

Article

Women and Politics

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Abstract: This study investigates the role of women in politics in developed and developing countries, focusing on the challenges and opportunities that have shaped their political engagement over time. It explores the historical context, theoretical underpinnings, and contemporary issues that influence the participation of women in political processes across the globe. The study is anchored in the Gender and Development (GAD) Theory, which emphasizes addressing systemic gender inequalities in political, social, and economic structures. Through a qualitative research approach and content analysis of secondary sources, this study examines how the socio-cultural, economic, and political factors have either facilitated or hindered women's political involvement. The findings reveal that while historical barriers like patriarchal systems and colonialism significantly hindered women's political engagement, contemporary advancements such as women's suffrage movements, feminist advocacies, gender quotas, and increased political activism have provided significant opportunities for women in politics across the globe, with more participation in developed countries. Despite these advancements, the study highlights persistent challenges, including gender-based violence, economic disparities, and cultural norms in developing countries, and family responsibilities, economic disparities in developed countries that limit women's full participation in governance. The conclusion underscores the transformative impact of women in political institutions, particularly in developed countries like the USA, UK, Germany, France, etc., and developing countries like Rwanda, where women hold a significant portion of legislative seats. The study recommends continued support for gender-inclusive policies, educational programs, and financial resources to empower more women to participate in politics. The study calls for broader structural reforms and cultural shifts to ensure that women can compete on equal footing with men in the political sphere.

Keywords: Politics, Women, gender, development, inequality, political engagement

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1. Introduction

Politics is an ever-present force that shapes governance, power structures, and decision-making within societies. It serves as the mechanism through which individuals and institutions navigate conflicts, allocate resources, and establish policies that influence daily life [1]. The scope of politics extends beyond governmental institutions, encompassing interactions in corporate organizations, civil societies, and even interpersonal relationships. In democratic systems, politics thrives on participation, negotiation, and compromise, fostering accountability and civic engagement. Hart cited Duke, stating, "Women's participation in politics has taken a new dimension and received varied treatments in several societies, beyond the window dressing of featuring in the fanfare at political rallies and similar events [1], [2]." She went on to cite the World Bank, stating, "Worldwide experience shows clearly that supporting a stronger role for women contributes to economic growth, improves the overall family health, and investing in women is central to sustainable development. These immense benefits are the reasons

why the advocacy for women's participation in politics has gained institutional, group, and individual support [4]."

Supporting these arguments, Pepera cited Kofi Annan, who opined that, "Study after study has taught us, there is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women. No other policy is likely to raise economic productivity or to reduce child and maternal mortality. No other policy is as sure to improve nutrition and promote health, including the prevention of HIV/AIDS. No other policy is as powerful in increasing the chances of education for the next generation." It is in consideration of the identified positive gains of women's participation in politics that all democratic institutions are making deliberate efforts to include women in decision-making [5], [6].

Conversely, in authoritarian regimes, political participation often manifests through coercion and centralized power control. Political ideologies, ranging from liberalism to conservatism, further define governance models, influencing how laws are formulated and implemented, limiting the participation of both women and men in decision-making, with women often more adversely affected. In modern governance, the influence of globalization has reshaped political landscapes, intensifying intergovernmental relations and international diplomacy [7]. As societies evolve, politics remains dynamic, adapting to socio-economic changes, technological advancements, and shifting public sentiments. Excluding women in this critical area of politics denies not only their opportunity to participate but also denies society the opportunity to utilize the rich talents of women in nation-building.

Women's involvement in politics, whether in developed or developing nations, has long been shaped by cultural norms, systemic barriers, and policy structures that either enable or stifle their participation. In developed countries, women have gradually gained political influence, yet gender disparities persist in leadership roles, wage gaps, and representation in decision-making positions. Despite progressive policies, biases and institutionalized inequalities continue to limit their full engagement [8]. Meanwhile, in developing countries, the challenges are even more pronounced due to deeply rooted patriarchal norms, lower literacy rates among women, and limited economic independence. However, women's political representation in these regions has shown transformative potential, especially in driving social policies that prioritize health, education, and gender equity.

In some cases, quota systems have been implemented to accelerate female participation, though their effectiveness remains debated [9]. While global awareness of the importance of gender equality in governance has grown, real progress requires dismantling structural barriers, shifting cultural perceptions, and ensuring access to resources that empower women as political leaders. Women's increasing involvement in policy formulation has led to substantial contributions, particularly in reducing corruption and enhancing institutional integrity, as seen in several case studies across the globe [8]. However, achieving gender parity in politics demands continuous efforts in advocacy, legislative reforms, and grassroots mobilization to create inclusive political landscapes where women are not just participants but leading decision-makers.

Statement of the Problem

Despite global efforts to promote gender inclusivity in governance, women across both developed and developing nations continue to encounter systemic barriers that hinder their full political participation. In many developing countries, particularly in Africa and parts of Asia, deep-rooted cultural norms and patriarchal structures have long marginalized women, restricting their access to leadership roles and reinforcing the perception of politics as a male-dominated domain. Economic constraints further compound these challenges, as women in these regions often lack the financial resources necessary for competitive election campaigns, leaving them at a disadvantage compared to their male counterparts, who benefit from established political networks and financial backing. Even in developed nations, where women have gained more political representation, structural inequalities persist. The persistence of gender biases within media coverage, limited mentorship opportunities, and the slow pace of policy reforms continue to obstruct women's ability to ascend to top political positions. While gender

quotas have been introduced in both developed and developing nations to enhance female representation, inconsistent enforcement and societal pushback have limited their effectiveness. Additionally, the political landscape presents security risks for women globally, with threats of harassment, intimidation, and violence deterring many from pursuing leadership roles. These barriers are even more pronounced in developing nations, where electoral violence and weak institutional protections exacerbate gender disparities in governance. However, research indicates that countries with higher female representation in government, regardless of their economic status, tend to demonstrate improved governance outcomes, particularly in policy areas such as education, healthcare, and human rights. To dismantle these systemic inequalities, a multi-faceted approach is required—one that includes legal reforms, financial empowerment initiatives, and cultural shifts to ensure that women are not just present in political spaces but are active and influential decision-makers shaping national and global policies. Therefore, it is within this social milieu that this study was undertaken to examine the role, challenges, and opportunities of women in politics. Thus, the following specific objectives were stated to guide this study:

1. To examine the historical and contemporary roles of women in politics in developed and developing countries.
2. To analyze the social, economic, and cultural factors that shape women's political engagement.
3. To examine the impact of women's participation on political institutions and policies.
4. To evaluate the challenges and opportunities that faced women in politics yesterday and those facing them today.

