women's political agency in rural contexts.

The study addresses three research questions: (i) What factors influence women's participation in local governance in Zimbabwe? (ii) How do culture and gender intersect to shape women's participation in local governance? and (iii) What gender-transformative strategies can enhance women's participation in local governance? To answer these questions, the study triangulates evidence from a desk review, secondary qualitative data from Mutoko District, and key informant interviews to develop a comprehensive understanding of the multilayered barriers confronting women.

The study is both academically and practically significant. Women constitute approximately 52% of Zimbabwe's population, with 61.4% residing in rural areas (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency [ZIMSTAT], 2022). Their continued exclusion from local governance therefore represents not only a democratic deficit but also a development challenge, limiting the representation of most citizens in decisions affecting livelihoods, service delivery and local development. Given the gendered division of labour, women are primary users of services provided by local authorities, including water, sanitation, health, education and housing. Their participation is therefore central to responsive governance and sustainable development.

Evidence consistently demonstrates that women's representation in local governance contributes to more inclusive policy outcomes, improved public service provision, strengthened democratic accountability, and progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (African Union [AU], 2020; Berevoescu & Ballington, 2021; Mlambo & Kapingura, 2019; UN Women, 2012; United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2015). Comparative evidence from India's Panchayati Raj Institutions further suggests that women leaders are more likely to prioritise community-oriented infrastructure and social investments (Thakuria, 2025). Yet, despite these demonstrated benefits, women continue to encounter deeply embedded structural, cultural and relational barriers that constrain their full and meaningful participation in local governance (Guchuhi & Njuguma, 2017). By examining these intersecting forms of exclusion, this study contributes to scholarship on gender, governance and intersectionality while advancing a contextually grounded explanation of women's political exclusion in rural Zimbabwe.

Literature Review

This section establishes the theoretical and conceptual foundations of the study and locates it within the gender, culture, governance, and feminist scholarship. Included in the review is an overview of the gender equality framework that anchors Zimbabwe's attendant aspirations. It concludes by examining the patterns of the gender gap in local governance.

Intersectionality and the Culture, Gender and Governance nexus

The Intersectionality theory, originally developed within Black feminist scholarship and most prominently articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991), provides a critical framework for understanding how multiple and interacting systems of power produce differentiated experiences of privilege and disadvantage. Rejecting gender as a singular explanatory category, intersectionality argues that women's experiences are constituted through the simultaneous interaction of gender with other socially constructed identities and structures, including race, class, ethnicity, culture, marital status, age, religion and disability (Crenshaw, 1991; Hughes & Dubrow, 2018; Collins & Bilge, 2020). Rather than viewing these identities as additive, the theory conceptualises them as mutually constitutive, producing qualitatively distinct forms of marginalisation that cannot be understood through single-axis analyses. Consequently, women cannot be treated as a homogeneous social category because inequalities are produced through overlapping systems of social, cultural and institutional power.

As an analytical framework, intersectionality enabled this study to examine how gender intersects with patriarchal culture, relational identities, socio-economic status and governance institutions to shape women's participation in local governance. The theory moves beyond categorical analysis to interrogate the social processes through which identities are constructed, negotiated and reproduced within historical and cultural contexts (Shields, 2008). Shields (2008) argues that identity categories are dynamic rather than fixed, allowing individuals to negotiate agency within constraining social structures. Similarly, Carastathis (2014) contends that intersectionality captures both the structural organisation of power and the lived experiences through which multiple forms of oppression are simultaneously experienced. More recent scholarship further positions intersectionality as an indispensable framework for analysing governance, public policy and institutional inequality because it reveals how multiple systems of domination interact across structural, organisational and interpersonal levels (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Hancock, 2016).

The present study extends this scholarship by applying intersectionality to the cultural dynamics of local governance in Zimbabwe. Existing intersectionality research has largely focused on institutional discrimination operating through political, economic and organisational systems. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to the micro-social mechanisms through which family structures, kinship obligations, customary authority and community expectations simultaneously shape women's political agency. This study, therefore, introduces relational discrimination as an under-theorised dimension of intersectionality, referring to exclusion produced through culturally embedded interpersonal relationships that regulate women's social identities, political aspirations and participation in governance. Unlike formal institutional discrimination, relational discrimination operates through socially sanctioned expectations embedded within families, communities and traditional authority structures, making exclusion both culturally legitimate and socially reproduced.

