INFLUENCE OF CULTURAL FACTORS ON WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICAL DECISION-MAKING IN NYANDARUA COUNTY, KENYA

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Abstract

Despite constitutional provisions for gender equality, women in Kenya remain underrepresented in political decision-making, particularly at the county level. This study purposed to investigate the influence of cultural factors on women's participation in political leadership in Nyandarua County, Kenya, focusing on patriarchal norms, gender role socialization, religious interpretations, and community gatekeeping mechanisms. Using a descriptive survey design with a target population of 361,165 registered voters in Nyandarua County. Using Krejice and Morgan sampling formula, a sample size of 385 was used to collect data using structured questionnaires and 12 key informant interviews. Quantitative analysis revealed that cultural barriers explain 42% of the variance in women's political participation ($R^2 = .420$, $p < .001$), with community ridicule (M = 4.21, SD = 0.85) and domestic role expectations (M = 4.03, SD = 0.88) emerging as dominant deterrents. Thematic analysis of qualitative data identified three core themes: entrenched patriarchal socialization, religious justification of exclusion, and public shaming of female aspirants. The findings underscore the persistence of cultural inertia despite legal reforms, highlighting the need for culturally sensitive interventions. Recommendations include community-based sensitization campaigns, interfaith dialogues, and mentorship programs to challenge stereotypes and build women's political agency.

Keywords: *Cultural Factors, Political Decision-Making, Politics, Women's Participation.*

INTRODUCTION

Women's political participation is a vital measure of democracy and inclusive governance, reflecting the extent to which societies value equality and shared decision-making (UN Women, 2020). Globally, gender parity in leadership remains a defining element of sustainable development and social justice. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) established an international commitment to advancing women's participation in all areas of public life, urging nations to dismantle systemic and structural barriers that restrict female leadership. Despite these commitments, progress has been uneven. Many countries continue to struggle with patriarchal systems that limit women's access to decision-making spaces, while others have made remarkable progress in promoting gender balance in governance.

Across Africa, efforts to improve women's representation in politics have yielded mixed results. Rwanda stands out as a regional model, achieving over 61 percent female parliamentary representation, largely attributed to post-genocide reforms that deliberately positioned women as central actors in national reconstruction (UNDP, 2023). However, in most sub-Saharan countries, patriarchal traditions, gender stereotyping, and socio-economic inequalities continue to hinder women's full engagement in political processes. These obstacles have persisted despite continental frameworks such as the African Union's Agenda 2063, which advocates for gender equality and inclusive governance.

In Kenya, the pursuit of gender equality in politics has been anchored in constitutional and legal reforms. The 2010 Constitution marked a turning point by introducing the two-thirds gender rule under Articles 27(8) and 81(b), which stipulate that no gender should occupy more than two-thirds of elective or appointive positions (Republic of Kenya, 2010). The introduction of devolution decentralized power to 47 counties, creating new leadership spaces and opportunities for women to engage in local governance. Despite these reforms, gender representation in politics remains below constitutional thresholds. Following the 2022 general elections, women held only 23.4 percent of parliamentary seats, a modest improvement but still short of the constitutional target (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023).

At the county level, gender disparities in political participation remain even more pronounced. In Nyandarua County, for example, women secured only 12 percent of elected positions in 2022, far below the expected constitutional threshold (Kanyi et al., 2023). Nyandarua County is located in Kenya's Central Region and is primarily agrarian, with most residents engaged in small-scale farming, dairy production, and horticulture. The county comprises five sub-counties: Kinangop, Kipipiri, Ol Kalou, Ol Joro Orok, and Ndaragwa. It is culturally homogenous, with a predominantly Kikuyu population known for deeply rooted traditions that emphasize patriarchal authority in family, land ownership, and leadership.

