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Examining the Effectiveness of Gender Representation on Service Delivery in Local Government: A Case Study of Mansa Municipal Council

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Abstract

Local governments are central to providing essential public services and promoting community development. In Zambia, decentralization reforms have prioritized inclusive governance and gender-balanced representation to strengthen accountability and responsiveness. However, questions persist about whether greater gender representation leads to improved service outcomes. This study examined the effectiveness of gender representation in enhancing service delivery at Mansa Municipal Council, focusing on female participation in decision-making. A case study design using mixed methods was adopted, with data analyzed in STATA through descriptive statistics and chi-square tests. Thematic analysis was applied to qualitative data. Findings revealed that Mansa Municipal Council remains male-dominated. About 88.1% of respondents reported that most departments were composed mainly of men, while only 7.1% indicated gender balance. Leadership roles reflected similar disparities, with 78.6% stating that men occupied most senior positions. Chi-square results confirmed a significant relationship between gender composition and leadership distribution, showing that male-dominated departments were led by men. Women were concentrated in support areas such as Human Resource and Administration, while technical departments remained largely male. Despite underrepresentation, gender diversity was widely viewed as beneficial. Most respondents linked it to enhanced teamwork (76.2%), stronger community engagement (81.0%), improved service timeliness and quality (83.3%), greater transparency (76.2%), and better accountability (71.4%). The study concludes that while women remain marginalized in leadership and technical fields, their inclusion positively influences efficiency, transparency, and accountability. It recommends stronger policy frameworks, gender-responsive budgeting, and targeted leadership training to enhance women's participation and improve municipal governance in Mansa.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Gender representation in governance has emerged as an essential aspect of modern public administration and democratic development (Park, 2021). The concept refers to the equitable inclusion of both men and women in decision-making positions, particularly within institutions that influence public policy and service delivery. Effective gender representation ensures that governance structures reflect the diversity of the communities they serve and that policy outcomes respond to the needs of all citizens (Yadav, 2023) [50]. Over time, the inclusion of women in political and administrative leadership has been linked to improvements in transparency, accountability, and equity in service delivery (Armitage, 2020).

Globally, the push for gender balance in leadership can be traced to several landmark policy frameworks and conventions. The 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) laid the foundation for addressing structural inequalities that limit women's participation in public life (Sales, 2025). This was reinforced by the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of 1995, which called on governments to ensure women's full participation in decision-making at all levels. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 5 on gender equality and Goal 16 on strong institutions, further emphasize gender parity as a prerequisite for inclusive governance and sustainable development. Many countries have since adopted legislative and policy reforms to promote gender equality in political representation, such as quota systems and gender-responsive budgeting (Chinagorom, 2024).

In Africa, gender representation in governance has been recognized as central to promoting inclusive development and improving public service outcomes (George, 2021). The African Union's Agenda 2063 and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol) commit member states to achieve at least 50 percent representation of women in decision-making positions. Despite these commitments, gender disparities remain evident across many African local government structures, where women continue to be underrepresented due to social, economic, and institutional barriers. This underrepresentation affects how resources are allocated, priorities are set, and services are delivered at the local level (George, 2021).

In Zambia, gender representation in governance has gradually improved through a combination of constitutional reforms, national gender policies, and political commitments (Kayumba, 2023) [31]. The National Gender Policy of 2014 underscores the importance of integrating gender equality in all sectors, including local government. Zambia is also a signatory to international conventions promoting gender equality, such as CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action (Lubinda, 2023). Despite these policy frameworks, women's participation in local governance remains limited. Data from successive elections show that female representation at the council level has been consistently below 20% (Evelyn, 2024). This imbalance raises concerns about whether existing service delivery systems adequately reflect the priorities and perspectives of all citizens, particularly women, who are often the primary users of public services such as water, sanitation, health, and education (Phiri, 2025) [43].

