

Bridging Gender Gaps to Intensify Women's Political Representation: Analysis of Risks

Paulus Hlongwane^{1*}

¹ University of South Africa

*Corresponding Author: hlongp@unisa.ac.za

Citation: Hlongwane, P. (2026). Bridging Gender Gaps to Intensify Women's Political Representation: Analysis of Risks. *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change*, 11(1), 35–44. <https://doi.org/10.64753/jcasc.v11i1.3033>

Published: January 14, 2026

ABSTRACT

The World Economic Forum initially presented the Global Gender Gap Index in 2006 to assess advancements toward gender equality and evaluate countries' gender disparities across four aspects: economic participation, educational attainment, health outcomes, and political representation. Since then, most countries across the globe have performed relatively well in relation to the first three dimensions towards reducing gender discrepancies. Unfortunately, there is a sluggish pace in bridging gender gaps to allow for women's participation in the political spectrum. Various efforts have been made to identify challenges and barriers that keep women out of key political decision-making roles. The specific issue of concern is that while the previous research has successfully identified barriers and challenges that prevent women from participating in politics, there is limited research that highlights potential risks associated with women's participation in politics. Therefore, this paper aims to assess the potential risks associated with women's political participation. By understanding the risks involved in political participation, the paper intends to identify potential threats, analysing their likelihood and severity, and determine the necessary measures to mitigate those risks. To achieve the aim of this paper, a conceptual review of literature was conducted to highlight key themes that relate to risks associated with women's political participation. Specifically, scholarly peer reviewed articles and non-scholarly documents such as reports by governmental and non-governmental organizations were reviewed. The paper highlights the following key findings: women participating in politics are likely to be prejudiced. In that regard, evidence suggest that women participating in politics tend to be harshly judged in terms of their performance as opposed to their male counterparts. While political violence has consistently affected both men and women in the political realm, this finding indicates that women who intend to venture into the political arena should be psychologically and mentally prepared to deal with any form of political violence. Political assassination is one of the forms of political violence which may be experienced by those who participate in politics. Sexual harassment has been identified as one of the potential risks that women are likely to face once they enter political space. To mitigate against the potential risks that women are likely face in politics, it is imperative that both national and international organisations should draft comprehensive plans to educate the society on how to eschew unjustifiable prejudice against female politicians. At the same time, effective measures should be drafted and implemented to curb political killings, which can dissuade women from participating in politics. In essence, addressing risks associated with political participation can positively contribute towards reduction of gender gap in political representation across the globe.

Keywords: Gender Gap, Political Killing, Political Participation, Prejudice, Sexual Harassment

INTRODUCTION

The equitable inclusion and active participation of women in political and civic spheres are fundamental elements of a democratic system. At the same time, a more robust, formidable, and inclusive society may emerge by enabling women to act as catalysts for change and leaders in the decision-making processes that determine their own lives (Artac & Ogurlu, 2024). The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2024)

posited three rationales for female participation in the political sphere: the advancement of fairness as impartiality, the incorporation of women's unique perspectives derived from their daily realities, and their representation of particular concerns. The demographic reality that women constitute approximately fifty percent of the citizenry necessitates proportional representation in all governmental positions. In Akiyode-Afolabi's (2020) view, women's political participation creates an opportunity for women in general to have their voices heard in matters of importance that affect the society at large. To support this view, Artac and Ogurlu, (2024) point out that the involvement of women in the political arena is essential to transform conventional gender roles and enhance the visibility of women in the public domain. Without equitable involvement and meaningful participation of women, the vacuum that is created in the political domain due to less representation of women may remain intact for numerous years to come.

The impact that women can make in terms of bringing change in the political space is worth noting. For instance, Dim (2023) notes that women played a significant role in the emancipation of African states from colonial powers, but they were subsequently sidelined shortly after some of the African states regained their independence. This is evidenced by perennial gender gaps in terms of representation of women in political decision-making structures of governments. According to Artac and Ogurlu (2024), numerous national governments globally have acted to enhance female involvement in political decision-making processes via statutory regulations. Gender quotas serve as a method to elevate women's political engagement by ensuring a designated proportion of female representatives within the decision-making structures of political organizations, municipal administrations, and national legislatures. Elizabeth, Putra, Sholihan and Arikhah (2023) point out that political organisations have sought to increase the representation of women in legislative bodies. One strategy involves the creation of a women's division specifically designed to enlist female candidates. Nevertheless, Artac and Ogurlu (2024) state that while efforts have been undertaken to enhance females' political participation in Northern Cyprus, the representation of women in the legislature remains less than that of men. Specifically, the number of female representatives is 11, whereas the number of male representatives is 39. This explains that there is somewhat little progress towards empowering women and affirming them into political positions in most countries across the globe.

