International Journal Of Women's Empowerment And Development

P ISSN: xxxx-xxx

VOL.1-NO.1-2026

E ISSN: xxxx-xxx

WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND DECISION-MAKING IN DEVELOPING SOCIETIES

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ABSTRACT

Women's political participation and decision-making are essential components of democratic governance, social justice, gender equality, and sustainable development in developing societies. Despite significant progress in women's education, legal rights, and political representation, women continue to encounter institutional, economic, cultural, and social barriers that restrict their meaningful participation in political processes. In many developing countries, traditional gender roles, patriarchal structures, limited financial resources, political violence, unequal access to education, and inadequate representation within political institutions prevent women from exercising their full political rights. This study examines women's participation in elections, political parties, legislative institutions, local governments, and public decision-making processes. It also explores how education, economic independence, legal protection, digital technology, and institutional reforms can strengthen women's political empowerment. The study adopts a qualitative, descriptive research approach based on a review of relevant academic literature, international reports, and policy documents published between 2023 and 2026. The analysis focuses on the relationship between women's political representation and their actual influence over policy formulation, resource allocation, governance, and community development. Particular attention is given to the difference between symbolic representation and substantive participation, emphasizing that the presence of women in political institutions does not automatically guarantee equal decision-making authority. The study argues that meaningful political empowerment requires inclusive political institutions, gender-responsive policies, civic education, financial support, and protection against gender-based discrimination and violence. It highlights the importance of cooperation among governments, political parties, civil society organizations, educational institutions, and international organizations.

KEYWORDS:*Women's Political Participation, Political Empowerment, Decision-Making, Gender Equality, Developing Societies, Democratic Governance, Women's Representation, Political Leadership, Gender Discrimination, Civic Engagement, Institutional Barriers, Sustainable Development.*

INTRODUCTION

Women's political participation is a fundamental element of democratic governance and an important indicator of progress toward gender equality in developing societies. Political participation extends beyond the right to vote and includes contesting elections, joining political parties, participating in community organizations, influencing public policies, holding elected office, and contributing to decisions that affect society. In developing countries, women frequently participate in political processes as voters, campaign workers, activists, and community representatives, yet their opportunities to exercise political authority remain unequal. Historical patterns of male-dominated leadership, unequal access to education, economic dependency, and restrictive social expectations have contributed to the underrepresentation of women in formal political institutions.Das, B. R., Bhuyan, M. J., Deka, N., & Bhattacharya, P. (2026). Found that . Although many countries have introduced constitutional protections, electoral reforms, and reserved seats for women, these measures do not always translate into equal influence over political priorities or public resources. Consequently, understanding women's political participation requires an examination of both their numerical representation and their ability to exercise genuine authority. Political empowerment becomes meaningful when women can participate independently, express their political preferences, influence legislation, and hold decision-makers accountable. Examining

these dimensions is particularly important in developing societies, where political institutions, social traditions, and economic inequalities interact to shape women's opportunities for leadership.

Social and cultural structures significantly influence women's access to political participation and decision-making. In many developing societies, traditional gender expectations associate men with public leadership and women with domestic responsibilities, creating obstacles to women's involvement in political activities. Dulak, M. (2024). Explains. Women who seek political office may face criticism for prioritizing public responsibilities over family duties, while male political participation is often treated as a socially accepted responsibility. These expectations can limit women's mobility, access to political networks, opportunities to attend meetings, and ability to participate in election campaigns. In some communities, family approval and community perceptions strongly influence whether women can contest elections or engage in public debate. Women from rural areas, minority communities, economically disadvantaged households, and marginalized social groups may experience additional barriers. However, cultural traditions should not be understood as uniform or unchangeable because communities differ considerably in their attitudes toward women's leadership. Community education, supportive family environments, women's organizations, and visible female role models can gradually challenge restrictive assumptions. Promoting women's political participation therefore requires not only legal reform but also sustained efforts to transform discriminatory attitudes, encourage shared domestic responsibilities, and establish social environments in which women's public leadership is respected.

