

The Persistent Grip of Patriarchy: Socio-Cultural and Economic Barriers to Kamba Women's Political Participation

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Abstract

Despite significant constitutional reforms aimed at enhancing gender equality in Kenya, women's participation in elective politics remains markedly low, particularly in culturally conservative regions. This article investigates the specific socio-cultural and economic factors that influenced the participation and representation of Kamba women in the elective politics of Machakos County between 1991 and 2017. This period, spanning the re-introduction of multiparty democracy to the second general election under the 2010 Constitution, provides a critical lens through which to examine the tension between progressive legal frameworks and persistent on-the-ground realities. The study concludes that legal reforms alone are insufficient to achieve substantive gender equality in politics. Overcoming these persistent barriers requires multi-faceted interventions that actively challenge patriarchal attitudes, provide targeted economic support for female candidates, and foster institutional change within political parties.

Keywords: Women in Politics, Gender Equality, Kenya, Machakos County, Kamba, Socio-Cultural Barriers, Economic Empowerment, Feminist Theory

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1. Introduction

The journey of women's political participation in post-colonial Africa is a narrative of both remarkable progress and persistent struggle. Across the continent, the transition to democratic governance has been accompanied by a growing recognition of the importance of gender equality in the political sphere. Kenya, since its return to multiparty politics in the early 1990s and the landmark promulgation of its progressive 2010 Constitution, stands as a key case study in this continental trend. The 2010 Constitution, in particular, introduced transformative affirmative action measures, most notably the "two-thirds gender rule," a constitutional principle designed to ensure that no single gender holds more than two-thirds of positions in elective or appointive public bodies (Lomong, Oino & Lumayo, 2023).

These legal and institutional advancements have, in theory, created unprecedented opportunities for women to enter and thrive in the political arena. However, the translation of these de jure gains into de facto political power has been slow and uneven, particularly in regions where traditional patriarchal structures remain deeply entrenched. The spheres of politics and public leadership in Kenya have been historically and culturally framed as an aggressive and exclusively male domain, a perception that continues to shape electoral dynamics on the ground (Gatheru, 2024). Women who dare to enter this space often face a unique and formidable set of obstacles, ranging from systemic discrimination within political parties to gender-based violence and a crippling lack of financial resources (Nasong'o, 2024).

The Statement of the Problem that drives this research lies in the gap between the national narrative of progress and the localized, lived realities of women aspiring to political office. While general scholarship acknowledges the underrepresentation of women in Kenyan politics, there is a scarcity of focused, in-depth research that examines the specific socio-cultural and economic barriers faced by women from different ethnic and regional backgrounds.

The experiences of Kamba women in Machakos County, a region where modern political processes intersect with strong traditional norms, remain largely undocumented in academic literature. While the county has produced notable female leaders, their successes are often seen as exceptional, masking the systemic barriers that prevent the majority of aspiring women from even contesting, let alone winning, elective office. This knowledge gap makes it difficult for policymakers and civil society to design effective, context-specific interventions.

This article, drawn from a broader historical study, seeks to fill this gap by addressing a specific objective: To examine the socio-cultural and economic factors that influenced the participation and representation of Kamba women in the elective politics of Machakos County from 1991 to 2017. This specific timeframe is critical as it covers the period of democratic expansion in Kenya, allowing for an analysis of how women have fared in an increasingly competitive, yet still deeply patriarchal, political landscape.

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2. Literature Review

The study of women's political participation is a rich field, with scholars identifying a complex interplay of factors that either enable or hinder their entry and success in politics. This review synthesizes empirical literature on the key socio-cultural and economic barriers women face, providing the context for the specific investigation in Machakos County. The analysis is grounded in Feminist Political Theory, which provides the critical lens for understanding these dynamics.

2.1 Theoretical Framework: A Feminist Political Lens

This study is primarily guided by Feminist Theory, which argues that political, social, and economic structures are inherently patriarchal, designed in ways that systematically privilege men and marginalize women (Usmani et al., 2023). A core concept within this framework is patriarchy, a system of social organization that grants men power and authority in both public and private spheres. Feminist theory helps to deconstruct how institutions like the family, the community, political parties, and the state perpetuate gendered role expectations that confine women primarily to the domestic sphere and view their entry into the "masculine" world of politics as a transgression (Sapkota & Dahal, 2022). This theoretical lens is crucial for moving beyond a simplistic "add women and stir" approach to political representation, and instead interrogating the deep-seated power structures that maintain the status quo.