Although most African countries appear to be putting more efforts to enhance women's representation in politics, such representation does not automatically translate into effective political participation (Akiyode-Afolabi, 2020). According to Zvobgo and Dziva (2017), lack of opportunity in education can contribute to poverty, but insufficient schooling can negatively impact confidence and foster feelings of inadequacy, which may lead women to withdraw from political life. Additionally, voters and leaders often favour those with financial advantages and higher levels of education. Consequently, inadequate education can lead to bitterness and the marginalization of women from political participation. Regarding the exclusion of women from politics, Yadav and Suman (2021) argue that women are systematically excluded from key political decision-making bodies and those who are expressive about subjugation of their political rights are ostracised deliberately. In some instance, women who aspire to venture into the political arena have to go against established cultural values and norms. For example, in Indonesia, the study conducted by Elizabeth et al. (2023) found that even though governmental policies endorse the participation of women in politics, if community authorities oppose it, the outcomes are improbable to be successful because individuals tend to adhere to the views articulated by their leaders without engaging in critical analysis.

The World Economic Forum initially presented the Global Gender Gap Index in 2006 to assess advancements toward gender equality and evaluate countries' gender disparities across four aspects: economic participation, educational attainment, health outcomes, and political representation. Since then, most countries across the globe have performed relatively well in relation to the first three dimensions towards reducing gender discrepancies (World Economic Forum, 2023). Unfortunately, there is a sluggish pace in bridging gender gaps to allow for women's participation in the political spectrum. Approaches to enhance women's involvement in political spheres have been promoted through treaties, protocols, and global accords aimed at integrating gender perspectives (Mlambo & Kapingura, 2019). The specific issue of concern is that while the previous research has successfully identified barriers and challenges that prevent women from participating in politics, there is limited research that highlights potential risks associated with women's participation in politics.

The aim of this paper is to assess the potential risks associated with women's political participation. By understanding the risks involved in political participation, the paper intends to identify potential threats, analysing their likelihood and severity, and determine the necessary measures to mitigate those risks. Risk encompasses two key elements: the likelihood of adverse events, and the severity of negative consequences, where consequences pertain to dangers to individuals and their valued assets (Bodemer & Gaissmaier, 2015). Wolff, Larsen and Ogaard (2019:2) described risk as "a possibility of danger, harm or loss; and a chance or hazard". In the context of this paper risk is viewed as a possibility of adverse events with negative consequences that threaten the physical, emotional, and psycho-social well-being of individuals. To attain the aim of this paper, a conceptual review of

literature was conducted to highlight key themes that relate to risks associated with women's political participation. Specifically, scholarly peer reviewed articles and non-scholarly documents such as reports by governmental and non-governmental organizations were reviewed.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory utilized for the purpose of this paper is risk perception theory, which was frequently used to study climate change risk perception (See Van der Linden, 2014; Van der Linden, 2017; Van Eck, Mulder & Vander Linden, 2020). Risk perception refers to an individual's perceived likelihood of a designated adverse event occurring, coupled with their valuation of the resulting ramifications, constitutes a subjective risk appraisal. Alternatively, risk perception explain how individuals and communities perceive risks and rewards, taking into account their perspectives, opinions, emotions, and the overall values and cultural norms that shape their approach (Bodemer & Gaissmaier, 2015). Priolo, Vignoli and Nielsen (2025) state that risk perception can be more comprehensively viewed as a multi-faceted construct encompassing the individual's perceived likelihood of encountering a particular threat, their subjective evaluation of the magnitude of its potential adverse outcomes, and their emotional response, typically characterized by negativity, towards the threat. Furthermore, risk perception regarding a course of action reflects an individual's subjective assessment of its potential adversity, derived from evaluating both the probability and severity of possible undesirable consequences (Wolff et al. 2019). Risk perception theory is used in this paper to understand how women make risk assessments pertaining to political participation.

In terms of the key assumptions, the risk perception theory indicates that high dread risk signifies a situation where individuals experience a pronounced sense of helplessness, coupled with significant anxiety and the perception of potentially devastating outcomes that could be fatal (Bodemer & Gaissmaier, 2015). At the same time, a tendency to participate in risky activities correlates with an increased perception of potential danger. Moreover, risk assessments are shaped by the prominence or accessibility of data to an individual. (Ferrer & Klein, 2015). There is a consensus among researchers (Bin-Husayn, Abdullah & Rimmel, 2025; Ferrer & Klein, 2015:2; Van der Linden, 2014) that risk perception is influenced by the following factors, namely: cognitive, affective, socio-cultural, and individual factors.