Economic inequality is another major factor affecting women's political participation in developing societies. Tan, M. Z. S., Bakar, A. N., Ahmad, Y., & Jen, A. L. (2025). Explained. Political campaigns require financial resources for transportation, communication, campaign materials, networking, public meetings, and electoral organization. Women who have limited access to paid employment, property ownership, credit, and independent income may find it difficult to compete with candidates who possess greater financial resources. Economic dependency can also reduce women's freedom to make political decisions without pressure from family members, community leaders, or political sponsors. Furthermore, the unequal distribution of unpaid care work limits the time women can devote to political meetings, leadership development, and community engagement. Women from low-income households may face a particularly difficult choice between earning a livelihood, fulfilling family responsibilities, and participating in political activities. Economic empowerment can help address these constraints by improving women's financial independence, educational opportunities, and access to professional networks. Nevertheless, economic independence alone does not eliminate discrimination within political parties or electoral systems. Effective strategies should combine financial assistance, transparent campaign financing, childcare support, leadership training, and fair recruitment practices. These interventions can reduce the economic disadvantages that prevent qualified women from entering politics and exercising decision-making authority.

Political institutions and electoral systems play an important role in determining the extent of women's representation. Political parties often control candidate selection, campaign resources, leadership appointments, and access to influential political networks. When party leadership is dominated by men, women may receive fewer opportunities to contest competitive constituencies or occupy positions with substantial authority. Reserved seats,

electoral quotas, and gender equality regulations have helped increase women's numerical representation in several countries, but their effectiveness depends on implementation, accountability, and the wider political environment. Women elected through reserved seats may face difficulties establishing independent political influence when party leaders or powerful male relatives control their political activities. In other circumstances, quotas provide an important entry point through which women develop experience, establish networks, and gradually gain broader electoral support. The distinction between descriptive and substantive representation is therefore essential. Descriptive representation concerns the presence of women in political institutions, whereas substantive representation concerns their ability to influence decisions and advance issues affecting women and other underrepresented groups. Political reforms should consequently address candidate selection, leadership appointments, committee membership, access to resources, and institutional accountability. Such measures can help transform political representation from a numerical achievement into meaningful participation in governance.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

1. To examine the major social, cultural, economic, and institutional factors influencing women's political participation and decision-making in developing societies and to identify strategies for promoting their meaningful representation, political empowerment, and equal involvement in governance.

RESEARCH QUESTION

1. How do social, cultural, economic, and institutional factors influence women's political participation and decision-making in developing societies?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Women's political representation and democratic governance. Recent literature emphasizes that women's political representation is an important dimension of democratic inclusion, political equality, and accountable governance. The presence of women in legislative assemblies, local councils, executive offices, and political parties provides opportunities for a wider range of social experiences to enter public debate. Nevertheless, representation remains uneven across countries and political institutions. Tavares, P., Bergano, T. D., & Negm, N. (2026). Found that. The Inter-Parliamentary Union's reporting on women in parliament demonstrates both long-term progress and continuing limitations in women's access to legislative authority. Its review of parliamentary representation indicates that women held approximately 27.2% of parliamentary seats worldwide in 2025, compared with 11.3% in 1995 (Inter-Parliamentary Union [IPU], 2025). These figures demonstrate progress but also highlight the distance between equal political rights and equal representation. In developing societies, political inclusion is shaped by electoral rules, party structures, social expectations, and access to financial resources. Researchers must therefore examine not only the number of women elected but also whether they can participate in legislative discussions, influence political priorities, and exercise independent judgment. Representation becomes more meaningful when women have opportunities to occupy leadership positions, chair committees, contribute to policy development, and influence the allocation of public resources.

Social norms and patriarchal political structures. Social norms remain an important subject in research on women's political agency. Nazneen (2023), examining women's political agency in Egypt, Nigeria, Mozambique, and Pakistan, highlights how male gatekeeping, restrictive social expectations, fragile political environments, and limited civic space can constrain women's political action. The study also distinguishes individual experiences of empowerment from broader institutional transformation, showing why participation does not necessarily produce systemic change. These insights are particularly relevant to developing societies where political participation may depend on informal relationships, community acceptance, family support, and access to influential networks. Women can be active voters, campaign organizers, community advocates, and political intermediaries while remaining excluded from the most influential decision-making positions. Social expectations about domestic responsibilities may also restrict their time and mobility. Nazneen, S., Ibarra-Mejia, G., Mahmud, S., Ojo, B., Khanjani, N., Jeon, S., ... & Duarte-Gardea, M. O. (2026). Explaains.However, these barriers vary across social groups and are not fixed characteristics of particular cultures. Zana, A., Willis, E., Fien, S., & Sahay, A. (2024). Found that. Community engagement, public education, supportive families, and women-led organizations can challenge discriminatory practices. Literature in this area therefore supports a contextual approach that investigates how formal political rules interact with informal social relationships to shape women's access to power.