Culture, gender and governance therefore constitute mutually reinforcing dimensions of women's political participation. Culture comprises the shared beliefs, values, norms and practices through which societies regulate behaviour and assign social meaning (Hofstede, 2011; Whittington, 2015). Through continuous socialisation, these cultural norms become internalised and shape perceptions of appropriate gender roles, authority and leadership. Patriarchal value systems institutionalise unequal power relations by privileging masculine authority while simultaneously constructing femininity around domesticity, caregiving and political deference (Manyonganise, 2015). Although African relational philosophies such as Ubuntu emphasise communal interdependence and social cohesion, they may also reinforce hierarchical gender expectations that constrain women's participation in public decision-making. Cultural norms function not merely as contextual influences but as active mechanisms through which political exclusion is normalised and reproduced.

Gender, within this perspective, is understood as a socially constructed system of power rather than a biological characteristic. Ouatat and Draissi (2023) conceptualise gender as both a system of functions and a system of meanings, whereby social institutions, including religion, education, politics and the family, collectively construct expectations regarding femininity and masculinity. Similarly, Lumumba-Kasongo (2017) argues that these gendered expectations become embedded within institutional practices and everyday social interactions, reinforcing unequal access to political opportunities and

leadership. The intersection of culture and gender therefore generates layered constraints that extend beyond legal discrimination to influence women's confidence, aspirations, legitimacy and political agency.

These intersecting processes are particularly significant within local governance, where formal political institutions interact directly with customary authority, community leadership and local social norms. Local governance encompasses the structures and processes through which public institutions, elected representatives and civil society collectively make and implement decisions affecting local communities (Local Government Discussion Paper, 2004; Mehraj, 2020). Although Zimbabwe has adopted constitutional and legislative measures promoting gender equality and women's representation, governance spaces continue to reflect deeply embedded patriarchal norms that privilege male authority in political leadership. Consequently, women's participation in local governance remains shaped not only by institutional arrangements but also by cultural expectations that regulate legitimacy, leadership and public visibility (UN Women, 2012; Kumari, 2024).

These realities expose the limitations of approaches that conceptualise gender inequality solely as a legal, institutional or economic problem. Previous studies attribute women's under-representation to weak implementation of gender policies, institutional rigidity and tensions between formal legal reforms and entrenched community values (Akpomuvie, 2010; Bock & Derksen, 2008; Chigumira et al., 2018; Mlambo et al., 2019; African Union, 2020). While these explanations remain important, they insufficiently explain how culturally embedded interpersonal relationships reproduce exclusion despite progressive legal frameworks. By incorporating relational discrimination into intersectionality, this study provides a more comprehensive explanation of why formal gender equality initiatives often produce limited transformation within local governance contexts.

The selection of intersectionality is also theoretically justified when contrasted with earlier feminist paradigms. Liberal feminism and the Women in Development (WID) approach successfully advanced women's legal rights, education and political participation but largely overlooked structural and cultural sources of inequality, particularly within postcolonial societies (Muyoyeta, 2007). Marxist-socialist feminism and Women and Development (WAD) attributed women's oppression primarily to capitalist political economy, thereby underestimating the autonomous influence of patriarchal cultural

relations (Zahirovic & West, 2025). In contrast, intersectionality, closely aligned with Gender and Development (GAD) and increasingly informed by decolonial and postcolonial feminist scholarship, offers a multidimensional framework capable of capturing the complex interactions between gender, culture, governance and power within African societies (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Musingafi & Musingafi, 2024). It is, therefore, the most appropriate theoretical lens for explaining how overlapping systems of cultural, relational and institutional power shape women's participation in local governance in Zimbabwe while providing the conceptual basis for advancing relational discrimination as the study's principal theoretical contribution.

The Participation of Women in Local Governance in Zimbabwe

Gender equality is internationally recognised as both a fundamental human right and a prerequisite for sustainable development. Its normative foundation is embedded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and reinforced through subsequent global frameworks, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 5, which promotes gender equality and women's full participation in political and public life (Leach et al., 2016; United Nations, 2015). Zimbabwe has demonstrated formal commitment to these international obligations through the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the African Union Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa, and the Southern African Development Community Protocol on Gender and Development. Collectively, these frameworks establish a normative expectation that women should participate equally in governance, leadership and public decision-making.