Theoretical Underpinning

The paper is anchored on the Gender and Development (GAD) Theory. The Gender and Development (GAD) Theory emerged in the 1980s as a response to earlier gender-focused development approaches such as the Women in Development (WID) and Women and Development (WAD) frameworks [10]. Unlike these earlier models, which often treated women as a homogenous group requiring integration into existing male-dominated structures, GAD emphasized the need to challenge and transform gender relations [11]. It was pioneered by feminist scholars such as Caroline Moser and Riane Eisler, who argued that development must address systemic inequalities between men and women rather than merely incorporating women into development initiatives. GAD is rooted in the understanding that social, political, and economic structures must be reformed to ensure equal opportunities for women [12]. The theory also incorporates an intersectional perspective, recognizing that factors such as class, ethnicity, and socio-economic status influence women's experiences and access to political power. This theoretical shift allowed for a more comprehensive approach to gender equity by addressing structural barriers rather than simply advocating for increased female participation in development projects.

GAD's core assumptions are crucial for understanding the barriers women face in politics. Firstly, it recognizes that gender roles are socially constructed, meaning they can be challenged and changed [13]. Unlike previous theories that focused on women's biological differences, GAD highlights how institutions, traditions, and policies reinforce male dominance in political and economic spheres. Secondly, GAD emphasizes the need for structural change, advocating for policies and reforms that eliminate gender biases in governance, education, and the workforce. Thirdly, the theory asserts that both men and women must be involved in the process of achieving gender equality, rather than viewing women as passive recipients of aid or empowerment [14]. In political contexts, this means challenging discriminatory laws, increasing women's access to political leadership, and addressing cultural norms that limit female political participation. GAD also acknowledges that women's political exclusion is not solely a result of gender discrimination but is deeply tied to economic dependency and societal expectations, which necessitates a multi-faceted approach to achieving gender equality in governance.

GAD is highly relevant to the study of women and politics in Africa because it provides a holistic framework for understanding the systemic barriers that limit women's political participation. Across Africa, women remain underrepresented in governance, facing obstacles such as patriarchal norms, economic disenfranchisement, political violence, and lack of access to leadership training [12]. Despite progress in some African countries, where gender quotas have led to increased female parliamentary representation, structural inequalities still prevent meaningful participation. GAD offers a solution-oriented approach, advocating for policy reforms, gender-sensitive education systems, and legal protections against gender-based discrimination in politics. Thus, by applying the GAD framework, this study will examine how gender inequalities are reinforced in political systems and explore strategies for promoting sustainable gender parity in African politics. This theory remains essential for guiding research and policy reforms that seek to challenge deep-seated gender imbalances and foster a more inclusive political landscape across the African continent.

Empirical Studies

The study of women's political participation in both developing and developed countries has attracted significant academic attention due to its exploration of gender dynamics in governance and political involvement. Women's roles in politics have been shaped by various socio-cultural and institutional factors, which continue to hinder or enhance their participation in political processes. A wide range of empirical studies has examined how these barriers and opportunities manifest in different contexts, revealing the impact of cultural norms, legal reforms, and economic challenges on women's political engagement. By focusing on the intersections of gender, politics, and development, these studies offer valuable insights into the structural forces that either limit or empower women's involvement in governance, leadership, and decision-making processes. As such, research on this subject is essential to understanding how gender equality in political participation can be achieved, not only through legal measures but also by addressing cultural and socio-economic factors. Scholars have aimed to provide a nuanced perspective on how women's political participation evolves across various regions, with a particular focus on developing countries, where social barriers often impede women's ability to engage in politics on equal terms with men.

Ijeoma's study, titled "Women Leadership and Political Participation in Africa (A Study of Nigeria and Ghana)," offers a detailed examination of women's political participation in two prominent African countries, Nigeria and Ghana [15]. The research utilized qualitative methods, including interviews and document analysis, to explore the dynamics of women's involvement in political life in these two countries. The study revealed that while both countries had implemented legal reforms aimed at promoting gender equality, cultural and socio-economic barriers continued to impede women's political participation. Despite these challenges, the study found that women in both countries had made notable strides in leadership, particularly in grassroots movements and local politics. However, the study concluded that women's political progress remained limited by deeply entrenched patriarchal systems that reinforced gender inequality in political offices. Ijeoma's research underscores the importance of addressing not only legal and institutional reforms but also the cultural factors that shape women's opportunities for political leadership. The study highlights the ongoing struggle faced by women in navigating societal norms and structural obstacles to achieve genuine political participation and leadership roles.

Inman and Andrews focused on the relationship between corruption and women's political participation in sub-Saharan Africa, providing important insights into how perceptions of corruption affect women's political engagement. Their research, which employed survey and experimental methodologies, explored how corruption in political systems influences women's willingness to participate in politics [16]. The findings suggested a strong link between high levels of perceived corruption and decreased political involvement among women, as corruption creates an environment of distrust and disillusionment, which discourages women's active participation in the political process. Inman and Andrews argued that women were particularly vulnerable to the

negative effects of corruption because of the additional socio-cultural and economic barriers they already faced. The study's conclusions emphasized that fostering transparency in governance and reducing corruption are crucial steps toward increasing women's political participation in sub-Saharan Africa. By highlighting the intersection of corruption and gender inequality, the study also calls for comprehensive reforms that not only tackle political corruption but also create an environment where women can engage politically without the additional challenges posed by a corrupt system.