Furthermore, the concept of intersectionality, developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, is essential. It explains how different facets of an individual's identity—such as gender, ethnicity, class, and geographical location—can intersect to create unique and compounded layers of disadvantage (Collins et al., 2021). For Kamba women in Machakos County, their political experiences are shaped not just by their gender, but also by their identity as members of the Kamba community, their economic status, and whether they reside in an urban or rural setting. This framework allows for a nuanced analysis that avoids treating "women" as a monolithic category and instead recognizes the diverse realities and challenges they face.

2.2 Socio-Cultural Barriers: The Patriarchy's Enduring Grip

A vast body of literature identifies socio-cultural norms as one of the most stubborn barriers to women's political participation globally and in Africa. In many societies, politics is culturally constructed as a male domain, associated with aggression, competition, and public authority—traits not traditionally associated with femininity (Bwire, 2021). This cultural framing creates a powerful psychological and social barrier. Women who enter politics are often seen as violating traditional gender roles, subjecting them to a level of public scrutiny and criticism that their male counterparts do not face (Ilodigwe & Uzoh, 2024).

This is often manifested in what is termed the double bind. Female politicians are expected to be tough enough to lead, but not so tough that they are perceived as "unfeminine" or "aggressive." They are expected to be nurturing and community-oriented, but not so "soft" that they are seen as weak. This impossible standard is a direct product of patriarchal expectations. Research in Kenya has shown that female candidates are often subjected to gender-based insults, rumors about their marital status or morality, and a general "disdain and hostility" designed to delegitimize their candidacy (Mwendwa, 2023).

Another powerful socio-cultural barrier is the double burden of domestic and public responsibilities. In many cultures, including the Kamba community, women are expected to be the primary caregivers and managers of the household (Kilimo, 2022). For a woman aspiring to a political career, which demands long hours, extensive travel, and constant public

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engagement, these domestic responsibilities create a significant logistical and time-based impediment that men rarely face to the same degree. The lack of family support, particularly from a spouse, can make a political career virtually impossible (Lotwel, Ongori, & Gervasio, 2021). This unequal division of domestic labor is a direct reflection of patriarchal structures that extend from the private sphere of the home into the public sphere of politics.

2.3 Economic Barriers: The High Cost of a Political Voice

Alongside cultural impediments, economic factors are consistently cited as a primary barrier to women's political participation. Modern electoral campaigns are incredibly expensive, requiring substantial financial resources for logistics, media, branding, and mobilization. In many societies, including Kenya, women are systematically disadvantaged economically. They often have lower incomes, less access to credit, and fewer property rights than men (Leghorn & Parker, 2022). This economic disparity creates a formidable barrier to entry into the political arena.

The phenomenon of money politics or "handout culture" is particularly pronounced in many African democracies, including Kenya. Voters often expect direct financial incentives from candidates, and the ability to distribute money is seen as a sign of a candidate's viability and capacity to deliver (Cherotich & Njoroge, 2022). Women, who typically have less access to the large financial networks that fund male politicians, are often unable to compete in this highly monetized environment. This forces them to rely on male-dominated political party structures for funding, which can compromise their autonomy and make them beholden to patriarchal gatekeepers (Anzia & Bernhard, 2022).

The intersection of gender and economic status is therefore critical. While all aspiring politicians face financial challenges, women often face them more acutely due to systemic economic inequality. As Kilimo (2022) argues in the Kenyan context, you can't do politics without money, and this reality effectively locks out a huge number of capable and qualified women who simply cannot afford the price of admission.

While this literature provides a robust framework for understanding the general barriers to women's political participation, a significant gap remains in the form of localized, in-depth studies. There is a need to move beyond broad generalizations and examine how these socio-cultural and economic factors manifest in the specific context of Machakos County. How do Kamba cultural norms specifically shape perceptions of female leadership? How does the local economic landscape of Machakos impact the ability of women to fund their campaigns? This study seeks to answer these questions, thereby filling a critical gap in the literature.

3. Research Methodology

This study employed a descriptive research design utilizing a mixed-methods approach to provide a comprehensive and holistic analysis of the research problem. The qualitative component, driven by a historical research strategy, provided rich, in-depth narratives and contextual understanding of women's political experiences. The quantitative component, through structured questionnaires, allowed for the measurement of attitudes, perceptions, and the statistical analysis of relationships between variables.