Economic resources and political independence. Economic empowerment is closely connected to women's ability to participate in political activities independently. Political engagement may involve expenses associated with transportation, communication, campaign organization, public meetings, and networking. Women with limited personal income or restricted access to financial resources can experience disadvantages when competing for party nominations or electoral office. Economic inequality also interacts with unpaid domestic and caregiving responsibilities, which can reduce the time available for political activities. Research on women's participation in household decision-making provides additional insight into how employment, media exposure, family structure, and social attitudes relate to women's decision-making agency. Alam and colleagues' research on Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey data, published in the Journal of International Development in 2024, examines factors associated with women's participation in household decisions and illustrates the importance of economic and social conditions in understanding agency. Although household decisions are not identical to formal political decisions, the findings are relevant to understanding the broader conditions under which women exercise autonomy. Economic empowerment initiatives should therefore be complemented by political financing reforms, transparent candidate selection, childcare arrangements, leadership training, and access to professional networks. These measures may help reduce financial barriers without assuming that income alone can overcome institutional discrimination.

Electoral quotas and political institutions. Electoral quotas and other affirmative measures have become important instruments for increasing women's representation in political institutions. Such policies can help address longstanding exclusion by requiring or encouraging political parties and governments to include more women among candidates or representatives. However, the effectiveness of quotas depends on their design, implementation, enforcement, and interaction with the electoral system. A quota may increase the number of women entering parliament without ensuring that they receive influential committee assignments, control political resources, or exercise independent

decision-making authority. The United Nations and international parliamentary institutions have emphasized the continuing need to improve women's access to political leadership and public decision-making. Evidence reviewed by UN Women in 2024 indicates that gender quotas have been associated with higher average representation of women in national and local political institutions. These developments suggest that quotas can serve as an entry mechanism, but they should not be considered a complete solution. Political parties must also provide equal opportunities for leadership development, transparent nomination procedures, fair access to campaign funding, and protection against discrimination. Further research should assess whether institutional reforms produce sustained influence over legislation, budgets, public services, and governance priorities rather than focusing exclusively on numerical representation.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive methodology to examine women's political participation and decision-making in developing societies. The research is based on secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic studies, international institutional reports, and relevant policy publications issued between 2023 and 2026. A secondary research methodology is appropriate because the study aims to synthesize existing knowledge about the social, economic, cultural, and institutional conditions influencing women's political engagement rather than collect new primary data. The literature is examined to identify recurring themes, contrasting perspectives, research gaps, and potential strategies for strengthening women's political empowerment. Particular attention is given to research on women's representation in legislatures, participation in local government, political agency, electoral quotas, gender discrimination, and access to decision-making authority. International reports are used to provide institutional context and information about representation, while academic studies contribute analytical perspectives on the factors shaping women's political experiences. Sources are considered in relation to their relevance, publication date, methodological clarity, and credibility. The research does not assume that all developing societies share identical political conditions; instead, it recognizes differences in electoral systems, governance structures, economic development, and social organization.The study uses a thematic review process to organize the collected literature into major analytical categories. These categories include social and cultural barriers, economic inequality, education and civic awareness, political party structures, electoral quotas, digital participation, political violence, and substantive representation. Each source is examined for its contribution to understanding how these factors influence women's ability to enter political institutions and participate in decisions. Evidence from different countries is compared to identify recurring patterns while retaining attention to local political and social contexts..

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design is descriptive and qualitative, with an emphasis on document analysis and thematic synthesis. This design is suitable for examining the complex relationship between women's political participation and decision-making because political empowerment is influenced by formal institutions as well as informal social practices. The study organizes secondary evidence into thematic categories that correspond to the research objective and question. These categories include women's access to elections, political party membership,

representation in legislative bodies, leadership opportunities, financial independence, civic education, and participation in policy formulation. The descriptive component explains the existing patterns and challenges documented in the literature, while the qualitative component interprets how social and institutional arrangements may influence women's opportunities to exercise political authority. The design also allows comparisons among studies conducted in different developing societies. Rather than assuming that a particular reform will have the same effect everywhere, the analysis considers how electoral systems, governance structures, and local conditions shape the relationship between representation and decision-making.A comparative documentary design is used to examine similarities and differences across selected country contexts represented in the literature. Studies concerning South Asia, Africa, and other developing regions can provide evidence about the ways women experience political exclusion and develop strategies for political engagement. The comparison focuses on institutional arrangements, cultural expectations, access to financial resources, and opportunities for participation in public decision-making. It also distinguishes between national and local political institutions because the barriers women encounter in parliamentary elections may differ from those experienced in municipal councils and community organizations. National-level representation may depend heavily on political party nominations, campaign financing, and electoral competition, whereas local participation may be influenced more directly by community relationships, household responsibilities, and local governance practices. Comparing these settings can reveal recurring constraints without ignoring regional differences. The design is therefore intended to produce a contextualized understanding of women's political participation rather than a universal explanation based on a single country or institution.