Mansa Municipal Council provides a relevant case for examining this relationship, as it represents a typical local government structure in Zambia operating under national policy frameworks but influenced by local socio-cultural dynamics. Understanding how gender representation affects the council's service delivery performance can provide insights into whether the inclusion of women in decision-making contributes to efficiency, accountability, and responsiveness. Such analysis can also inform strategies for strengthening gender equity in local governance and ensuring that policy objectives on gender mainstreaming translate into measurable service delivery improvements. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the effectiveness of gender representation on service delivery in local government, using Mansa Municipal Council as a case study. The study aims to contribute to both policy and academic debates by linking gender representation with institutional performance and the practical realities of service delivery in Zambia's local governance framework.

1.2 Statement of the Problem
Despite Zambia's commitment to gender equality through frameworks such as CEDAW, the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development, and the National Gender Policy, women remain significantly underrepresented in local government, especially in decision-making roles (Ministry of Gender and Child Development, 2014; Republic of Zambia, 2016). This underrepresentation raises concerns about inclusiveness, equity, and responsiveness in local service delivery. At Mansa Municipal Council, the proportion of female elected Councillors remains below the 30% SADC and Beijing Platform for Action target, despite

initiatives such as the Parliamentary Women's Caucus and the 2014–2016 Count Her In campaign (Ministry of Gender and Child Development, 2014). Although constitutional and policy provisions such as Article 45(d) of the Amended Constitution promote gender equity, a persistent gap exists between policy commitments and actual implementation at Municipal level (Republic of Zambia, 2016). Weak enforcement mechanisms, socio-cultural norms, and structural constraints continue to hinder women's participation, resulting in a policy practice disconnect (Žuvela, 2021) [51]. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the extent to which gender representation particularly women's participation in decision-making positions influences the effectiveness of service delivery in local government, using Mansa Municipal Council as the case study. Understanding this relationship is essential for informing strategies that promote inclusive governance, strengthen accountability, and enhance service delivery outcomes.

1.3 General Objectives
To assess the effectiveness of gender representation in enhancing public service delivery in local government, with a focus on the role of female participation in decision-making processes at Mansa Municipal Council.

1.3.1 Specific Objectives
1. To examine the state of gender representation at Mansa Municipal Council.
2. To assess the effect of gender representation on service delivery efficiency in Mansa.
3. To investigate the relationship between gender representation and accountability in local government service delivery.

1.4 Conceptual Framework
The study applies a conceptual framework developed from the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW, 2005) to examine how gender representation influences service delivery in local government. The framework identifies four related elements political representation, participation, leadership, and accountability as key to achieving gender-equitable governance. In local contexts such as Mansa, these concepts help explain how women's inclusion in decision-making processes affects the responsiveness and fairness of public services. Gender representation goes beyond counting women in office; it involves ensuring that they have real influence over policy design, budgeting, and service delivery. Measures such as gender quotas and reserved seats can promote inclusion, but true representation requires empowerment, voice, and institutional support.

Political participation focuses on women's active involvement in governance through voting, attending ward meetings, joining committees, and influencing budget decisions. Effective participation extends to collective action, where women organize across political lines to advocate for gender-responsive policies. Examples such as the Zambian Parliamentary Caucus on Gender demonstrate how such networks can strengthen advocacy and influence outcomes. However, participation is constrained by social and structural barriers including patriarchy, unpaid care work, and limited access to information. Addressing these issues through civic education, leadership training, and institutional reforms is essential for ensuring that women's

participation translates into more inclusive and accountable governance.

Political leadership and accountability link representation and participation to measurable outcomes in service delivery. When women hold leadership positions in local government, evidence shows that they prioritize community-based and socially beneficial investments such as water access, education, and healthcare. Leadership by women in Mansa and similar contexts enhances inclusivity and promotes participatory decision-making. However, challenges such as limited authority and resource access reduce their impact. Accountability mechanisms like participatory budgeting, public consultations, and gender audits help ensure that leaders respond to citizens' needs and uphold equity principles. Strengthening gender-sensitive accountability systems, supported by active citizen engagement, is crucial to making women's representation and leadership effective in transforming local governance and improving service delivery.