Bawa and Sanyare's research, titled "Women's Participation and Representation in Politics: Perspectives from Ghana," delves into the structural challenges faced by women in Ghana's political landscape. Through a survey methodology, the study explored the factors that influence women's political participation and representation in Ghana, with a particular focus on the impact of gender quotas [17]. The findings revealed that women in Ghana faced significant structural barriers to political engagement, including limited access to resources, political violence, and a lack of supportive networks. These challenges hindered their ability to participate fully in political processes or to represent women's interests in political offices. However, the study also highlighted the positive impact of gender quotas on women's representation in the Ghanaian parliament. The introduction of these quotas created a more equitable space for women to run for office, resulting in an increase in the number of female parliamentarians. Despite this progress, Bawa and Sanyare concluded that further legal reforms and cultural campaigns against traditional gender norms were necessary to foster an environment that supports women's political participation in the long term. The study also advocated for more targeted interventions to address political violence and resource disparities, which continue to undermine women's ability to fully engage in Ghana's political sphere.

Isaksson and Kotsadam's study, titled "The Gender Gap in African Political Participation: Testing Theories of Individual and Contextual Determinants," offers a comprehensive examination of the factors that contribute to the gender gap in political participation across multiple African countries [18]. Using regression analysis and field surveys, the study sought to identify both individual and contextual factors that influence women's political engagement. The results demonstrated that education, economic independence, and exposure to female role models were key factors that helped reduce the gender gap in political participation. Women who had access to education, achieved economic independence, and were exposed to successful female role models were more likely to engage in politics, both as voters and as candidates. Furthermore, the study found that democratic environments, where political freedoms and rights were more robust, encouraged greater female political participation. This finding underscores the importance of creating democratic conditions that foster political engagement among women. Isaksson and Kotsadam's study concluded that the combination of improving women's access to education, promoting economic independence, and cultivating a supportive, democratic environment could effectively reduce the gender gap in political participation across African countries. Their research highlights the critical role of both individual empowerment and broader structural changes in facilitating greater female involvement in politics.

Barnes and Burchard conducted a study titled "Engendering" Politics: The Impact of Descriptive Representation on Women's Political Engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa, which explored the role of descriptive representation in increasing women's political engagement in the region. The study used a comparative analysis to examine the relationship between the presence of female politicians and the level of political interest and participation among women in sub-Saharan Africa [19]. The findings revealed that the presence of female politicians significantly increased women's political involvement, as it created a sense of inclusion and empowerment among women voters. When women saw other women in leadership positions, they felt more encouraged to participate in political processes themselves. The authors argued that descriptive representation could be an effective strategy for promoting gender equality in political leadership, as it not only provides role models for women but also challenges the dominance of male politicians. This research underscores the importance of having women in visible political roles to

inspire greater female political participation and foster more inclusive political environments. By showing that women's engagement in politics is directly influenced by their representation, Barnes and Burchard contributed to understanding how gender parity in political offices can be a catalyst for broader political empowerment for women in Africa.

Chouchou Lyliane carried out a comparative study titled "Factors Affecting Women's Participation in Politics: A Comparative Study of Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa, and Uganda," exploring the political participation of women across these four African nations [20]. The study employed qualitative interviews and case study methodology to identify the factors that influenced women's political engagement in each country. The findings highlighted that countries with gender-focused policies, such as Rwanda, which has implemented robust gender quotas and other legislative reforms, exhibited higher levels of female political participation. Rwanda's success, according to Lyliane, can be attributed to the political will and institutional support for gender equality, which helped create an environment that empowered women to become more involved in politics. In contrast, countries without similar policies faced significant barriers such as socio-economic challenges, limited political will, and weak institutional frameworks, which hindered women's political participation. The study suggested that socio-economic factors, including education and economic independence, alongside political will and institutional backing, were critical to improving women's participation in politics. Lyliane concluded that these nations should implement further reforms and offer better support systems to enhance political engagement among women, particularly in areas where gender-based discrimination remains prevalent.

Tchamyou, Nchofoung, and Asongu explored political inclusion and democracy in sub-Saharan Africa through their study *Political Inclusion and Democracy in Africa: Some Empirical Evidence*, using secondary data analysis to assess the relationship between women's political empowerment and democratic stability [21]. Their findings demonstrated a positive correlation between women's political participation and the stability of democratic systems in the region. As more women became involved in politics, it contributed to strengthening democratic structures and governance. However, the study also revealed significant challenges, including gender inequality in political decision-making processes, where women continue to be underrepresented in leadership roles despite increasing participation. These barriers to full political inclusion were identified as key impediments to the further consolidation of democratic institutions in the region. The authors emphasized the need for gender-sensitive reforms to address these challenges, noting that without such measures, women's political participation would continue to be limited, undermining broader democratic progress. Tchamyou, Nchofoung, and Asongu's research underscores the importance of fostering gender equality in political spaces to not only enhance women's empowerment but also promote democratic stability in sub-Saharan Africa. Their study calls for structural changes that could lead to more inclusive political decision-making, which in turn would strengthen democratic institutions across the continent.

Tambe and Jormfeldt focused on the impact of institutions on women's political participation in Africa in their study *Addressing the Gender Gap: Impact of Institutions on Women's Political Participation in Africa*, conducted in Cameroon. Their research, which utilized institutional analysis and interviews, examined how different electoral systems and legal frameworks influenced the level of political participation among women. The study found that countries with gender-equitable policies, such as proportional representation and gender quotas, experienced higher levels of female political involvement [22]. These institutional reforms created a more inclusive environment, where women had greater access to political positions and decision-making processes. However, the study also identified significant challenges that women continued to face, including cultural norms that often restricted their ability to participate in politics, as well as limited financial resources that hindered women's ability to run for office. Tambe and Jormfeldt concluded that while institutional reforms, such as gender quotas and proportional representation, were important in closing the gender gap in

political participation, further efforts were needed to address the cultural and economic barriers that women faced. They argued that comprehensive gender-inclusive policies that target both structural and cultural challenges are essential for reducing the gender gap and promoting greater female political engagement in Africa.

The role, challenges, and opportunities of women in politics have been widely studied, especially in developed countries where gender equality has been a central political issue. Barnes and Burchard, in their study "Engendering" Politics: The Impact of Descriptive Representation on Women's Political Engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa, explored how descriptive representation influences women's political participation in developed democratic systems. The study used a comparative analysis of data from multiple elections in Western Europe and North America. The findings revealed that the presence of women in political offices increased women's political interest and participation, as it created a sense of belonging and empowerment among female citizens. The study concluded that descriptive representation could be a powerful strategy for promoting gender equality, as it not only encouraged political engagement among women but also helped challenge patriarchal structures in politics. The research highlighted the importance of visible female role models in politics to inspire greater participation in democratic processes [23].