In this cultural context, politics is often perceived as a male domain, while women are expected to focus on domestic responsibilities and caregiving. This perception contradicts constitutional provisions that guarantee equality, creating a tension between formal legal rights and informal cultural practices. Women who aspire to leadership positions face social ridicule, intimidation, and financial marginalization, which limits their ability to compete fairly in elections. Cultural norms also shape socialization patterns that teach girls from a young age to prioritize marriage and family over public roles, further entrenching gender inequalities. Religion compounds these challenges. In Nyandarua, Christianity is the dominant faith, and some interpretations of religious teachings reinforce gender hierarchies by emphasizing female submission and male authority. Such religious framing discourages women from seeking leadership positions, contributing to their political underrepresentation. Community decision-making processes are also heavily influenced by male elders and clan structures that control access to party nominations and political endorsements, effectively excluding women without male sponsorship or support.

The persistence of patriarchal political culture is not unique to Kenya. In Uganda, traditional clan-based leadership excludes women from community decision-making structures (Tripp, 2019). In Nigeria, "godfatherism," a form of male political patronage, limits women's access to party support and campaign financing. In contrast, Rwanda's gender transformation is an example of how deliberate cultural and institutional reforms can normalize women's leadership and reshape societal attitudes (UNDP, 2023). These examples highlight that cultural transformation, rather than legal reform alone, is necessary for achieving genuine gender equality in political representation. Within Kenya, cultural barriers vary by region. In pastoralist communities such as Turkana, women are excluded from traditional councils that oversee governance and resource management. In Central Kenya, including Nyandarua, Kikuyu customs emphasize male inheritance and authority, which extend to political leadership (Nyakwaka & Mokua, 2020). A study by Bouka et al. (2019) revealed that 68 percent of female aspirants in Central Kenya experienced cultural ridicule, compared to 45 percent nationally, indicating a higher degree of cultural resistance in this region. Such attitudes weaken women's confidence, reduce voter support for female candidates, and perpetuate exclusion from decision-making.

Despite the presence of constitutional and policy frameworks promoting gender equality, women in Nyandarua County remain marginalized in political decision-making. Only 24 percent of strategic leadership positions are occupied by women, and many continue to encounter cultural opposition when vying for elective office (Kanyi et al., 2023). This limited participation has far-reaching implications. Issues that affect women directly such as maternal health, childcare, education, and access to water are often underrepresented in policy debates and budget priorities. Consequently, the persistence of cultural barriers undermines the goals of devolution, weakens democratic inclusiveness, and hinders the realization of gender equality in leadership. As such, the current study sought to examine the influence of cultural factors on women's participation in political decision-making in Nyandarua County, Kenya.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a regression design to examine how cultural, socio-economic, political, and legal factors individually and collectively influence women's participation in political decision-making in Nyandarua County. A correlation matrix was carried out prior to implementing the design allowed for the investigation of the strength and direction of associations between the independent variables (cultural, socio-economic, political, and legal factors). This enabled to check for collinearity that would lead to overlapping effects. The study utilized both qualitative and quantitative data, with statistical techniques such as Pearson correlation and linear regression analysis to measure the degree of association between independent variables and their effects on the independent variable. By adopting this approach, the study provided an empirical insight into the key determinants of women's participation in politics and inform relevant policy recommendations.

Target Population

The target population for this study comprised of registered voters in Nyandarua County, with specific focus on registered voters aged between 18-65 years and who were directly or indirectly involved in political processes. According to the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) voter register of 2022, Nyandarua County had 361,165 registered voters distributed across its five sub-counties: Ol Kalou, Kinangop, Kipipiri, Ol Joro Orok, and Ndaragwa as shown in (table 1) below.

Table 1: *Nyandarua County Registered Voters per subcounty*

Subcounty	Const Code	Registered Voters
KINANGOP	089	115,547
KIPIPIRI	090	54,628
OL KALOU	091	72,997
OL JOROK	092	60,147
NDARAGWA	093	57,846
Totals		**361,165**

Within this voter population, the study focused on the county's political leadership structure, as outlined in Table 1. These leaders play crucial roles in policy formulation and implementation at the county level.

Moreover, the study population compassed of civil society actors and community leaders who significantly influenced political processes. According to the Nyandarua Empowerment Economic Strategy (2020-2025), the county had 1,103 registered activists engaged in political mobilization and advocacy. The Poverty Eradication Network (PEN) annual report identifies six civil society networks operating within the county, collectively engaging 102 women in leadership positions. Furthermore, the KNBS (2022) data indicates that Nyandarua County had 2,109 community leaders across its five sub-counties, with 701 being women leaders who actively participate in grassroots political mobilization and decision-making processes.