Regarding the affective factors, people feeling rage (an emotion linked to confidence and agency) often see risks with a brighter outlook. Conversely, individuals experiencing fright, an emotion tied to uncertainty and powerlessness, tend to view risks more negatively (Ferrer & Klein, 2015). In support of this view, Mlambo and Kapingura (2019) found that exposure to conflict-related violence is associated with increased rates of subsequent civic and political participation. In other words, individuals who are constantly exposed to risky situations are likely to have reduced levels of negative risk perceptions regarding political participation. Cognitive factors consist of knowledge which play a critical role in terms of predicting risk perceptions (Van Eck et al., 2020). In this sense, having adequate knowledge can allow women to make informed decisions on whether to participate in politics based on thorough assessment of risks involved. The socio-cultural factors explain the mechanisms by which risk indications are perceived, understood, and disseminated are especially pertinent for comprehending the ways in which social processes influence and temper risks associated with political engagement (Van der Linden, 2017). Liu, Zhang, Li and Zhang (2020) mention that individual factors that play a significant role in terms of risk perceptions are personal ability (skills; risk related knowledge), psychological dimension (trust; empathy; responsibility), and behavioural intentions.

As applied to this study, this theory holds that women's political participation should be expected to be influenced by their risk perceptions because individuals' risk perceptions can positively or negatively influence their decision-making process. Ferrer and Klein (2015) have shown that while assessments of potential risks may be either positive (underestimated) or negative (overestimated), these evaluations differ, both in practice and in theory, from broad personality-based optimism, primarily due to their focus on specific contexts. Importantly, individuals increasingly face decisions that necessitate evaluating potential hazards in relation to the repercussions and advantages associated with a particular course of action (Ferrer & Klein, 2015). As indicated earlier, risk perception theory elucidates the processes by which individuals and collectives understand and react to potential hazards (Bin-Husayn, Abdullah & Rimmel, 2025). Van der Linden (2014) noted that research has repeatedly demonstrated that women generally exhibit greater perceived vulnerability to a variety of dangers compared to men.

Mañez, Carmona, Haro and Hanger (2016) suggest that risk perception theory can be best understood In line with Rogers' (1975) Protection Motivation Theory (PMT). This theory suggests that individuals exhibit a greater propensity for self-protective behaviours when they foresee adverse outcomes, possess a motivation to circumvent those outcomes, and perceive themselves as capable of implementing preventative actions (Inouye, 2017). Generally, Protection Motivation Theory (PMT) posits that self-protective behaviour necessitates both a sufficient

understanding of potential threats and the requisite resources and competencies to enact preventative measures. Individuals predisposed to engaging in risky behaviours are often characterized by diminished threat awareness and a lack of perceived ability or control over their own safety (Inouye, 2017). In essence, women who are aspiring to actively participate in politics should not only possess the capability to identify threats but should also be capable of taking preventive actions against potential threats in the political sphere.

RISK FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS

In this section, different risk factors that seem to influence women's participation in politics are discussed. These factors are not necessarily direct causes, but rather factors that raise the probability of poor representation of women in the political arena.

Prejudice

Women who participate in political sphere are at risks of being treated in a biased manner in relation to their male counterparts who hold political positions. For example, in South Africa, the Commission for Gender Equality (2013) noted that despite women's formal inclusion in political organizations, they often experience marginalization due to established practices and the power dynamics within those entities. Evidence suggests that even with equal gender representation in political bodies, women are disproportionately situated in less influential roles, while men are more likely to hold senior positions and exert greater control over decision-making processes. In Pakistan, female legislators are subject to instances of gendered prejudice. This discourages familial endorsement of female relatives' aspirations for political engagement. Furthermore, the lack of secure environments for women in politics obstructs their professional development within the political sphere (British Council, 2024). In this sense, women's very reason of existence or presence in the political arena is unjustifiably questioned predominantly by males who seek to appear superior to their female counterparts in the political space (Akiyode-Afolabi, 2020).

Men have consistently identified and used the most outrageous approaches to frustrate women who aspire to participate in politics on their own or through political organizations. For instance, in Zimbabwe, the pre-election party selections before 2013 were significantly compromised by procedural anomalies. Accounts emerged of female candidates facing coercion from male counterparts, alongside instances of male aspirants unlawfully seizing voting materials. The considerable influence of male power brokers who obstruct female participation in political life persists as a major obstacle to the meaningful incorporation of women within initial electoral processes (Zvobgo & Dziva, 2017). Similarly, in India, women are given ministries that are inferior or less influential in government than their male counterparts. In Yadav and Suman's (2021) view regarding governmental bodies, females are markedly underrepresented in leadership roles. Their involvement in civic affairs is largely limited to electoral participation. Meaningful engagement in policy formation is generally inaccessible to them. Even when policies directly affect their well-being, they often remain peripheral observers. The electoral landscape often necessitates that female candidates demonstrate superior credentials across multiple domains, including academic attainment, societal standing, and socioeconomic resources, in order to secure widespread voter validation (Artac & Ogurlu, 2024). In other words, women are expected to do more and receiving less while men want to do less and receive more at the expense of women.