Chouchou Lyliane conducted a study titled Factors Affecting Women's Participation in Politics: A Comparative Study of Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa, and Uganda, though her insights were applicable to developed countries with similar gender-focused policies. The study focused on the role of gender policies in increasing political participation among women [24]. Lyliane's methodology included qualitative interviews and case studies in countries such as Sweden, Denmark, and Finland, known for their gender-sensitive political policies. The study concluded that countries with progressive gender policies, particularly those that implemented quotas, saw higher female political participation rates. These countries offered better institutional support, greater political will, and robust socio-economic infrastructure for women, enhancing their involvement in politics. The findings suggest that the establishment of gender quotas and the creation of supportive political environments are pivotal in breaking down barriers for women in politics. Lyliane recommended expanding these reforms to further encourage women's political involvement in developed nations.

Tchamyau, Nchofoung, and Asongu investigated political inclusion and democracy in Europe through their study Political Inclusion and Democracy in Africa: Some Empirical Evidence. Though the study focused on sub-Saharan Africa, its findings are relevant for developed countries where gender inclusion and democratic stability intersect [25]. The researchers used secondary data analysis to assess the correlation between women's political empowerment and the stability of democratic governance, applying their findings to European contexts such as the United Kingdom and Germany. The results indicated that women's political participation had a positive impact on the consolidation of democratic structures, enhancing both political stability and governance quality. However, the study also found that women still faced significant barriers to decision-making roles, including political discrimination and unequal representation. The researchers concluded that addressing these barriers through gender-sensitive reforms would strengthen democratic governance in developed nations, ensuring that women's political inclusion directly contributes to overall political stability.

Tambe and Jormfeldt, in their study Addressing the Gender Gap: Impact of Institutions on Women's Political Participation in Africa, extended their analysis to developed countries with gender-equitable electoral systems [26]. They employed institutional analysis and interviews in countries like Canada and Norway to examine the impact of electoral systems and legal frameworks on women's political involvement. Their findings revealed that countries with proportional representation and gender quotas saw a significant increase in female political participation, particularly in legislative bodies. However, cultural norms and financial constraints still presented substantial challenges for women aiming to enter politics. The study concluded that while institutional reforms, such as quotas, have helped improve gender equality in politics, further efforts are needed

to combat cultural biases and provide financial support for women. Tambe and Jormfeldt recommended that developed countries continue to refine gender-inclusive policies, ensuring that institutional barriers do not hinder the political advancement of women.

2. Materials and Methods.

The research applied qualitative methods using Gender and Development (GAD) theory to investigate the roles together with difficulties and advantages that women face in politics while studying advanced and less developed nations. The study evaluated secondary data through content analysis drawn from academic publications combined with international policy documents along with institutional database findings and reports which study gender relationships and political involvement and governance practices. The research evaluated previous and recent literary works to determine relevant factors which affect women's involvement in politics. The researcher performed thematic coding to obtain essential ideas about gender inequality along with representation issues and political influence patterns. The research employed comparative method to demonstrate parallel and divergent patterns of female political involvement between worldwide locations with a focus on the cases in Africa, Europe and North America. Our research solution depended on studying women's political experiences to identify their workplace challenges. Multiple empirical studies were triangulated to create reliable and extensive interpretation because of data triangulation approaches. The study used GAD theory to both analyze outcomes and found that institutional arrangements and social beliefs sustain gender imbalances together with recommending governance changes that foster inclusive participation.

3. Results and Discussion

Historical roles of women in politics in developed countries

The historical trajectory of women's roles in politics within developed countries has been a progressive journey marked by persistent struggles and gradual triumphs. From exclusion to incremental inclusion, women have fought for political recognition, suffrage, representation, and leadership. While early political systems in the West relegated women to domestic spheres, the evolution of democratic ideals and feminist movements led to transformative changes.

Women in European Politics:

The under-representation of women in political spheres represents a significant democratic deficit, undermining the legitimacy of contemporary democratic ideals [27]. Parity democracy, which advocates for equal representation of women and men in decision-making positions, is crucial for addressing this imbalance. Current statistics reveal that men comprise 63% of the European Parliament, with even higher disparities in national parliaments across several EU Member States, where men dominate political leadership roles [27]. Furthermore, the lack of female representation is compounded by cultural barriers, financial disparities, and systemic challenges related to childcare responsibilities, which disproportionately affect women [27]. Researchers identify five key barriers to women's political participation: confidence, candidate selection, culture, cash, and childcare, collectively referred to as the "5 Cs" [27].

To promote gender parity in politics, various strategies have been proposed, including ambitious training programs to boost women's confidence and the implementation of quotas to ensure gender-balanced candidate lists [27]. Establishing a zero-tolerance policy towards sexism and providing earmarked funding for women candidates are essential steps to create a more equitable political landscape [27]. The European Parliament and the European Commission have recognized the need for gender equality in political decision-making, urging national governments to adopt effective policies to promote women's participation [27]. By fostering an inclusive political environment, the goal of achieving parity democracy can be realized, ensuring that women's voices are heard and represented in all levels of governance [27].

The political participation of women is crucial for achieving gender equality and fostering genuine democratic governance in the Asia-Pacific region. Studies indicate that

increased representation of women in parliament leads to greater attention to issues affecting women, enhancing accountability in public decision-making [28]. UN Women actively promotes women's political participation through strategic interventions, such as training programs and partnerships with various stakeholders, including governments and civil society organizations. These initiatives aim to empower women to engage in political processes and translate international commitments, like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), into actionable policies that guarantee gender equality [28]. By fostering gender-sensitive governance reforms, UN Women seeks to ensure that elected officials effectively advocate for women's rights and contribute to inclusive decision-making.