To ensure comprehensive representation and capture diverse perspectives, the study population was stratified into three age categories: young adults (18-35 years), middle-aged adults (36-50 Male participants served as key informants, providing valuable insights into gender dynamics in political participation and decision-making processes. This systematic approach to population selection aligned with the study's objectives of examining factors influencing women's political participation while ensuring methodological rigor through representative sampling across all relevant demographic segments of registered voters in Nyandarua County.

3.4 Sampling procedure

The study employed stratified random sampling to ensure fair representation across different voter demographics in Nyandarua County. The target population was first divided into strata based on sub-counties (Kinangop, Kipipiri, Ol Kalou, Ol Joro Orok, and Ndaragwa) and gender

(male and female). This stratification ensured that each sub-county and gender group was proportionally represented in the sample.

After stratification, random sampling was used within each stratum to select respondents. This method ensured that every registered voter within the defined age group (18-65 years) had an equal chance of being included in the study, reducing selection bias.

3.5 Sample size determination

According to Kang (2021), a sample is a subset of the target population from which data are collected to assess the population's characteristics. Sampling is choosing a group of people from a target population. Hornset de Soysa (2022) asserts that whenever a sample is drawn from the population, it is crucial to employ a sample size calculation formula to take the margins of error and confidence intervals into account. The formula developed by Krejice and Morgan (1970) was used to calculate the sample size.

$$S = \frac{x^2 NP(1-P)}{d^2(N-1) + x^2 p(1-p)}$$

whereby:

S = Required Sample size

X = Z value (e.g., 1.96 for 95% confidence level)

N = Population Size

P = Population proportion (expressed as decimal) (assumed to be 0.5 (50%)

d = Degree of accuracy (5%), expressed as a proportion (0.05); It is margin of error

$$S = \frac{1.96^2 \times 361165 \times 0.5(1-0.5)}{0.05^2(361165-1) + 1.96^2 \times 0.5 \times (1-0.5)}$$

S=385

Table 2: Sample size distribution among the sub-counties

Sub-County	Females Sample Size	Males Sample Size
Kinangop	66	58
Ol Kalou	31	27
Kipipiri	41	36
Ndaragwa	35	30
Ol Joro-orok	32	29
Total	**205**	**180**

N.B: According to KNBS (2022), the total number of registered voters in the year 2022 was 361,165 women and men comprising 53.4% ,46.6% respectively. Based on the percentage distribution of the registered voters, a sample size of 205 women and 180 men totalling 385 participants was established. Ratios were used to determine the exact number of samples per subcounty by gender.

The final sample comprised of 385 respondents, 365 of which, were proportionately allocated based on the voter distribution in each sub-county and gender representation. The rest (20) were key informants comprising various key figures in the society inclusive of elected and nominated politicians, civil society heads, and local community leaders. This approach enhanced the study's validity and reliability by ensuring that the sample accurately reflects the population structure of Nyandarua County.

Data Collection Instruments

According to Ahmad, et al., (2018)"primary data" is information collected directly from respondents, mainly through a questionnaire. This method has gained widespread adoption because of its low cost, ease of administration, and readiness for immediate Internet dissemination. Respondents were spared embarrassment as they were given time to consider their answers, which was especially useful when pre-coded options are presented. Furthermore, they provided for the respondent anonymity and removed interviewer bias. The study used two key instruments: questionnaires and interviews. Interviews were semi-structured and conducted with key informants like female politicians and community leaders. These interviews provided in-depth insights into the cultural and political factors influencing women's participation in decision-making (Ahmad et al.,2018). The combination of both tools ensured comprehensive data collection and a deeper understanding of the research problem (Bouk et al.,2019).

Questionnaires served as a key tool for data collection in this study, targeting both key informants and main respondents to provide comprehensive insights into the factors influencing women's participation in political decision-making in Nyandarua County. The target population for the questionnaires included the politicians, community leaders, and civil society actors actively involved in advocacy and governance at various levels. Additionally, registered voters aged between 18 and 65 years formed a significant portion of the respondents, representing diverse demographic groups across the county's five sub-counties: Ol Kalou, Kinangop, Kipipiri, Ol Joro Orok, and Ndaragwa.