Domestically, Zimbabwe has developed a progressive constitutional and policy framework intended to institutionalise gender equality. The Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act of 2013 explicitly recognises gender equality as a constitutional principle. Section 17 obliges the State to promote gender balance across all governmental institutions and commissions, while Section 56 guarantees equality before the law and prohibits discrimination on grounds including sex, culture, marital status and social status. Furthermore, Section 80 secures women's equal opportunities in political, economic and social spheres and invalidates customs and traditional practices that infringe constitutional rights. These constitutional commitments are reinforced through the National Gender Policy (2017) and, more recently, the National Gender

Policy (2025), which identifies gender-balanced leadership and decision-making as a strategic national priority. Collectively, the legislative and policy instruments position Zimbabwe among African countries possessing relatively comprehensive formal commitments to gender equality.

Despite this robust normative architecture, substantive gender equality in local governance remains elusive. The persistence of women's under-representation illustrates a significant implementation gap between constitutional commitments and political practice. This disconnect reflects a broader paradox observed across many developing democracies, where progressive legal reforms coexist with deeply entrenched socio-cultural norms that continue to shape political participation and access to leadership (Goetz, 2009; African Union, 2020). Consequently, formal legal equality has not translated into equitable participation within local governance structures, particularly in rural communities where customary institutions and patriarchal authority remain influential.

Globally, political representation remains one of the most persistent dimensions of gender inequality. Women continue to occupy a disproportionately small share of leadership positions despite decades of policy reform. According to UN Women (2021), women constitute only 6.7% of Heads of Government worldwide and approximately 36% of elected representatives in local deliberative bodies (UN Women, 2021). Of the 133 countries analysed, only two had achieved gender parity, while fewer than one-fifth had reached the internationally recognised benchmark of 40% representation. Although Sub-Saharan Africa has made gradual progress, averaging approximately 29% female representation in local governance, significant disparities remain between constitutional aspirations and actual political participation (UN Women, 2021). Zimbabwe reflects this broader regional pattern but performs comparatively poorly in local government representation.

Research demonstrates that women's participation in Zimbabwean local governance has stagnated and, in some instances, deteriorated. The proportion of female councillors has declined over successive electoral cycles despite constitutional guarantees and affirmative policy commitments (Gender Links, 2019). During the 2018 harmonised elections, women constituted only 17% of local government candidates, while twelve participating political parties failed to nominate a single female candidate (Hamandishe, 2018). These trends illustrate that exclusion occurs long before electoral competition, emerging

within candidate selection processes, party structures and community perceptions of political leadership. They also suggest that constitutional reforms alone are insufficient to dismantle historically embedded systems of gendered political exclusion.

Scholarship attributed women's limited participation in local governance to multiple, mutually reinforcing structural and socio-cultural barriers. Patriarchal norms remain particularly influential, defining political leadership as inherently masculine while assigning women primary responsibility for domestic and reproductive roles (Ademiluka, 2018; Maphosa et al., 2015; Mlambo et al., 2019). These cultural constructions interact with gender stereotypes, political violence, intimidation, discriminatory party practices and weak enforcement of gender-sensitive legislation to constrain women's political aspirations and opportunities (African Union, 2020; Hamandishe, 2018). Structural inequalities further compound exclusion through unequal access to productive resources, education, financial capital and political networks, all of which influence women's capacity to contest and sustain political office (Tarinda, 2019; UNDP, 2015). Women seeking elected office also continue to experience public vilification, character assassination and gender-based harassment that discourages political participation (Hamandishe, 2018; Zikhali, 2018).

Importantly, these barriers rarely operate independently. Rural–urban disparities in infrastructure, digital connectivity, educational opportunities and institutional support intersect with patriarchal cultural expectations to create layered forms of exclusion that disproportionately affect rural women (ILO, 2019; Njuki et al., 2021; UN Women, 2021). These intersecting constraints reinforce unequal power relations across households, communities, political institutions and customary governance systems, limiting women's agency long before formal political processes commence. Consequently, existing literature increasingly suggests that women's under-representation cannot be adequately explained through institutional or legal deficiencies alone. Rather, it reflects the cumulative effects of overlapping structural, cultural and relational inequalities.