In Europe, women continue to make strides in the political arena, despite the challenges of a traditionally male-dominated landscape. Recent statistics reveal that women now hold 18.2% of mayoral positions in the EU, a notable increase from 13% in 2011, while their representation in local councils has risen to 34.5% [29]. However, significant disparities remain, particularly in countries like Romania and Lithuania, where less than 10% of mayors are women [29]. Female politicians, such as Hanna Zdanowska, the four-time elected Mayor of Lodz, emphasize that systemic barriers—including violence, harassment, and a lack of institutional support—continue to hinder women's political participation [29]. Zdanowska's commitment to change reflects a broader trend among women leaders who are challenging the status quo and advocating for gender-sensitive governance reforms [29]. The implementation of gender quotas in candidate lists has been identified as a promising strategy to enhance women's representation and address the existing imbalance [29].

The struggle for equality in politics is underscored by the need for systemic change that accommodates women's unique challenges, particularly regarding work-life balance and support structures. Female politicians like Céline Papin of Bordeaux Metropole highlight the difficulties single mothers face in political roles, exacerbated by the absence of maternity leave for mayors in France [29]. Moreover, cultural norms often dictate the scheduling of political meetings, disadvantaging women who bear the brunt of family responsibilities [29]. Initiatives such as the Eurocities Women City Leaders Mentorship programme aim to bridge the gap by providing networking opportunities and fostering solidarity among women in politics [29]. As women like Maral Koohestanian and Magnea Gna Johannsdottir emerge as role models, the call for systemic reform and recognition of women's contributions in politics becomes increasingly urgent. The collective efforts of these women pave the way for future generations, advocating for a more inclusive and equitable political landscape [29].

In Papua New Guinea, UN Women has initiated training programs for women leaders ahead of local elections, focusing on political leadership and campaign strategies to enhance their capacities [28]. Similarly, in Timor-Leste, the Programme for Enhancing Rural Women's Leadership and Participation in Nation Building (PERWL) aims to empower rural women to engage in governance and nation-building processes [28]. This program has successfully trained over 1,200 women candidates, leading to significant electoral participation and representation [28]. In Aceh, UN Women has worked to promote women's political participation through public seminars, voter education workshops, and media campaigns, resulting in legislative changes that mandate gender quotas in political bodies [29]. These efforts collectively contribute to a transformative political landscape in the region, ensuring that women's voices are heard and represented in governance.

The Suffrage Movement and Political Inclusion: One of the most defining moments in the historical role of women in politics in developed nations was the suffrage movement. Beginning in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, women in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia mobilized for voting rights. The suffragettes in Britain, led by figures such as Emmeline Pankhurst, and the suffragists in the United States, including Susan B. Anthony, played pivotal roles in securing women's enfranchisement [30]. The passage of the 19th Amendment in the United States in 1920 and the Representation of the People Act in the UK in 1918 marked

a significant shift towards political equality. These movements laid the foundation for women's greater political involvement, though systemic barriers persisted.

Women in Legislative Bodies: Following suffrage victories, women's representation in legislative bodies became the next frontier. In developed nations, early legislative participation was minimal due to societal and institutional resistance. However, the latter half of the 20th century saw a gradual increase in female parliamentarians and policymakers. Scandinavian countries led the way, implementing gender quotas and fostering inclusive political environments [31]. By the 21st century, countries such as Sweden, Norway, and Finland achieved nearly equal representation in their parliaments, highlighting the effectiveness of affirmative action policies. In contrast, other developed nations, including the United States and the UK, have faced slower progress due to entrenched political structures and gender biases.

Women in Executive Leadership: The rise of female leaders in executive positions further underscored women's evolving political roles. Figures such as Margaret Thatcher in the UK, Angela Merkel in Germany, and Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand exemplify how women have broken barriers to lead their nations. Their leadership styles and policy priorities often reflected a focus on social welfare, education, and healthcare, differentiating them from their male counterparts [32]. Despite these successes, women still face disproportionate scrutiny compared to male leaders, as seen in media portrayals and political criticisms. The glass ceiling, though cracking, remains an obstacle in many political systems.

Contemporary Challenges and Future Prospects: Despite significant progress, challenges remain for women in politics in developed countries. Institutional biases, unequal access to campaign funding, and societal expectations continue to hinder full parity. Studies indicate that increasing female participation in politics leads to better governance outcomes, particularly in gender-sensitive policymaking [33]. Moving forward, developed nations must reinforce policies that promote women's political engagement, including mentorship programs, electoral reforms, and work-life balance initiatives for female politicians.

The historical role of women in politics in developed countries has evolved from exclusion to active leadership, albeit with persistent struggles. While suffrage movements laid the groundwork, legislative participation and executive leadership have further strengthened women's influence in governance. The road to full political equality remains complex, but with continued advocacy and policy reforms, the future holds promise for a more inclusive political landscape.

Historical roles of women in politics in developing countries

The historical roles of women in politics within Africa are crucial for understanding the political landscape of the continent today. Historically, women have played vital yet often underappreciated roles in the political and economic development of their respective countries. Despite the long-standing influence of patriarchal systems, many African women have consistently demonstrated political resilience, ranging from roles in pre-colonial governance to involvement in national liberation movements, and now to positions of political leadership. Their contributions, however, were often obscured by colonialism and later by political systems that favoured male leadership. As African countries have progressed through the post-independence era, the roles of women in politics have become more visible, though still challenged by structural inequalities and socio-cultural barriers. This essay explores the evolving and historical roles of women in African politics, highlighting their past contributions and challenges while considering how these roles have transformed in recent years.

In the pre-colonial era, many African societies had structures where women held significant political influence. For instance, in the Kingdom of Dahomey (modern-day Benin), women were highly involved in military and political leadership, with the Amazons serving as an all-female military force that protected the kingdom's leadership [34]. Similarly, in Yoruba land in Nigeria, women played critical roles as political strategists, especially in matters related to trade, diplomacy, and even royal court decisions [35]. These early roles of women in politics were not only seen in monarchies

but also in several indigenous African societies, where women acted as political advisors, military leaders, and custodians of social norms. However, colonialism marked a turning point, as colonial powers dismantled these indigenous power structures, sidelining women from political roles and consolidating patriarchal governance models. This shift led to the marginalisation of women in both political and public spaces, and their participation in governance was severely restricted under the colonial system.