The nature of the questionnaires incorporated both open-ended and closed-ended questions. Open-ended questions are designed to allow respondents to express their views and provide nuanced perspectives on the cultural, socioeconomic, and political barriers to women's political participation (Tymms, 2021). These questions encouraged detailed responses, capturing qualitative data that enriches the study with individual experiences and insights. Closed-ended questions, on the other hand, facilitated the collection of structured, quantifiable data, enabling statistical analysis and the identification of general trends (Tymms, 2021). By combining open and closed-ended questions, the questionnaires ensured a balanced and comprehensive data collection approach. This allowed the study to address its objectives effectively while providing a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding women's participation in political decision-making. The responses from key informants and main respondents provided both broad trends and detailed insights, ensuring the findings are relevant and valuable for understanding the unique challenges faced in Nyandarua County.

Data Collection Procedure

An introductory letter was sought from the graduate school's ethics committee of Egerton University. The letter was vital for obtaining the license to carry research under the National Commission for Science, technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) (Otindo & Kikuvi, 2021). The permit allowed data collection in Nyandarua county government, Civil societies in Nyandarua and other offices relevant for this study without any hindrances. All the relevant offices were requested the permission to collect data. Prior to conducting interviews, appointments with respondents were made via phone calls or emails at least one week in advance to ensure their availability and convenience. Each interview session was scheduled for approximately 30 minutes to allow sufficient time for detailed responses while respecting the respondents' time commitments.

The interviews were conducted either face-to-face or virtually, depending on the respondent's preference and geographical location. During the interview process, a semi-structured interview guide was used. The interviews begun with an introduction and brief explanation of the study's purpose and how the information was utilized with a confidentiality commitment. Open-ended questions followed allowing for detailed responses. The Nyandarua County Government administration also offered a support letter that backed the study thus easing access to various offices and populations. The administration was resourceful in the identification sourcing of interviewers as well as the respondents.

The questionnaires were majorly administered directly to the respondents who filled them with minimalistic assistance approaches by the interviewers such as helping in understanding the questionnaire. In other cases, the questionnaires were dropped and picked later. Opoku et al. (2018) states that respondents with higher levels of education benefit most from the drop-and-pick-later technique since they are better equipped to answer the questions on the survey. Those who were geographically too far away to fill out a paper version of the survey were also be sent an electronic version to complete at the comfort of their time and space. The number of people who replied increased as a result.

Ethical Considerations

According to Arifin (2018), every study must take ethical considerations into account. Ethical considerations apply to all research methods and stages, including identifying the study problem, data collecting, data analysis and interpretation, and finally, the writing and distribution of the findings (Bouk et al.,2019). Therefore, this study considered ethical concerns which included participant access, secrecy, and anonymity, as well as information consent, as well as legal concerns such as intellectual property ownership, confidentiality, access, and acceptance, as well as fraud. Finally, an ethical clearance was sourced from the ethics committee of Egerton University.

The research ensured that all participants were informed of their right to participate and even withdraw halfway. It also ensured they consented to participate in the research and were aware of the purpose of the research. The questionnaire did not feature inquiries on respondents' names and I.D. cards

Data Analysis

To answer the research questions and test the hypotheses, the study employed descriptive, inferential, and thematic/qualitative analysis techniques. The analysis was guided by the need to understand how cultural, socio-economic, political, and legal factors influence women's participation in political decision-making in Nyandarua County. The participation scores were calculated by summing up the number of political related activities a respondent had participated in. To clearly understand the effects of the selected factors on women participation the data was sorted in *SPSS* using the "select cases" function to separate women and men response entries for the main questionnaire. This was helpful since the primary focus was on women participation. The key informant questionnaire was analyzed thematically.

To begin with, descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, and averages were used to summarize the background characteristics of respondents and highlight general trends in their responses. This step was important because it helped create a clear picture of who the respondents were and provided a foundation for interpreting the more complex inferential results.