While previous studies have established culture as a significant determinant of women's political exclusion, they have generally conceptualised culture as a broad contextual variable rather than examining the specific mechanisms through which it reproduces inequality. This study argues that culture functions not merely as a background influence but as an active system of relational power that shapes political legitimacy, leadership expectations and women's

self-perceptions as political actors. By applying an intersectionality perspective, the study moves beyond conventional explanations centred on legal reform or institutional barriers to examine how culturally embedded relational hierarchies generate relational discrimination that systematically constrains women's participation in local governance. In doing so, it provides a more nuanced explanation of the persistent gap between Zimbabwe's progressive gender equality framework and the lived realities of women's political participation.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design to examine how gender intersects with socio-cultural norms to shape women's participation in local governance in Zimbabwe. A qualitative approach was appropriate because it facilitates an in-depth understanding of socially constructed realities and the lived experiences of women within their cultural and institutional contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2015). Guided by the social constructivist paradigm, the study recognised that multiple realities exist and that women's experiences of exclusion are shaped by interacting social identities and systems of power, consistent with the intersectionality framework (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Shields, 2008).

The study employed a sequential qualitative strategy comprising three complementary data sources: a desk review, secondary analysis of qualitative data from an earlier study conducted in Mutoko District, Zimbabwe, and additional key informant interviews. This multiple-source design enabled methodological triangulation and strengthened analytical rigour by integrating documentary, secondary and primary qualitative evidence (Patton, 2015).

Purposive sampling was used to identify the information-rich participants. Primary data were drawn from seven key informants (three men and four women) who had participated in a previous study on women's empowerment in agricultural value chains. These participants represented local government, central government, non-governmental organisations and women involved in value addition initiatives. To further explore emerging themes relating to socio-cultural norms, relational identities and gendered role expectations, three additional key informants were recruited using snowball sampling, resulting in a total sample of ten participants (Naderifar et al., 2017).

Data collection combined a systematic review of academic literature, policy documents, legislation and reports with secondary qualitative data and semi-

structured interviews. Documentary evidence examined women's participation in local governance, determinants of exclusion and gender-transformative strategies, while the follow-up interviews elaborated emerging themes identified in the preceding phases. Ethical standards were observed through informed consent, participant anonymity and secure storage of data.

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) six-phase framework. A primarily deductive coding strategy, informed by intersectionality theory and the study objectives, guided the analysis while remaining responsive to emerging insights (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Triangulation across the three datasets enhanced credibility and analytical depth, enabling the identification of three overarching themes: socio-cultural norms and values, gender relations and identities, and gender-transformative strategies. These themes formed the basis for interpreting how intersecting cultural, relational and structural factors shape women's participation in local governance.

Results and Discussion

This section presents and interprets the findings across three intersecting themes: socio-cultural norms and values, gender relations, and gender-transformative strategies. These themes are aligned with the three research questions and interpreted through the lens of Intersectionality. Evidence from the three data sources was triangulated to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Guinon et al., 2011).

Existing scholarship consistently attributes the under-representation of women in local governance to deeply entrenched patriarchal structures and socio-cultural norms that institutionalise gender inequality (Maphosa et al., 2015; Hivos, 2017; Hamandishe, 2018; Mlambo et al., 2019; African Union [AU], 2020). The findings corroborate this body of literature by demonstrating that culture does not merely coexist with gender inequality but actively intersects with institutional arrangements to reproduce women's exclusion from local governance and diminish the effectiveness of formal equality mechanisms.

Intersection of culture and institutional support

Document analysis showed that legislated gender quotas increased women's political representation in several countries. Female representation increased from 16% to 22% in Mexico and from 1% to 11% in Morocco following quota implementation. In India, quotas contributed to improved public perceptions of

women's leadership capabilities (Berevoescu & Ballington, 2021; World Bank, 2012). In Zimbabwe, the introduction of the 30% proportional representation quota in local government in 2023 increased council seats by 587 and raised women's representation from 14% to 23% (Maphosa, 2021). However, interview data indicated that increased numerical representation had not necessarily translated into meaningful participation in local governance. Table 1 summarises the aforesaid.