The study was conducted in Machakos County, Kenya. The target population included current and former female politicians, registered voters (both male and female), and community leaders. A purposive sampling approach was used to select a sample of 250 respondents deemed to have in-depth knowledge and experience relevant to the study's

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objectives. Participants were selected from across the county's sub-counties to ensure geographical and demographic diversity.

The primary data collection instruments were a structured questionnaire and a key informant interview guide. The questionnaire, administered to all 250 respondents, included demographic questions and a series of Likert-scale items to quantitatively measure attitudes and perceptions. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sub-sample of 15 key informants, including two current female politicians, one former female politician, and twelve voters (six male, six female) of varying ages, to gather detailed qualitative insights.

Quantitative data from the questionnaires were coded and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages) were used to summarize the data. Inferential statistics, specifically multiple regression analysis, were used to determine the predictive influence of historical, socio-cultural, and economic factors on women's political participation. Qualitative data from the interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and report patterns and themes. The validity of the instruments was ensured through expert review, and reliability was established through a pilot study. All ethical protocols, including obtaining a NACOSTI research permit and ensuring informed consent, were strictly followed.

4. Findings

The findings are presented in two main sections. The first details the quantitative results that map the perceptions and attitudes of the community regarding the barriers to women's political participation. The second presents the qualitative themes that emerged from the interviews, providing the lived experiences behind the numbers.

4.1 Quantitative Findings: Mapping the Barriers

The quantitative data revealed a community that is highly aware of and supportive of gender equality in principle, but simultaneously recognizes the powerful barriers that prevent its realization. An overwhelming 94.4% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that women should have equal representation in politics. However, 81.6% also agreed that female candidates face more challenges than their male counterparts.

When asked to identify the most significant barriers, the responses were clear and consistent.

4.1.1 Socio-Cultural Barriers

As shown in Table 1, when respondents were asked to identify the most significant cultural norm hindering women, disdain and hostility towards female politicians was the most frequently cited factor.

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Table 1: Perceived Influence of Cultural Norms and Societal Expectations (N=250)

Primary Cultural Barrier	Frequency	Percent (%)
Disdain and hostility towards female politicians	103	41.2
Tying women's roles primarily to domestic work	88	35.2
Initial public hesitation in supporting women	59	23.6
Total	250	100.0

Source: Field Data 2025

4.1.2 Economic Barriers

Economically, the cost of campaigns was identified as the most significant impediment.

Table 2: Perceived Role of Economic Factors (N=250)

Primary Economic Barrier	Frequency	Percent (%)
Running for office requires huge amounts of money	163	65.2
Limited access to economic resources for women	87	34.8
Total	250	100.0

Source: Field Data 2025

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4.1.3 Inferential Analysis

To determine which set of factors had the most significant influence, a multiple regression analysis was conducted. The results, summarized in Table 3, confirm that socio-cultural and economic factors are the most powerful predictors of women's political participation.

Table 3: Regression Analysis of Factors Influencing Women's Political Participation

Model	Standardized Coefficients (Beta)	p-value
(Constant)		.015
Historical Context	.112	.060
Milestones & Achievements	.188	.012
Socio-Cultural & Economic Factors	.421	.000

Dependent Variable: Political Participation; $R^2 = 0.532$

Source: Field Data 2025

The model explains 53.2% of the variance in women's political participation. The Socio-Cultural and Economic Factors variable was the strongest and most significant predictor ($\beta = .421$, $p < .001$), confirming that these contemporary barriers have the greatest statistical impact on a woman's ability to participate in politics.

4.2 Qualitative Findings: The Lived Experience of the Struggle

The interviews with female politicians and voters provided powerful, first-hand accounts that gave a human face to the statistical findings. Three main themes emerged: the experience of gendered hostility, the reality of money politics, and the double burden of family and career.

Theme 1: The Experience of Gendered Hostility and Scrutiny

Female politicians spoke candidly about the unique and often brutal nature of the criticism they face, which is almost always gendered.

Politician 102:

When you, a woman, stand to speak, they don't listen to your ideas. They look at your dress, they comment on your body, they ask who is taking care of your children. They will call you names and question your morality in a way they never would for a man. It is a tool designed to break your spirit and make you quit. You have to develop a skin thicker than a rhinoceros.