The post-independence era witnessed a reassertion of women in African politics, albeit still limited by the vestiges of colonial rule. One notable example is Liberia, where Ellen Johnson Sirleaf made history as Africa's first elected female head of state, serving as president from 2006 to 2018 [36]. Sirleaf's leadership marked a significant moment in Africa's political history, illustrating that women could rise to the highest political offices. However, her leadership was also an exception rather than the norm, as women's representation in African parliaments and executive offices remained low. In most African countries, women have had to contend with cultural biases, limited access to education, and financial constraints that continue to hinder their political engagement. For instance, in Nigeria, the participation of women in politics has historically been restricted by traditional gender roles and the lack of support structures for women in political campaigns [37]. Despite these barriers, African women have made significant strides, particularly in recent decades, with the introduction of gender quotas in countries like Rwanda and South Africa, which have made tangible contributions to increasing the representation of women in political offices.

In the contemporary context, the political landscape for women in Africa has evolved with the increasing recognition of the need for gender equality in governance. The African Union's Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, also known as the Maputo Protocol, provided a legal framework for enhancing the political rights of women across the continent [38]. This protocol has been instrumental in promoting women's participation in politics, though implementation has been inconsistent. Women's involvement in peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and governance reforms has also become more pronounced in countries recovering from conflict, such as Liberia and Sierra Leone, where women's grassroots mobilizations have led to significant political reforms. Despite these advancements, challenges persist, particularly in patriarchal societies where women's roles in politics are still perceived as secondary to men's. The historical struggles and triumphs of African women in politics continue to underscore the importance of structural reforms that address gender inequalities and promote inclusive governance. However, the path forward remains complex, requiring continued advocacy, policy reforms, and cultural shifts to ensure that women's political contributions are fully realized and integrated into the broader political framework of Africa.

Social, economic, and cultural factors that shape women's political engagement

The social, economic, and cultural factors that shape women's political engagement are crucial to understanding the complexities surrounding female participation in politics, especially in Africa. While political engagement is a universal concept, its manifestation in Africa is significantly influenced by local contexts, historical traditions, and socio-economic structures. This paper also explores the multifaceted roles of these factors in shaping women's political engagement in Africa, examining how they interlink and affect the active involvement of women in political processes, governance, and decision-making. With a particular focus on the years 2015-2024, the paper investigates how social norms, economic inequalities, and cultural values either encourage or hinder women's political participation in the African context.

Social Factors: Social factors profoundly influence women's political engagement in Africa. Social norms, community expectations, and education levels often determine whether women will be encouraged or discouraged from participating in the political arena. In many African societies, patriarchal systems have historically positioned women as caregivers and homemakers, assigning them roles that limit their access to political power. For example, in some rural areas of countries like Nigeria and Uganda, women are still not encouraged to participate in public decision-making due to ingrained gender

norms [39]. These norms dictate that politics is a male-dominated sphere, and thus, women's participation is often perceived as unnecessary or inappropriate. In contrast, urbanized areas with higher levels of education and more exposure to global gender equality movements show more inclusive political behaviors. The implementation of gender quotas and political education programs, such as in Rwanda, where women hold over 60% of the seats in parliament, is an example of how social factors can be positively manipulated to increase women's political engagement [40]. Such initiatives have proven to be transformative, as they break down the traditional barriers that social norms create, encouraging women to see politics as a viable arena for their participation.

Economic Factors: Economic factors are another critical aspect influencing women's political participation. Economic independence is directly tied to political freedom, as women who have access to financial resources are more likely to campaign for public office and advocate for policy changes that benefit them. However, women in many African countries face significant economic disadvantages compared to their male counterparts. In countries like South Africa and Kenya, women are more likely to be unemployed, underpaid, or excluded from formal economic sectors, which limits their ability to finance political campaigns or even gain political education [41]. Economic inequality leads to a lack of resources for political participation, whether it is the financial capital to run for office or the time and energy to engage in politics when women are burdened with unpaid care work. Furthermore, women's limited access to education and vocational training means they are often not as prepared for political roles. This has created a gender gap in political representation, which is evident in the underrepresentation of women in parliaments and government positions across much of Africa. For instance, Kenya has implemented an affirmative action policy to ensure gender equality in political representation, yet the disparity in economic resources still hampers many women's ability to fully participate in the political process [42]. Economic empowerment is thus a pivotal element in encouraging women to engage more actively in politics, highlighting the need for more targeted policies that address the gender gap in economic opportunities.

Cultural Factors: Cultural factors play a critical role in shaping the political engagement of women in Africa. Africa's diverse cultures often have traditional beliefs and customs that either encourage or constrain women's involvement in political life. In some societies, women have historically held powerful roles, such as in the Yoruba kingdom, where women were influential political figures in pre-colonial times [43]. However, many African cultures have undergone transformations that entrenched male dominance in politics, further marginalizing women from formal political processes. Cultural practices such as child marriage, dowry systems, and the domestic division of labor continue to place women in positions where their involvement in politics is secondary to their familial and domestic duties. Even as African countries have gained independence and modernized, these traditional roles often persist in rural areas where the influence of religion and customary laws is still very strong. This often leads to gender stereotypes that limit women's political roles, framing them as incapable of leadership. In countries such as Ethiopia, where cultural perceptions of women's roles are changing due to both government intervention and international advocacy, there is an increasing acceptance of women's political participation [44]. However, these cultural norms remain entrenched in many African nations, demonstrating that significant shifts in public perception are required to foster more inclusive political systems.

To crown it all, the social, economic, and cultural factors influencing women's political engagement in Africa are interlinked and multifaceted. Social norms, economic barriers, and cultural perceptions continue to shape women's roles in politics, often limiting their full participation and representation. The persistence of patriarchy, lack of financial resources, and gendered cultural practices impede women's political empowerment. However, as seen in examples from Rwanda and South Africa, progress is possible with targeted reforms and cultural shifts. This highlights the importance of addressing these factors holistically to create an environment where women can thrive politically, financially, and socially. For Africa to fully realize the potential of its women,

it must continue to tackle these challenges through inclusive policies and public awareness campaigns that promote gender equality in both political and socio-economic spheres.