Table 1: Impact of legislated quotas on women's political representation

IMPACT OF LEGISLATED GENDER QUOTAS ON WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION			
FINDINGS FROM DOCUMENT ANALYSIS			
COUNTRY	QUOTA POLICY / INTERVENTION	CHANGE IN WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION	OTHER KEY FINDINGS / OUTCOMES
Mexico	Legislated gender quotas	Increased from 16% to 22%	Improved women's representation in political bodies.
Morocco	Legislated gender quotas	Increased from 1% to 11%	Significant rise in women's political representation.
India	Constitutional and legislative quotas (reservations)	–	Quotas contributed to improved public perceptions of women's leadership capabilities.
Zimbabwe	30% proportional representation quota in local government (introduced in 2023)	- Council seats increased by 587 - Women's representation increased from 14% to 23%	Marked numerical increase in women councillors at local government level.
FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS			
Increased numerical representation has not necessarily translated into meaningful participation in local governance.			
KEY IMPLICATION			
While legislated gender quotas have been effective in improving women's numerical representation in political and decision-making bodies, deeper structural, cultural, and institutional barriers continue to limit meaningful participation and influence in local governance.			

Two key informants, however, reported that quota seats were commonly referred to as "BACOSS" or a "free ride" in Zimbabwe. Participants explained that BACOSS—derived from the *Basic Commodities Supply Side Intervention* programme implemented by the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe during 2007–2008, implied that women occupying quota seats had not earned their positions through electoral competition but had been given them. The findings, therefore, indicate that quota beneficiaries continue to face questions regarding their legitimacy.

Key informants further observed that allocating quota seats at the council level rather than the ward level resulted in some wards having no female representation. Participants also indicated that linking quota allocation to

political parties constrained women's participation because candidate selection was largely determined by party leadership. According to participants, women nominated under the quota system were frequently expected to remain accountable to party structures rather than to their constituencies.

The findings further revealed limited institutional support for women within political parties. Key informants indicated that women largely navigated political processes without formal organisational support. Campaign financing emerged as one of the most frequently reported barriers. One participant remarked:

People want to be bought to vote...they expect leaders who have something to offer, such as projects to improve their livelihoods, but so often women do not have the money.

Participants consistently reported that limited financial resources constrained women's ability to campaign effectively and reduced their competitiveness during elections. One key informant further proposed that political parties should adopt formal quota systems to increase women's representation.

The findings also showed that women experienced multiple barriers operating simultaneously across institutional, structural and cultural domains. Key informants reported that women were predominantly assigned supportive political roles such as mobilisation, singing, dancing and electioneering, while decision-making and leadership positions remained largely occupied by men.

Spatial intersectionality

The findings revealed clear rural-urban differences in women's participation in local governance. Key informants consistently reported that women's participation was considerably lower in rural than in urban areas. Participants attributed this to stronger adherence to cultural norms, heavier domestic responsibilities and more limited access to productive resources in rural communities. Key informant KI3 submitted by saying:

Rural areas are still very culture-bound, upholding gender stereotypes and myths which perceive women as weaker than men and unable to make decisions.

Data from interviews held in Mutoko further indicated that women lacked access to labour-saving technologies and supporting infrastructure, increasing domestic workloads and limiting the time available for political participation. Educational disadvantage also emerged as a recurring theme. Key informants KI3 reported that girls in rural communities continued to be socialised primarily

into domestic roles centred on marriage and motherhood. One participant noted that these were *"stereotypes which the school curriculum has failed to break."* Documentary evidence from the 2022 Population Census showed that 31.7% of rural girls left school because of pregnancy or early marriage compared with 3.0% of boys. Participants further indicated that educational attainment enhanced women's confidence, communication skills and participation in political processes.

Document analysis also revealed significant spatial inequalities in educational access and poverty. The 2022 Population Census indicated that 51.2% of rural children left school because of financial constraints compared with 36.7% in urban areas. Similarly, ZimStat (2017) reported higher levels of poverty, poverty depth and poverty severity in rural than in urban communities. Collectively, the findings indicate that geographical location intersects with educational and economic disadvantage to constrain women's participation in local governance.

Social identities and role expectations

The findings revealed that women's multiple social identities as wives, caregivers, daughters-in-law, and community members significantly influenced their participation in local governance, particularly in rural areas. Key informants indicated that these intersecting roles imposed competing domestic and social responsibilities that constrained women's political engagement. A Key Informant (KI4) explained that married women *"must negotiate their way up starting from the husband, the cell and the ward,"* illustrating that women's political aspirations were mediated through successive family and community approval structures.