The patriarchal social ideology that prevails globally is responsible for subjugation of women by men in the political arena. A study conducted by Commission for Gender Equality in South Africa (2013) found that there was a broad consensus among respondents and participants that the enduring influence of patriarchal systems constitutes a major impediment to advancing women's leadership. This persistent societal structure inhibits parties from nominating female candidates, discourages women from seeking candidacy, and deters both male and female voters from supporting women candidates (Commission for Gender Equality, 2013). However, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2024) has noted that while attitudes are evolving, particularly among younger men who are increasingly receptive to female leadership, a more established sentiment persists among older generation of men suggesting that women are not appropriate for political positions. This perspective is thought to contribute to voter bias against female candidates. Nevertheless, increased support from political organizations, specifically in the form of campaign funding, may alter these established viewpoints. Furthermore, the demonstrated success of numerous women in prominent political roles, often surpassing the performance of their male counterparts, challenges these prior assumptions.

Political Violence

Political violence encompasses the perpetration of forceful actions driven by a conscious or unconscious aspiration to acquire or sustain dominance in the political sphere while gender-based violence targeting women in political roles encompasses actions that inflict, or are likely to inflict, physical, sexual, or psychological injury or distress. This includes threatened acts of aggression, coercion, and unjustified restrictions on autonomy, whether occurring in public or private spheres (Centre for Social Research, 2014). The disenfranchisement of women, which

hindered their capacity to exercise constitutionally guaranteed rights to engage in the political sphere through electoral participation, advocacy, and informed civic involvement should be recognised as violence against women in politics. Mlambo and Kapingura (2019) note that although political violence affects men and women, it disproportionately impedes women's involvement and participation in political processes. A study conducted by United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (2019) reveals that almost 44% of surveyed women in Asia and the Pacific experienced threats involving fatality, sexual assault, physical violence, or unlawful confinement while approximately 20% of surveyed female legislators reported being subjected to physical aggression, including acts of hitting, shoving, or being struck by a potentially injurious object.

Although it is argued that political violence affects both men and women, it is also a generally accepted fact that men are perpetrators of political violence for their own selfish reasons. This view is also shared by the Centre for Social Research (2014) emphasising that political violence against women, similar to gender-based abuse targeting women in general, is frequently committed by men to exhibit dominance and assert their perceived elevated status (CSR, 2014). According to Zvobgo and Dziva (2017), studies conducted by Gender Links indicated that approximately two-thirds of female respondents reported experiencing at least one instance of violence during their lives. In comparison, nearly half of the male participants acknowledged perpetrating acts of violence against women. A United Nations report (2015), drawing on Afrobarometer data, indicates that women perceive themselves as susceptible to political coercion and violence. Specifically, the Afrobarometer revealed that in Guinea, a significant proportion of women (64%) expressed substantial apprehension regarding political intimidation (Mlambo & Kapingura, 2019).

Most frequently, political violence culminates in deaths and casualties among ordinary citizenry while instilling excessive fear in political participation among women. For example, in Zimbabwe, the 2008 elections were marked by significant internal displacement, with figures suggesting approximately 36,000 individuals were forced to relocate. Furthermore, an estimated 5,000 people suffered physical violence, including beatings and torture, and around 200 fatalities were reported (Zvobgo & Dziva, 2017). The immediate outcome of this event was reduced female voter participation in the 2008 secondary elections. A lasting repercussion is the continued association of political processes and elections with aggression against women. (Zvobgo & Dziva, 2017). Unfortunately, in Nigeria, there is a perennial struggle to confront violence against women and girls, largely because it is considered a personal matter rather than a societal problem. The government's inability to acknowledge this as a more widespread issue also diminishes female political representation (British Council, 2024).

The socio-economic disparities and existing power dynamics in India, Nepal, and Pakistan significantly contribute to violence against women and girls in politics (VAWIP). Furthermore, the research suggests that religious fundamentalism, and its correlation with societal fragmentation and power structures, represents a critical consideration for comprehending VAWIP, especially within Pakistan (Centre for Social Research, 2014). Mlambo and Kapingura (2019) postulate that violence against women in political arena is under reported. Globally, females remain significantly excluded from political participation, frequently due to inequitable legislation, customary behaviours, ingrained biases based on gender, inadequate educational attainment, limited healthcare availability, and the amplified economic hardships experienced by women. To increase political representation of women in politics, Mexican election authorities have been working to remove obstacles that hinder women's involvement in politics. This includes tackling political aggression against women, drawing inspiration from Bolivia's successful initiatives to make violence against women in politics a crime. In 2020, Mexico revised eight national statutes to incorporate measures designed to deter and address violence targeting women in the political sphere (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2021). According to International Foundation for Electoral Systems (2021), the Electoral Tribunal mandated the establishment of a nationwide database of individuals penalized for engaging in violence against women in politics. Simultaneously, the National Electoral Institute implemented regulations enabling the revocation of candidacy for anyone convicted of gender-based violence. Moreover, Mexico has implemented a regulation mandating that individuals seeking elected office must declare during their candidacy registration that they have no prior convictions or penalties related to domestic abuse, sexual offenses, or outstanding child support obligations. This rule, known as "3 for 3 Against Violence," aims to ensure candidates have a clean record regarding these specific types of misconduct (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2021).