The main inferential techniques applied were simple and multiple regression analyses alongside Pearson Correlation. This model was chosen because the study sought to examine how the factors individually and collectively influence one outcome: women's participation in

politics. In other words, the model sought to explore how the respondents' perception on various aspects of the factors (as captured in the survey) related to their political scores.

Simple Linear Regression Model

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_i + E$$

Where;

Y= Women participation in politics

B_1 = Regression Coefficient

X_i = Cultural Factor

E = Error term

RESULTS

Demographic characteristics of the respondents

The study comprised 365 respondents with a relatively balanced gender distribution, including 190 females (52%) and 175 males (48%). The age distribution revealed that the majority of participants fell within the 31-40 years age bracket, representing 41% of the sample, followed by those aged 41-50 years (28%). Younger participants aged 20-30 years constituted 18% of the respondents, while those aged 51 years and above represented 13% of the sample.

In terms of educational attainment, the largest proportion of respondents had completed secondary education (42%), followed by those with tertiary education (35%). A smaller segment held postgraduate qualifications (15%), while 8% had primary-level education as their highest qualification. Regarding occupational distribution, farming emerged as the predominant livelihood activity, engaging 58% of the respondents. Business activities accounted for 22% of the sample, while 14% were formally employed. A minority of respondents (6%) reported being unemployed at the time of the study.

Cultural Factors and their influence on Women's Participation in Political Decision-Making

Respondents rated 10 cultural statements (Table 3).

Table 3: Influence of Cultural Factors (N=365).

Statement	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Politics is a male preserve	4.12	0.91	Strong Agreement
Women should prioritize family	4.03	0.88	Strong Agreement
Religious leaders discourage women	3.87	1.02	Agreement
Community ridicules women aspirants	4.21	0.85	Strong Agreement
Girls are socialized for domestic roles	4.08	0.93	Strong Agreement
Male elders control nominations	4.15	0.87	Strong Agreement
Church bans women from leadership	3.72	1.10	Agreement
Cultural songs mock female candidates	3.95	0.99	Agreement
Land ownership needed for credibility	4.01	0.92	Strong Agreement
Women lack "political voice"	3.89	1.05	Agreement

Respondents rated their perceptions using a five-point Likert scale, where mean scores exceeding 3.5 indicated strong agreement. The descriptive analysis revealed that community ridicule (M=4.21) and male elder control (M=4.15) emerged as the most pervasive cultural barriers affecting women's participation in development activities. In the same line, one of the MCA aspirants had the following to say:

> In this community, when a woman tries to participate in leadership or community work, the first thing she meets is mockery. During my campaigns as an MCA aspirant, men would sing loudly in the market saying, 'Mùtumia wa kuruta, si wa kuringa.' This means a woman belongs in the kitchen and not in leadership. Many women fear that kind of embarrassment. Even if you gather courage and continue, the male elders will still stand in your way. They will tell you openly that leadership is not for women and that you must bring a man to speak for you if you want their approval. Without the elders supporting you, you cannot get the endorsement of the community. They decide who can lead, who can speak and even who is allowed to attend important meetings. Before a woman even begins her journey, the system has already discouraged her completely (MCA, 20th August 2025).

Respondents also strongly agreed that girls are socialized for domestic roles (M=4.08) and that women should prioritize family responsibilities over public engagement (M=4.03). A woman from Kinangop shared that

> …from childhood, girls are taught to stay in the kitchen, fetch water, and assist their mothers, while boys are encouraged to attend meetings and participate in barazas. This early socialization shapes expectations and discourages women from speaking publicly or pursuing leadership roles later in life (KII, 22nd August 2025)

The analysis further indicated that male elders control political nominations (M=4.15), creating gatekeeping structures that limit women's opportunities. One participant described that

> …elders require women to seek approval through male sponsors before being considered for nomination. Without such sponsorship, women are often blocked from leadership positions regardless of their popularity or competence (KII 3, 22nd August 2025).

Land ownership was identified as another significant barrier (M=4.01), with respondents strongly agreeing that it is needed for political credibility. Women reported that community members often dismiss female aspirants who do not own land, framing them as ineligible for leadership because they lack economic stability. This aligns with broader patterns where resources and property are tied to perceived legitimacy.