KI1, a highly educated female key informant who contested in primary elections, described how, as a daughter-in-law seeking political office within her husband's rural community, encountered resistance from family members. According to the participant, concerns centred on potential political violence and the reputational risks associated with women participating in politics. Despite possessing the academic qualifications considered necessary for political leadership, she lost the primary election, which she attributed to patriarchal resistance. The findings indicate that gender intersected with marital status and family relationships to influence women's political participation beyond individual capability or educational attainment.

Participants further reported that women seeking elective office were subjected to negative social labelling. Three key informants expressed that, generally, women entering politics were commonly labelled as “sluts” or portrayed as sexually available. Participants also indicated that married women were often questioned through the expression “*ane murume here?*” (*Is she married?*), implying that political participation was incompatible with marriage. KI6 submitted that “... *in such cases women often withdraw because they want to save their marriages.*” These accounts suggest that reputational concerns and family expectations influenced women's willingness to participate in politics.

Women also described multiple domestic responsibilities that limited opportunities for political networking and leadership development. It was reported that women were expected to cook, care for visitors, and provide hospitality during community gatherings, responsibilities that frequently excluded them from meetings and informal discussions where political relationships and influence were established. Participants indicated that these obligations reduced women's access to information, networking opportunities, and decision-making spaces.

Relational discrimination

Across the interviews, a recurring pattern emerged in which family and community relationships influenced women's political participation independently of formal institutional arrangements. Participants described situations in which culturally prescribed family obligations determined whether women could contest political positions.

KI2 reported that she withdrew from the 2023 primary elections because her opponent belonged to her husband's extended family, making electoral competition culturally inappropriate. Another participant recounted that his grandmother, after serving her constituency successfully for five years, declined to contest the 1995 primary elections because her opponent was a brother-in-law within the extended family. Although these cases occurred nearly three decades apart and at different levels of governance, participants described similar family expectations influencing women's political decisions.

The findings indicate that family relationships, marital status, kinship obligations, and community expectations collectively shaped women's political participation alongside formal political structures. These patterns were particularly evident in rural communities, where cultural norms regulating

respect, hierarchy, and family relationships remained influential in determining women's participation in local governance.

Gender Transformative Strategies

The findings identified capacity building as one of the most frequently proposed strategies for enhancing women's participation in local governance. It came out of the interviews that increasing women's numerical representation was insufficient unless accompanied by interventions that strengthened their capacity to participate meaningfully in governance processes. An informant, KI4, remarked that *"being present does not mean participation"*, explaining that socio-cultural norms discouraged women from speaking in the presence of men. Participants reported that women's attendance at meetings did not necessarily translate into active engagement in deliberations or decision-making.

It was also highlighted that persistent gender prejudice within local governance structures. One participant described how a male-dominated School Development Committee dismissed her proposal to prioritise the construction of a classroom block to improve the learning environment, despite the proposal addressing an immediate community need. Participants indicated that women's contributions were undervalued or overlooked, limiting their influence on local decision-making processes.

Capacity-building interventions were proposed that extended beyond technical leadership skills. They emphasised the need for civic education, leadership development, confidence-building initiatives, and mentorship programmes targeting prospective female leaders. It was suggested that experienced women councillors should mentor younger women to strengthen leadership succession and increase women's representation in local governance. Participants also observed that many women underestimated their leadership abilities because of long-standing socialisation processes that reinforced gender stereotypes and limited self-confidence.

The findings, thus, further identified socialisation as an important strategy for promoting gender equality. KI2 described women as important agents of social change, arguing that they possessed the capacity to reshape gender norms within families and communities. Participants suggested that gender equality should begin within households through the equitable sharing of domestic responsibilities between boys and girls from an early age. According to participants, transforming socialisation practices would contribute to

changing community attitudes towards women's leadership and participation in governance.