As pointed out herein, the sociopolitical climate frequently presents an inhospitable, even antagonistic, context for women. Furthermore, the enduring repercussions of mistreatment endured by women and girls during periods of unrest are frequently overlooked and inadequately documented, particularly concerning their involvement in political processes and governance (Mlambo & Kapingura, 2019). According to Sharma (2019), the potential for aggression significantly hinders women's political engagement. This threat curtails many women's ability to participate fully in diverse forms of social and civic involvement, voice their opinions publicly, and be recognized as valued individuals deserving of equal consideration. In addition, the Centre for Social Research (2014) stated that political engagement has historically been framed as a male domain, and the perceived masculinization of the

political arena has contributed to the view of politics as a corrupt or unsavoury field, deemed unsuitable for female participation. In other words, violence against women in politics is directly intended to discourage women from participating in politics and to create an impression that the political arena is reserved for males. Given the prevailing perception of the political sphere as a male-dominated domain, women's engagement in political activities is often interpreted as a challenge to established gender hierarchies (Centre for Social Research, 2014).

According to Sida (2022), a comprehensive examination of political violence is necessary to ascertain whether gender plays a role in its underlying motivations or if women's increased involvement in political processes has led to their increased vulnerability. These insights have important ramifications for policy development. In contexts where women are specifically and deliberately victimized, targeted interventions designed to ensure their safety are crucial. Conversely, in already volatile environments characterized by widespread violence and heightened female participation, integrating a gender-aware perspective into broader strategies aimed at mitigating political violence may prove sufficient. Importantly, the manifestations of violence experienced by men and women are likely to be different, irrespective of the underlying cause. While political parties are generally the main conduits through which women can emerge as political leaders in key positions in government institutions (Zvobgo & Dziva, 2017), such parties should at least endeavour to improve the safety and security of women who actively participate in the political domains.

Sexual Harassment

A study conducted by Horowitz and Goddard (2023) in the US found that 75% of surveyed individuals indicated that sexual harassment is the reason why there are fewer women than men in high political offices. According to Loots (2008), the consequences of specific actions on the person receiving them can help pinpoint three kinds of harassment: *quid pro quo* harassment, preferential treatment based on sexual relationships, and a hostile work atmosphere. Regarding the *quid pro quo* harassment, it occurs when someone feels compelled to submit to unwanted sexual advances out of fear of losing something important. This type of harassment generally happens when one person holds real authority and can influence another's job-related advantages or opportunities. A mixed method study conducted by the Centre for Social Research (2014) in Pakistan, Nepal and India, revealed that the anticipation of sexual inducements and implied sexual impropriety were the most common and widespread expressions of violence against women in politics, although these issues were often mentioned without extensive analysis or elaboration. In a separate study, Collier and Raney's (2018) found that men's dominance in the lower houses of Australia, the United Kingdom, and Canada is not solely a matter of numerical advantage; the very procedures and conventions governing these parliamentary systems perpetuate male supremacy through discriminatory practices and sexual harassment. By comparing these three nations, the study has illuminated the mechanisms by which the established protocols and customs of Westminster-style governance contribute to and sustain a wider organizational climate of gender bias. Given the concomitant ramifications of incidents of sexual harassment on its victims, Loots (2008) argued that applying the doctrine of vicarious liability against political parties whose members may have committed sexual harassment during performance of their duties could assist in making political parties more vigilant and instil discipline among party members.