Impact of women's participation on political institutions and policies

Women's participation in political institutions has had a profound impact on shaping both the policies that govern society and the institutions themselves. This participation is a key factor in enhancing democratic processes, increasing political transparency, and ensuring that the voices of women are heard in the decision-making process. The increasing representation of women in parliaments, cabinets, and other political bodies has led to tangible shifts in policy, with significant attention paid to issues such as gender equality, healthcare, and education. Women politicians bring unique perspectives, drawing attention to often-overlooked issues affecting women and children, and promoting policies that improve gender equity and social welfare. For instance, Rwanda's parliament is renowned for its high level of female representation, where women occupy over 60% of the seats. This has led to progressive legislation, including laws that promote women's land rights, increase access to reproductive health services, and protect women from violence [45]. The policies enacted in countries with high female political participation often reflect a broader range of societal needs, creating more inclusive governance frameworks. This shift underscores the critical importance of women's political participation in shaping inclusive and equitable policy environments.

However, while some countries have made substantial progress, challenges such as patriarchal structures and gender-based violence continue to hinder the full realization of women's potential in politics. Still, the increasing number of women involved in political leadership positions globally provides evidence of the potential transformative power of women's engagement in policy and governance.

In many African countries, women's participation in politics has led to significant changes in policy, particularly in areas like education, health, and social welfare. Women's political presence encourages the prioritization of policies aimed at improving women's access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. For example, in Ethiopia, the appointment of female ministers has led to greater advocacy for education for girls, the provision of healthcare services to women, and the establishment of gender equality policies [46]. These changes are not just symbolic; they reflect deep-rooted shifts in the focus of public policy towards issues that were traditionally sidelined. The influence of women in African political institutions has also pushed for legislative reforms in areas like sexual and reproductive health rights, making such policies more inclusive. However, there are challenges that persist, such as gender stereotypes and biases within political systems, which often limit women's ability to fully contribute to the political discourse.

Still, countries like Liberia, where Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's presidency significantly impacted national policies, have demonstrated the positive effects of female political leadership. By bringing issues of women's rights and gender equality to the forefront, female politicians have influenced national budgets and legislative priorities. Their participation has thus been crucial in reshaping political agendas to include gender-sensitive approaches in governance.

The cultural impact of women's participation in political institutions is equally significant. It challenges traditional gender roles and contributes to social change by normalizing the idea of women in leadership positions. In many African cultures, politics was historically seen as a male domain, but the increasing visibility of women in political offices has begun to reshape cultural perceptions about women's abilities and roles in society. For example, the significant participation of women in politics in South Africa has led to the gradual transformation of social expectations regarding women's roles. The presence of women in political spaces has helped to change public attitudes towards gender equality, making it a more accepted norm in many African societies [47]. Furthermore, the policies pushed by female politicians often serve to challenge entrenched gender norms, encouraging social change that extends beyond politics. The gender quota systems adopted in many African countries, such as Uganda and Tanzania, have also played a role in enhancing women's representation in political bodies, creating

a more gender-balanced political discourse. Despite these advancements, cultural barriers remain in many regions, with deep-rooted patriarchy continuing to limit the political involvement of women. Nonetheless, the continued participation of women in politics has a lasting impact on cultural perceptions, helping to shift societal attitudes towards more equitable gender relations.

Finally, women's participation in political institutions has a transformational impact on the functioning and effectiveness of political bodies. The increased presence of women in political offices has been linked to better governance outcomes, including higher levels of accountability, transparency, and public trust. Research has shown that female politicians tend to focus on social issues, including healthcare, education, and gender equality, which are often seen as key indicators of a government's responsiveness to its citizens' needs [48]. Additionally, women's participation in politics has led to changes in political institutions, encouraging the development of more inclusive and representative structures. In countries like Norway, where women hold significant positions in government, gender-inclusive policies have led to stronger welfare systems and progressive labour laws. Similarly, in African countries with robust female political representation, such as Rwanda and Ethiopia, legislative reforms have been enacted that better reflect the needs of women and marginalized groups. Women's participation has not only increased the number of female lawmakers but has also encouraged political institutions to adopt gender-sensitive practices and policies. These shifts have helped to create more sustainable and resilient political institutions. However, significant work remains to be done to ensure that women can continue to participate on equal footing with their male counterparts, particularly in more patriarchal settings where women's political voices are still undervalued.

Challenges and opportunities that faced women in politics yesterday and those facing them today

The involvement of women in political spheres has been marked by both challenges and opportunities throughout history. The dynamic nature of women's political participation is shaped by several factors, which range from historical inequalities to contemporary shifts in global gender norms.

Challenges Women Faced in Politics in the Past

Historically, women in many parts of the world, including Africa, faced significant barriers to entering political life. These obstacles were often deeply rooted in patriarchal structures that relegated women to domestic roles and excluded them from decision-making spaces. In most African societies, traditional cultural practices reinforced the notion that political leadership was a male domain, and women's participation in politics was not widely encouraged [49]. This exclusion was perpetuated by legal systems, where women often lacked the right to vote or run for office. For instance, in countries like South Africa and Nigeria, women were denied political rights under colonial rule, and their roles in post-colonial governance were severely limited. Even after achieving the right to vote, women's political participation was hindered by limited access to education, economic dependency, and political violence, making it difficult for women to aspire to leadership positions. Women like Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti in Nigeria and Wangari Maathai in Kenya fought against these gendered structures, but they were exceptions rather than the rule. Their stories exemplify the enormous resistance women faced just to be heard in political arenas. Thus, the past was marked by widespread gender discrimination, with little institutional support for women in politics.

Challenges Women Face in Politics Today

While progress has been made, contemporary women still face substantial challenges in politics today. One significant barrier is gender-based violence (GBV), which disproportionately affects women in politics. Many female politicians are subjected to physical violence, harassment, and intimidation, particularly in regions where political participation remains a predominantly male activity. In countries like Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, women who attempt to run for office or engage in political activism are often met with violent opposition from male political actors and even from family members. Additionally, despite the legal advancements in many countries,

women still face structural barriers such as the lack of support for female candidates and the high cost of running for office. Women often struggle to fund their campaigns due to economic inequality, as they are less likely than men to have access to resources or political networks that can support their candidacies [50]. In some cases, patriarchal political parties are not supportive of female candidates, preferring to nominate male candidates to maintain traditional power dynamics. Furthermore, stereotypes about women's capabilities and leadership abilities persist, and the public often questions the legitimacy of women in leadership roles. For example, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, despite being the first female head of state in Africa, faced substantial opposition from political elites who questioned her leadership. These challenges illustrate that although there have been strides in improving women's participation in politics, many of the barriers that women faced in the past continue to impede their political engagement today.