Several key informants also proposed the establishment of women-only consultative forums to create safe spaces where women could discuss governance issues freely and develop confidence before participating in broader community decision-making structures. Participants viewed such platforms as mechanisms for strengthening women's collective voice and increasing their participation in local governance.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that strengthening women's participation in local governance requires more than increasing their numerical representation; it demands interventions that address the cultural and psychological barriers that constrain meaningful participation. Although participants recognised capacity building as essential, they consistently emphasised that women's presence in governance structures did not automatically translate into influence over decision-making. This finding supports Goetz (2009/2015), who argued that gender inequality is fundamentally a governance problem requiring transformation of both formal institutions and informal power relations. It also resonates with Manyonganise (2015), whose work demonstrates that patriarchal norms continue to position men as legitimate decision-makers while socialising women into silence and deference. From an intersectionality perspective, these findings illustrate that exclusion extends beyond institutional access to include the cultural and psychological processes that shape women's confidence, voice, and perceived legitimacy within governance spaces.

The findings further reveal that effective capacity building must extend beyond leadership skills to address internalised gender inequalities and the social norms that sustain them. Participants proposed civic education, mentoring, confidence-building, and women-only consultative forums as mechanisms for strengthening women's agency and leadership capacity. The findings align with Abakah (2018), who found that women often participate in local governance without possessing sufficient influence over decision-making processes. They also reinforce Joyce Mujuru's (2009) emphasis on educational interventions that challenge internalised gender stereotypes and enhance women's confidence to assume leadership positions. Consistent with Intersectionality, the findings suggest that meaningful participation requires simultaneous transformation of structural opportunities, institutional practices, and individual perceptions of

leadership, thereby addressing both external and internal dimensions of gender inequality.

The study also identifies socialisation as a critical entry point for sustainable gender transformation. Participants viewed women not merely as beneficiaries of change but as active agents capable of reshaping gender norms within families and communities through the equitable socialisation of girls and boys. This finding supports Nurmiati's (2018) argument that sustainable social change requires institutional mechanisms that redistribute power while transforming organisational culture and gender norms. It further reinforces the central proposition of intersectionality that systems of inequality are socially reproduced and can therefore be challenged through equally deliberate processes of socialisation and cultural transformation. Collectively, the findings indicate that closing the gender gap in local governance requires a multidimensional strategy that integrates institutional reform, community-level norm change, and sustained investment in women's leadership development, thereby addressing the interconnected structural, cultural, and psychological barriers identified in this study

Conclusion

This study investigated how culture and gender intersect to shape women's participation in local governance in Zimbabwe. Guided by Intersectionality, the study demonstrates that the persistent gender gap in local governance is not solely a consequence of gender but results from multiple, overlapping, and mutually reinforcing structural, cultural, relational, and spatial inequalities. The findings extend intersectionality scholarship by introducing relational discrimination as a distinct mechanism through which women's political exclusion is reproduced. Unlike formal institutional discrimination, relational discrimination operates through culturally embedded family hierarchies, kinship relations, marital obligations, and community expectations that regulate women's political agency and reinforce political deference. These informal mechanisms remain largely invisible within conventional institutional analyses yet significantly influence women's participation in local governance.

The findings further revealed that legal and policy reforms, including gender quotas, have improved women's descriptive representation but have not translated into meaningful participation. Their effectiveness is constrained by patriarchal norms, limited institutional support, inadequate campaign financing, weak political party reforms, and persistent socio-cultural attitudes

that undermine women's legitimacy as political leaders. The study also demonstrates that women's exclusion is compounded by intersecting social identities, including marital status, family relationships, socio-economic position, and rural location. Addressing gender inequality requires interventions that move beyond numerical representation to confront the cultural, relational, and structural processes through which exclusion is reproduced.

The study, therefore, recommends a multidimensional policy approach. Gender-transformative interventions should institutionalise gender-sensitive consultative forums at the ward level, strengthen civic education and community dialogue targeting patriarchal norms, and engage traditional leaders, religious leaders, men, and women as partners in social norm transformation.

The Zimbabwe Gender Commission should advocate for legislated quotas within political parties and promote ward-level implementation to improve substantive representation. Simultaneously, the Ministry of Women Affairs, Community, Small and Medium Enterprises Development, working alongside development partners, should expand leadership development, mentoring, and economic empowerment programmes for prospective women leaders. Leveraging Zimbabwe's devolution agenda offers an important opportunity to strengthen women's participation through decentralised governance, gender-responsive local institutions, and targeted investment in rural infrastructure, digital connectivity, and digital literacy. Ultimately, closing the gender gap in local governance requires policy frameworks that recognise and address the intersecting structural, cultural, relational, and spatial inequalities that continue to shape women's political participation in Zimbabwe.

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