Verbal Attacks

Despite increasing female involvement in the political sphere, particularly as electoral contenders, misogyny and caustic rhetoric, perpetrated by both men and women, persist (Zvobgo & Dziva, 2017). For example, in Sri Lanka, women participating in activism and the political sphere, particularly through digital platforms, face considerable abusive language. Heightened risks to safety and security, especially facilitated by social media platforms, foster an adversarial climate. The widespread dissemination of misinformation disproportionately impacts women prominent in political sphere, contributing to a hesitancy among younger women to express their views on a range of subjects, extending beyond purely political domains (British Council, 2024). Centre for Social Research (2014) noted that although the practice of damaging an individual's reputation through targeted disparagement is a prevalent phenomenon across the South Asian region, female political figures encounter a significantly more arduous path to success compared to their male counterparts. They are compelled to defend against criticisms of being overly rigid or austere, while also facing insinuations of moral impropriety or sexual transgressions based on innocuous interactions with men outside their immediate family. Zvobgo and Dziva (2017) postulate that this behaviour originates from deeply ingrained societal conventions that position political domain as primarily belonging to men. The criticisms levelled are not solely focused on the candidate's policies, but frequently devolve into personal attacks, focusing on factors such as her family structure outside of marriage, her status as a single parent, and purported details of her sexual history, whether accurate or fabricated. The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (2019) stated that differential treatment, coercive practices, and reputation attacks disseminated through media channels contribute to limitations in the sustained political efficacy of female politicians. This explains that personal attacks directed to women who

participate in politics are used as diabolic tool to dissuade females from active participation and entering the political domain.

Psychological Distress

Research has consistently shown that some women who are participating in politics and those who are aspiring to occupy elected office are at risk of experiencing psychological distress in one form or the other. Firstly, a study conducted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union involving 55 female parliamentarians from 39 nations indicates that a significant majority (82%) of those interviewed reported experiencing psychological aggression, including demeaning comments, gestures, and imagery of a sexist or humiliating character, as well as intimidation and harassment (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2019). Secondly, women dedicate significantly more time to uncompensated domestic labour than men, which hinders their involvement in economic and political activities. Sadly, the disproportionate burden of domestic responsibilities and caregiving duties significantly impedes women's participation in the political sphere (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2019). In a study conducted in Northern Cyprus, Artac and Ogurlu (2024) found that political commitments require lengthy working hours. Further, the occasions and locations where political activities occur are generally not conducive for women and present challenges for them. Importantly, women often find it challenging to make time for themselves and lean on the support of other women around them.

Centre for Social Research (2014) reported that women experience hardship due to limitations on their autonomy in decision-making processes; they are often marginalized within political organizations, believed to be less electable, and consequently, denied opportunities to compete in elections. For example, in 2010, Kenya's revised constitution incorporated a provision designed to promote gender balance in legislative institutions at the local and national levels, mandating that neither gender should occupy more than two-thirds of the seats (Akiyode-Afolabi, 2020). Unfortunately, the assessment of the 2013 electoral contest demonstrated that women constituted only approximately 20% of all candidates, highlighting persistent impediments to female political representation as envisioned by the nation's fundamental legal document, notwithstanding *de jure* equality. A significant contributor to this disparity was the intensely competitive environment within political organizations, which placed women under sustained pressure to demonstrate their competence (Akiyode-Afolabi, 2020). In other words, women distress because of not being given roles that would allow them to influence critical decisions and make meaningful contribution to current affairs in the political domain. At the same time, women find themselves in a precarious position and helpless especially when they are unfairly isolated by some political parties to which they belong.

Gender Discrimination

Gender discrimination manifests in various forms within the political space sending signals that women holding elected office are degraded to positions of inferiority. For instance, Akiyode-Afolabi (2020) has noted that while Rwanda boasts a significant female presence in parliament, with women holding 68% of seats due to constitutionally mandated affirmative action policies aimed at promoting gender inclusivity in politics, persistent patriarchal societal structures continue to confine women to less influential roles. Furthermore, the inclusion of women frequently relies on the patronage of influential male figures who provide guidance and backing, but may also exert control over these women, potentially shaping their actions and limiting their autonomy. Elizabeth et al. (2023) point out that even with governmental mandates promoting female participation in political affairs, the lack of endorsement from local influential figures can significantly impede progress. Constituents are often inclined to adhere to the directives of their prominent representatives, potentially circumventing independent evaluation of the situation. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance International (2024) reported that in Rwanda, advancements in women's rights are notably linked to women holding numerous positions in government. Regrettably, most women holding various political positions are in power without power because they happen to be micromanaged by powerful males.

There are numerous reasons that ostensibly account for gender discrimination in the political sphere. Specifically, Elizabeth et al. (2023) outline variety of reasons for which women who join politics are unjustifiably discriminated in some of the countries. Firstly, the "Queen bee phenomenon" (a form of violence perpetrated by women against fellow women), which is rife in Indonesia, does not only frustrate women's ambitions to participate in politics but unhealthy and dangerous for both the perpetrator and the victim of this phenomenon. Secondly, women are often led to think that political involvement is outside their domain. Dominant societal norms, reinforcing male authority, are increasingly bolstered by certain female factions who, in a more intellectual fashion, exhibit competitive and exclusionary behaviours among themselves. Thirdly, discrimination based on gender in the political sphere originates from culturally embedded beliefs regarding the differentiated functions of men and women (Elizabeth et al. 2023).