Theme 2: The Reality of Money Politics

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Both voters and politicians described a political environment where financial muscle often outweighs policy ideas, a reality that disproportionately disadvantages women.

Voter 1:

Politics here is about money. A woman might have the best ideas for our community, but if she cannot give handouts, print thousands of posters, and hire big cars for her convoy, nobody will take her seriously. She is judged on her wealth before her wisdom. It is a very unfair game, and it locks out many good women.

Theme 3: The Double Burden of Family and Political Ambition

The challenge of balancing traditional domestic roles with the demanding nature of a political career was a recurring theme.

Politician 2:

Even if you have the money and the courage, you still have to fight battles at home. Your husband might feel threatened by your public profile. Your extended family might say you are neglecting your duties. You are expected to be a superwoman—a perfect mother, a perfect wife, and a perfect politician. The pressure is immense, and many talented women decide it's not worth the sacrifice.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study paint a clear and compelling picture of the state of women's political participation in Machakos County. The central conclusion is that a profound paradox defines the contemporary landscape: while there is widespread, explicit support for the principle of gender equality in politics, this aspirational ideal is systematically undermined by the persistent and powerful forces of socio-cultural patriarchy and economic inequality.

The regression analysis provides undeniable statistical proof that contemporary socio-cultural and economic factors are the most significant barriers to women's political participation, outweighing the influence of historical context. This finding is critical because it directs our attention to the immediate, lived realities that shape women's political choices. The powerful testimony of Politician 1 vividly illustrates the "disdain and hostility" identified in the quantitative data. This is not just simple political opposition; it is a form of gendered harassment designed to enforce traditional norms and police the boundaries of a male-dominated space. This aligns with the work of Mwendwa (2023) on the gendered nature of political violence in Kenya and is a core tenet of Feminist Theory, which posits that such hostility is a mechanism for maintaining patriarchal control.

The economic barriers identified in this study are equally stark. The comment from Voter 1 that a woman is "judged on her wealth before her wisdom" perfectly encapsulates the reality of "money politics." This finding is consistent with studies by Cherotich and Njoroge (2022), which link women's limited access to economic resources to their political underrepresentation. This creates a structural barrier that is deeply intertwined with broader patterns of gender-based economic inequality, a classic example of the intersectionality of gender and class that Crenshaw described.

Finally, the insights from Politician 2 on the "double burden" of family and political responsibilities highlight the socio-cultural expectation that women must achieve perfection in the domestic sphere before they are deemed worthy of entering the public sphere. This is a powerful form of gatekeeping, as identified by Kilimo (2022), and it places an unequal and often unbearable weight on aspiring female leaders.

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The study, therefore, concludes that the period from 1991 to 2017 is defined by this fundamental tension. On one hand, formal institutional support for women has increased, most notably through the 2010 Constitution. On the other hand, the informal but powerful rules of culture and economics have remained stubbornly persistent. This confirms that achieving genuine gender equality in the elective politics of Machakos County will require interventions that go far beyond legal reforms to actively challenge patriarchal attitudes, address systemic economic disadvantages, and create a political culture where women are judged on the content of their character and their ideas, not their gender.

6. Conclusion

This article set out to examine the socio-cultural and economic factors that have shaped the political participation of Kamba women in Machakos County from 1991 to 2017. The findings reveal a complex and often contradictory landscape. While the community expresses strong support for gender equality, a combination of deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes, the prohibitive cost of political campaigns, and the unequal burden of domestic responsibilities creates a formidable set of barriers that continue to limit women's representation in elective office.

The primary contribution of this research is its provision of a localized, evidence-based analysis that moves beyond national generalizations. By integrating quantitative data on perceptions with the rich, qualitative narratives of lived experience, this study has shown that for Kamba women, the struggle for political voice is fought on multiple fronts: in the public square, within the political party, and often, within their own homes.

7. Recommendations

The implications for policy and practice are clear. Legal and constitutional reforms, while essential, are not a panacea. To build on the progress that has been made, a multi-faceted approach is required. This must include sustained civic education campaigns to challenge patriarchal norms, the creation of dedicated financial and mentorship support systems for female candidates, and robust efforts to reform the internal cultures of political parties to make them more inclusive. Ultimately, achieving substantive gender equality in the politics of Machakos County, and Kenya as a whole, will require a concerted effort to dismantle the informal but powerful structures of patriarchy that continue to hold women back.

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