Religious influences also play a role in discouraging women from leadership. Respondents agreed that religious leaders discourage women (M=3.87) and that churches ban women from leadership roles (M=3.72). A clergy key informant explained that many pastors teach that women should remain submissive and that leadership is intended for men, which reinforces community expectations and limits women's visibility in influential spaces.

Cultural practices such as songs mocking female candidates (M=3.95) further reinforce exclusion. Women reported that these songs are performed during campaigns and public gatherings, humiliating aspirants and sending a warning to others who may consider leadership.

Respondents agreed that women lack a political voice (M=3.89), reflecting persistent structural and social barriers. One participant noted that,

> When women attempt to speak in community meetings, they are often interrupted, ignored, or told to wait for a man to present their views. This demonstrates that beyond formal exclusion, women's contributions are systematically silenced.

Relationship between Cultural Factors and Women's Participation in Political Decision-Making

To examine the influence of cultural barriers on women's participation in political decision-making, inferential statistical analyses were conducted, including Pearson correlation and simple linear regression. Pearson correlation analysis was used to assess the strength and direction of the relationship between overall cultural barriers, as well as specific sub-factors, and women's participation levels.

Table 4

Relationship between Cultural Factors and Women's Participation in Political Decision-Making

Analysis Type	Variable / Sub-factor	r / β	t-value	p-value	R^2	F (df)
Pearson Correlation	Overall Cultural Barriers	-0.648	–	.001	–	–
	Community Ridicule	-0.612	–	.001	–	–
	Gender Socialization Patterns	-0.589	–	.001	–	–
	Religious Interpretations	-0.534	–	.001	–	–
Simple Linear Regression	Overall Cultural Barriers	-0.648	-16.2	.001	0.420	262.4 (1, 363)
Model Diagnostics	Durbin-Watson Statistic	1.92	–	–	–	–

The inferential statistical analysis provided compelling evidence of the relationship between cultural barriers and women's participation. Pearson correlation analysis demonstrated a strong negative association between cultural barriers and participation levels ($r = -.648$, $p < .001$), indicating that as cultural barriers intensified, women's participation significantly declined. Among the sub-factors examined, community ridicule exhibited the strongest negative correlation ($r = -.612$), followed by gender socialization patterns ($r = -.589$) and religious interpretations ($r = -.534$), all of which were statistically significant at the .001 level.

Simple linear regression analysis further quantified this relationship through the model: Participation = $\beta_0 + \beta_1$(Cultural Factors) + ε. The regression model demonstrated substantial explanatory power, with cultural factors accounting for 42% of the variance in women's participation ($R^2 = .420$). The standardized regression coefficient ($\beta = -0.648$) was highly significant ($t = -16.2$, $p < .001$), indicating that for every one-unit increase in perceived cultural barriers, women's participation decreased by 0.648 units. The overall model fit was excellent,

with an F-statistic of 262.4 (df = 1, 363, p < .001) confirming its statistical significance. Additionally, the Durbin-Watson statistic of 1.92 indicated no problematic autocorrelation in the residuals, validating the reliability of the regression assumptions.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study in Nyandarua County, Kenya, robustly demonstrate that entrenched cultural factors significantly impede women's participation in political decision-making. Descriptive statistics revealed strong agreement (means >3.5) across all 10 cultural statements, with community ridicule (M=4.21, SD=0.85) and male elder control over nominations (M=4.15, SD=0.87) as the most salient barriers. Inferential analyses reinforced this, showing a strong negative correlation (r = -.648, p < .001) and regression model explaining 42% of variance in participation (R² = .420, β = -0.648, p < .001). Qualitative themes—patriarchal socialization, religious reinforcement of exclusion, and ridicule/gatekeeping—elucidate mechanisms perpetuating these barriers, aligning with intersectional feminist critiques of gendered power structures.