Women in politics have become victims of gender discrimination, which is exacerbated by patriarchal social ideology which prevails in the political sphere while abated by women who do not support female participation in political matters. For instance, in Indonesia, there is a pervasive societal scepticism regarding women's competence in politics, manifesting as a tendency to favour male candidates, even among female constituents (British Council, 2024). Similarly, in Ethiopia, deeply rooted sociocultural traditions impede female participation in positions of authority, a problem exacerbated by prejudiced intra-household resource allocation and power dynamics while Nigeria's patriarchal norms embedded in societal responses and decision-making processes significantly constrain women's potential contributions (British Council, 2024). Clearly, women in politics find it extremely difficult to assert their position of interest as a consequence of unwarranted manipulation which translates into gender discrimination particularly against women who participate. According to the Community of Democracies (2017), the enduring gendered prejudices, faith-based influences, and established societal customs continue to impede female advancement. A limited number of women pursue political candidacy, often due to perceived lack of familial or communal endorsement. Articulate women or female communal authorities are frequently stigmatized as disruptive elements within a society where discourse and agency are traditionally reserved for men and senior members. Moreover, Mlambo and Kapingura (2019) have vehemently stated that the capacity of women to participate in the political sphere, encompassing both formal electoral processes and broader civic engagement such as grassroots organizing and holding public office, is frequently influenced by prevailing societal expectations that underpin broader social institutions. These established conventions, which may hinder women's transition from conventional household duties to more visible and influential roles in the public domain. Based on the arguments presented above, it is evident that systemic gender discrimination directed specifically at women in politics makes it impossible for women to maintain their presence as political actors.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has assessed the potential risks associated with women's political participation thereby identifying potential threats, analysing their likelihood and severity. The paper reveals that women participating in politics suffer from unjustified prejudice in comparison to their male counterparts. Such prejudice is intended to make women to doubt their ability to perform functions related to elected office. Additionally, women in politics are at risk of experiencing political violence which has the potential to destabilise their aspirations to hold any political office. Sadly, the politically motivated attacks against women are carried out by misogynistic males to scare women from participating in politics and to view politics as dangerous game for men. It was also noted that women across the globe are the main victims of gender discrimination, which undermines efforts towards attain women's representation in politics. Women are also at risk of becoming victims degrading verbal attacks and sexual harassment when they venture into the political space. The implications of these findings are profound. While the agenda to bridge gender gaps in political representation of women should be sustained continually, it is also imperative for political actors to ensure that a conducive environment is deliberately created for them to fully participate in matters that affect them directly or indirectly. Further, political space needs to be safe for women and men respectively because there is no level of justification of violence meted out against any group in the society. This can be achieved by establishing specialised investigative units and courts dedicated to handling matters related to political violence. Political parties and governmental institutions need to introduce practical measures to prevent prejudice against women in politics and avoid micro-managing women when they are holding elected offices. In other words, women should be at liberty to make decisions that are informed by law and the needs of their constituencies. Moreover, political parties need to draft comprehensive sexual harassment policies to protect unsuspecting women in politics and those who aspire to participate in politics against predatory men. One notable limitation of this paper is that it is only based on the conceptual review of literature, which is unstructured and not reproducible. Future research endeavours should focus on who have high risk perception between men and women in the political sphere, using mixed methods empirical approach. Finally, it is possible to increase women representation in politics across the globe only if a welcoming and safer environment is created for women to partake in the political arena.

REFERENCES

- Akiyode-Afolabi, A. (2020). *Political participation, feminist organising and the creation of inclusive democratic spaces. Feminist Reflections*, 3, 1-15. Retrieved from <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/mosambik/17883.pdf>
- Artac, N.H & Ogurlu, E. (2024). A qualitative study on the attitudes of women politicians toward their roles in politics: A case of Northern Cyprus. *Frontiers in Psychology*. 14:1304905. Doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1304905