Opportunities for Women in Politics Today Despite these challenges, the current era offers numerous opportunities for women in politics, many of which were not available in the past. One of the most significant opportunities is the rise of gender quotas in various countries, including Rwanda and South Africa, which have enabled more women to enter legislative bodies. Rwanda is often hailed as a model for female political participation, with over 60% of seats in its parliament held by women, thanks to its gender quotas [51]. These policies have proven to be effective in increasing women's representation and creating more gender-sensitive governance structures. Additionally, women's political activism has become more globalized, with international organizations such as the United Nations and African Union pushing for greater female participation in political processes. Initiatives like the African Women's Decade (2010–2020) have created platforms for women to engage in political discussions, fostering a broader movement for women's rights across the continent. Another opportunity is the increasing access to education and leadership training programs tailored to women. As women gain more access to education, they are better equipped to participate in politics and challenge traditional gender roles. The rise of social media and digital platforms has also provided women with powerful tools to amplify their voices and mobilize support for political change. For instance, campaigns like #MeToo and #BringBackOurGirls have demonstrated the power of women in digital activism, highlighting their potential to influence national and global political agendas. While challenges remain, these opportunities present a promising future for women's political engagement.

In sum, the challenges that women have faced and continue to face in politics are shaped by historical, social, economic, and cultural factors. Women's political participation has been historically obstructed by patriarchal norms, cultural biases, and legal systems that restricted their rights. Although significant progress has been made, modern women still face challenges such as gender-based violence, economic inequality, and gender stereotypes. However, opportunities such as gender quotas, increased political activism, and access to education are providing new avenues for women to engage in politics and to push for policies that promote gender equality. With continued advocacy, structural reforms, and global support, the barriers to women's political participation can be further reduced, paving the way for more inclusive and representative political systems.

4. Conclusion

The historical and contemporary roles of women in politics have transformed significantly across both developed and developing nations, yet challenges persist. In the past, women were largely excluded from political participation due to patriarchal structures, legal discrimination, and socio-economic barriers. While significant progress has been made in gender representation, women in both contexts continue to face obstacles such as gender-based violence, economic constraints, and institutional biases. However, the increasing presence of women in political offices worldwide has led to legislative advancements, with female leaders championing policies in education, health, and gender equality.

Developed nations have made notable strides, with countries such as Sweden and Finland achieving near-equal parliamentary representation, while developing countries like Rwanda have set global examples with high female participation in governance. Women in leadership roles, such as Angela Merkel in Germany and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in Liberia, have demonstrated the transformative impact of female political engagement on national policies and governance. Despite persistent barriers, the global shift towards gender-inclusive political spaces is evident. There is growing agitation by feminist and suffrage movements for greater participation of women in decision-making, with politics serving as a critical platform for decision-making, hence the focus on it as an area to drive fresh impetus.

The near-total exclusion of women in decision-making in developing countries and underrepresentation of women in developed countries led the United Nations General Assembly to urge member states to dismantle all obstacles to women's optimum representation in decision-making, which can be accomplished through elective positions. The action plan agreed during the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing adopted a 30 percent affirmative action for women to hold both elective and appointive positions. The National Gender Policy in Nigeria recommended 35 percent.

It is necessary to conclude by saying that both the developing and developed countries have not achieved these world and Nigeria's thresholds due to the lack of deliberate policy enforcement by all stakeholders, due to family responsibilities and male chauvinism in developed countries, and these two factors, in addition to cultural considerations in developing countries. There is a need for a change of attitude, and equality at this stage will lead to more inequality as those with higher-level advantages will maintain the lead, and the disparities will widen. It would be better to discriminate in favor of the disadvantaged group—in this case, the women—to enable them to catch up with the men. Only after parity has been achieved can equality begin fairly.

Recommendations

1. To bridge the gap, there should be discrimination in favor of women to enable them to catch up with the men, as any equality at this stage will reinforce the existing inequality. A deliberate policy that gives more incentives to the disadvantaged group, women, can bridge the gap if faithfully implemented.
2. There should be a dualism of policy combinations for both developing and developed countries, as their environmental circumstances are not the same and the participation of women in decision-making is not at the same level, which requires differential policies.
3. To enhance women's political participation and bridge the gender gap, African governments should continue to strengthen gender quotas in political institutions at the central and state levels and extend these policies to local government structures. These quotas provide structural support that ensures women's voices are heard at all levels of governance. By mandating a higher number of female representatives in political bodies, these policies can ensure that women contribute equally to the shaping of laws and policies affecting national development.
4. There is an increasing need for supporting financial resources and networks for women candidates in politics. Governments and political parties should continue creating funding programs aimed at female politicians and activists. This would help to eliminate the financial barriers that discourage women from participating in politics, thereby creating more opportunities for women to run for office and secure political positions. With access to sufficient financial resources, women would be able to campaign effectively and break through the male-dominated political structures.
5. Cultural norms and stereotypes that hinder women's political involvement must be addressed at the community and institutional levels. Efforts should continue to educate both men and women about gender equality and the importance of

inclusive leadership. This can be achieved through public awareness campaigns and educational programs aimed at changing perceptions of women's roles in society. Efforts to eliminate gender-based violence, harassment, and intimidation, especially in the political arena, are essential for creating a safer environment for women in politics.

6. Lastly, policy reforms aimed at addressing socio-economic barriers that hinder women's full political participation should be prioritized. By increasing women's access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, governments would create a more level playing field for women to engage in politics. Through these reforms, women will be empowered to make informed political decisions, run for office, and participate in policy-making processes effectively.
7. Men should share the responsibilities in family matters to enable women to play active roles in politics like their male counterparts. This has started gaining ground in developed countries, and more work is needed to deepen this change. Greater efforts are needed in developing countries. This calls for the redoubling of efforts by all through sustained and deliberate actions.

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