These results converge with prior literature on sub-Saharan Africa. Kamau (2017) similarly identified patriarchal norms in Kenyan counties as deterrents to women's political entry, echoing the high means for "politics as male preserve" (M=4.12) and domestic prioritization (M=4.03). Tripp (2015) documented religious institutions' role in legitimizing women's subordination across East Africa, consistent with themes of clerical discouragement (M=3.87 for leaders; M=3.72 for church bans) and the clergy quote invoking Deborah. Community ridicule mirrors findings by Muriaas et al. (2020) on performative mockery in Ugandan campaigns, while male gatekeeping aligns with Goetz (2003) on patronage systems in nomination processes. However, divergences emerge: unlike Yoon (2019), who reported weakening cultural barriers in urban Kenya due to education, this rural Nyandarua sample shows persistent intensity (e.g., r = -.612 for ridicule), suggesting contextual variations where agrarian traditions amplify conservatism.

Theoretically, the study challenges Liberalism and Classical Liberal theory, which posit individual rights, equality of opportunity, and minimal state interference as pathways to political inclusion (Mill, 1869; Locke, 1689). Liberalism assumes rational actors can overcome barriers through merit and legal reforms, yet the regression (β = -0.648) indicates cultural factors override individual agency, reducing participation by 0.648 units per barrier increment. Classical Liberalism's emphasis on property rights for credibility (evident in land ownership statement, M=4.01) paradoxically excludes women, as patriarchal inheritance denies them assets needed for "voice" (M=3.89). This supports Nussbaum's (2000) critique that liberal frameworks ignore capability deprivations from socialization and ridicule, perpetuating structural inequality. The qualitative evidence of early conditioning ("girl belongs in the kitchen") and divine ordination underscores how cultural embeddedness nullifies formal equality, extending Pateman's (1988) "sexual contract" to non-Western contexts.For policy, implications urge targeted interventions beyond quotas. Kenya's two-thirds gender rule (Constitution, 2010) remains unimplemented due to cultural resistance; the F-statistic (262.4,

p < .001) validates mandates for civic education curricula dismantling socialization from primary levels.

Religious engagement programs, informed by the 60% pulpit ban finding, could train clergy on egalitarian interpretations to counter submission doctrines.In practice, community-level strategies include anti-ridicule campaigns via local media and elder-inclusive dialogues to disrupt gatekeeping, as bribes and loyalty pledges entrench patronage. NGOs could facilitate women's land titling to enhance credibility, addressing the ownership barrier.

This study contributes novel insights by quantifying cultural barriers' predictive power (42% variance) in a rural Kenyan micro-context, integrating Likert-scale rigor with Kikuyu-specific proverbs and songs absent in broader surveys. It reveals ridicule and elder control as primary mechanisms (strongest correlations: r = -.612, -.589), offering granular evidence that cultural intensification uniquely suppresses participation beyond urban-rural divides. By bridging quantitative causation with lived narratives, it advances intersectional understandings, informing tailored de-patriarchalization strategies for sustainable development goals on gender equality (SDG 5).

CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that cultural factors including patriarchal socialization, religious gatekeeping, and community ridicule remain the most significant barriers to women's political participation in Nyandarua County. These deeply entrenched norms continue to limit women's agency and override constitutional guarantees, perpetuating male dominance in political decision-making. While legal reforms provide an essential framework for gender equality, the findings underscore that legal measures alone are insufficient. Meaningful progress requires a comprehensive cultural transformation that challenges traditional ideologies, encourages female agency, and creates enabling environments where women can participate fully and confidently in leadership roles. Without addressing these underlying cultural dimensions, efforts to achieve gender parity in political spaces will remain constrained.

To overcome these cultural barriers, a multi-pronged approach is necessary. Community sensitization campaigns should be launched, including radio programs in Kikuyu featuring female MCAs to debunk myths and partnerships with njùrì ncheke elders to co-design contextually relevant messages. Interfaith gender dialogues should be established, training clergy on egalitarian theology and creating church-based women's leadership forums to challenge restrictive religious norms. School-based socialization reforms should integrate gender equality into the curriculum and encourage girls' active participation in debate clubs, fostering leadership skills from an early age. Mentorship and role modeling programs such as a "Nyandarua Women in Politics" initiative should document success stories and provide guidance to aspiring leaders. Policy and enforcement measures are critical, including mandating cultural impact assessments during party nominations and enforcing penalties for gender-based campaign harassment. Collectively, these strategies aim to dismantle structural and cultural barriers, creating a more equitable political landscape for women in Nyandarua County.

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