- Bin-Husayn, A.R., Abdullah, M & Rimmel, G. (2025): The relationship between risk perception and risk management: a systematic literature review. *Journal of Risk Research*. DOI: 10.1080/13669877.2024.2447258.
- Bodemer, N & Gaissmaier, W. (2015). Risk perception. in: Hyunyi Cho, Torsten Reimer, Katherine A. McComas (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Risk Communication*. Los Angeles, California: Sage Publications.
- British Council. (2024). *Next generation: Political empowerment of women and girls*. Retrieved from: https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/next-generation_women-and-girls_political-empowerment-brief.pdf
- Centre for Social Research (CSR). (2014). *Violence against women in politics: A study conducted in India, Nepal and Pakistan*. Retrieved from: <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/violence-against-women-politics>
- Collier, C.N & Raney, T. (2018). Understanding sexism and sexual harassment in politics: A comparison of Westminster Parliaments in Australia, the United Kingdom, and Canada. *Social Politics*, 25(3), 432–455. Doi:10.1093/sp/jxy024.
- Commission for Gender Equality (South Africa). (2023). *Evaluating progress for women's political participation and representation in political parties: A national report*. Retrieved from: <https://cge.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/women-and-political-parties-in-south-africa-2013.pdf>
- Community of Democracies. (2017). *Advancing women's political participation: African consultation on gender equality and political empowerment*. Retrieved from: <https://community-democracies.org/app/uploads/2017/09/WPP-African-Consultation.pdf>
- Dim, E.E. (2023). Openness of political structures and gender gaps in protest behaviour in Africa. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 9:1, 2194731, Doi: 10.1080/23311886.2023.2194731
- Elizabeth, M.Z., Ahimsa Putra, H.S.A., Sholihan & Arikhah. (2023). Queen-bee phenomenon: Barriers to women's participation in politics, *Cogent Social Sciences*, 9(2), 2266896, Doi: 10.1080/23311886.2023.2266896
- Ferrer, R & Klein, W.M. (2015). Risk perceptions and health behaviour. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 1(5), 85–89.
- Horowitz, J & Goddard, I. (2023). *Women and political leadership ahead of the 2024 election: Public views of obstacles faced by women in politics and the impact of having a woman president*. Retrieved from: <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2023/09/27/women-and-political-leadership-ahead-of-the-2024-election/>
- Inouye, J. (2017). *Risk perception: Theories, strategies, and next steps*. USA: Campbell Institute.
- International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES). (2021). Lessons on gender equality and women's political participation. *Election Case Law Analysis Series*. Retrieved from: <https://electionjudgments.org/api/files/1640188368470gfhkxcv7i5.pdf>
- International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. (2024). *The motivation for women in politics: The contemporary politics of women's participation and representation in Africa*. Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2024.115>
- Liu, T., Zhang, H., Li, X & Zhang, H. (2020). Individual factors influencing risk perceptions of hazardous chemicals in China. *Environmental Research*, 186. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envres.2020.109523>
- Loots, B.E. (2008). Sexual harassment and vicarious liability: A warning to political Parties. *STELL LR*, 1, 143-169. Retrieved from: <https://scholar.sun.ac.za/server/api/core/bitstreams/17bc7149-fd43-4985-8b36-031ff8881553/content>
- Mañez, M., Carmona, M. & Haro, D. & Hanger, S. (2016). *Risk perception*. Retrieved from: <https://pure.iiasa.ac.at/id/eprint/13903/1/Chapter3-ENHANCE.pdf>
- Mlambo, C & Kapingura, F. (2019). Factors influencing women political participation: The case of the SADC region. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 5(1), 1681048, DOI: 10.1080/23311886.2019.1681048
- Priolo, G., Vignoli, M. & Nielsen, K. (2025). Risk perception and safety behaviours in high-risk workers: A systematic literature review. *Safety Science*, 186. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssci.2025.106811>
- Sarda, B. (2023). Political participation and women empowerment. *International Journal of Novel Research and Development*, 8(3), 133-140.
- Sharma, A. (2019). Challenges faced by women leadership in politics. *International Journal of Political Science and Governance*, 1(1), 60-62.
- Sida. (2022). *Women's participation in politics: Technical note*. Retrieved from: https://cdn.sida.se/app/uploads/2022/12/07184109/10206829_Sida_TN_Womens_participation_in_politics_web.pdf
- United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). (2019). Women's political participation and leadership. *Social Development Policy Briefs*. Retrieved from: https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/SDPB%202019-03_Political%20Participation_1.pdf
- The social-psychological determinants of climate change risk perceptions: Towards a comprehensive model. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 41, 112-124.

- Van der Linden, S. (2017). Determinants and measurement of climate change risk perception, worry, and concern. *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Climate Science*. USA: Oxford University Press.
- Van Eck, C., Mulder, B., & Van der Linden, S. (2020). Climate change risk perceptions of audiences in the climate change blogosphere. *Sustainability*, 12(19), 7990.
- World Economic Forum (WEF). (2023). *Global Gender Gap Report*. Retrieved from <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2023/>
- Yadav, A & Suman, T. (2021). Tracing women empowerment through political participation. In S Mishra & K Datta (eds), *Women in Indian Politics*. pp. 164-176.
- Zvobgo, E.F & Dziva, C. (2017). Practices and challenges in implementing women's right to political participation under the African Women's Rights Protocol in Zimbabwe. *African Human Rights Yearbook*, 1, 60-81. Doi: <http://doi.org/10.29053/2523-1367/2017/v1n1a4>
- Wolff, K., Larsen, S. & Ogaard, T. (2019). How to define and measure risk perceptions. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 79. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2019.102759>