DATA ANALYSIS

The collected secondary material is analyzed through thematic analysis. Relevant findings, arguments, and institutional statistics are organized into recurring themes related to women's political participation and decision-making. The initial themes include social and cultural barriers, economic inequality, electoral and party structures, education and civic engagement, digital participation, political violence, and substantive representation. Each source is examined to determine which themes it addresses and how its evidence contributes to answering the research question. Similar findings are grouped together, while differences in research contexts and interpretations are retained rather than treated as inconsistencies that must be eliminated. For example, studies describing the effects of electoral quotas are considered alongside evidence about the continuing exclusion of women from influential political roles. This process helps distinguish between increasing women's numerical representation and improving their actual participation in decision-making. Thematic analysis also enables the study to identify relationships among factors, such as the interaction between economic dependency and political networking, without making unsupported claims about causation.A comparative interpretation is used to examine how the identified themes operate across different developing societies. Findings from country-specific studies are considered in relation to political institutions, socioeconomic conditions, and local cultural contexts. Institutional reports provide a broader picture of women's parliamentary representation, while qualitative research helps explain how women experience political participation within parties, communities, and public institutions. Where comparable numerical information is available, the analysis considers patterns in representation over time and differences between political settings. However, statistics from different years or institutions are not combined

unless their definitions and measurement methods are sufficiently comparable. The analysis also distinguishes between evidence relating to household decision-making and evidence relating to formal political authority. Although both concern agency, they represent different levels of decision-making and cannot be treated as equivalent measures. Through these comparisons, the study develops a balanced account of progress, persistent inequalities, and the institutional conditions associated with meaningful participation.

FINDINGS

The literature reviewed for this study indicates that women's political participation in developing societies is influenced by interconnected social, economic, and institutional factors. A recurring theme is the difference between formal political rights and the practical ability to exercise those rights. Women may possess the legal right to vote, contest elections, join political parties, and participate in public affairs while continuing to experience restrictions related to social expectations, financial resources, political networks, and institutional practices. The literature on women's political agency in difficult political settings further suggests that individual empowerment does not necessarily produce broad institutional change (Nazneen, 2023). International parliamentary reporting also demonstrates that women's representation has increased over time but remains below equal participation globally (IPU, 2025). These findings suggest that the expansion of women's political rights is an important achievement, but it must be accompanied by measures that enable women to influence decisions independently. Political empowerment should therefore be evaluated through both representation and actual participation in legislative, administrative, and community-level decision-making.A second major finding concerns the combined effects of social norms, economic inequalities, and political institutional barriers. Restrictive gender expectations can limit women's mobility, time, access to public networks, and acceptance as political leaders. Economic dependency and unpaid care responsibilities may further reduce opportunities to contest elections, participate in campaigns, and maintain sustained involvement in political organizations. At the institutional level, male-dominated political networks, unequal access to campaign financing, and limited opportunities for leadership positions can restrict women's influence even after they enter formal political institutions. The reviewed literature also suggests that electoral quotas and other inclusion measures can improve representation, but numerical gains do not automatically establish substantive decision-making power.

CONCLUSION

Women's political participation and decision-making are essential to democratic inclusion, gender equality, and sustainable development in developing societies. This study has examined the social, cultural, economic, and institutional factors that shape women's access to political institutions and their ability to exercise meaningful authority. The reviewed literature indicates that women's participation has expanded in many settings, but substantial barriers continue to limit equal access to political leadership and decision-making. Restrictive gender norms, economic dependency, unequal political networks, discriminatory institutional practices, and political harassment can prevent women from translating formal political rights into effective influence. The distinction between descriptive and substantive representation is therefore central to understanding political empowerment. Increasing the number of women in elected office is important, but representation alone cannot establish whether women have

equal authority over policy formulation, public resources, and institutional priorities. A comprehensive understanding of political equality must consider both access to political institutions and the conditions under which women participate after entering them.The study further concludes that women's political empowerment requires coordinated action across legal, economic, educational, and institutional areas. Governments should enforce gender equality protections, strengthen mechanisms for preventing political violence, and establish transparent systems for political participation. Political parties should provide fair candidate selection, equal access to campaign resources, and opportunities for women to occupy influential leadership positions. Educational institutions and civil society organizations can promote civic awareness, leadership skills, mentoring, and digital literacy, while economic empowerment initiatives can reduce financial obstacles to political engagement.

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