2. Literature Review

2.1 State of Gender Representation in Government Positions

Socio-cultural barriers are among the most persistent and deeply entrenched obstacles that discourage women from participating in political leadership. In many societies, cultural norms and traditional beliefs dictate distinct roles for men and women, often confining women to domestic responsibilities and caregiving roles while designating leadership and public decision-making as the domain of men (Anam, 2023; Alieva, 2025 [3]). These norms are reinforced from an early age through socialization processes in families, schools, and communities, where girls are often encouraged to prioritize marriage, child-rearing, and household duties over education, career development, or civic engagement (Adamu, 2023; Dahlvig & Longman, 2020) [1, 15].

Economic constraints represent another critical barrier to women's political participation. Running for office or sustaining a political career requires substantial financial resources, including campaign funding, transportation, staff, and promotional materials. In many contexts, women have limited access to these resources due to structural inequalities in employment, income, and asset ownership (Anam, 2023; Adamu, 2023 [1]). Women are often overrepresented in low-paying or informal sector jobs, which restricts their ability to accumulate wealth and finance political campaigns independently. Even when women have some economic means, prevailing gender norms often prioritize family obligations or household spending over political ambitions, limiting the funds women can allocate toward campaigns (Alshdiefat, 2024).

Institutional factors play a crucial role in shaping gender representation in political leadership, often creating systemic barriers that disadvantage women. Among these factors, party nomination processes are particularly significant, as they determine which candidates gain access to elections and ultimately influence who occupies leadership positions (Elkhwesky et al., 2025; Harry, 2024) [18, 23]. In many political systems, political parties serve as gatekeepers to public office. They control nominations, set eligibility criteria, allocate campaign resources, and determine the support structures that candidates receive during elections. Unfortunately, these processes are frequently designed in

ways that favor male candidates, whether intentionally or through entrenched traditions and informal practices (Ilodigwe & Uzoh, 2024; Ndjama, 2025) [25, 39]. Women often face structural disadvantages in these nomination systems, which can limit their chances of securing party endorsements and ultimately reduce their representation in elected offices (Irshad et al., 2023) [27].

2.2 Effects of Gender Representation on the Efficiency of Service Delivery in Local Governance

The effects of gender representation on the efficiency of service delivery in local governance are multidimensional, touching on aspects of decision-making, inclusivity, accountability, and community responsiveness (Ayalew, 2024; Beshi & Kaur, 2020) [9, 10]. Evidence from various studies indicates that when women are adequately represented in local government structures, service delivery tends to improve in both scope and quality (An et al., 2025; Caruso et al., 2022) [5, 11].

Gender representation in local governance has become an increasingly important factor in understanding the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery. The inclusion of women in decision-making structures does not merely fulfill equity or social justice objectives; it fundamentally shapes the priorities, quality, and reach of public services (Dube, 2024; Adams et al., 2021) [16, 2]. One of the most significant effects of gender representation is its influence on decision-making processes. Women leaders tend to bring perspectives, priorities, and approaches that differ from those of their male counterparts, resulting in more holistic and inclusive governance (Anderson et al., 2021; Caruso et al., 2022) [7, 11].

The impact of gender-balanced governance on innovation is also closely linked to leadership style. Women often adopt collaborative and inclusive approaches, engaging stakeholders in problem-solving and decision-making rather than relying solely on hierarchical or directive methods (Caruso et al., 2022; Cavill et al., 2022) [11, 12]. This participatory approach fosters creativity, encourages experimentation with new service delivery models, and facilitates the rapid adoption of best practices across sectors (Ayalew, 2024) [9].

Additionally, female leaders are frequently more willing to integrate social and economic objectives, designing programs that simultaneously address education, health, livelihood, and environmental needs (An et al., 2025; Adams et al., 2021) [5, 2]. By linking multiple policy objectives in this way, local governments can maximize resource utilization and deliver services more efficiently, achieving higher impact with limited budgets (Beshi & Kaur, 2020) [10].

2.3 Gender Representation and Accountability in Local Government Service Delivery

Accountability in local government refers to the obligation of officials to act in the best interests of citizens, ensure transparency, and take responsibility for decisions and the management of public resources (Hill, 2024; Kosec & Wantchekon, 2020) [24, 33]. Effective accountability mechanisms ensure that public services are delivered efficiently, equitably, and in a manner that meets the needs of communities. Gender representation in local government has a significant influence on accountability, as the inclusion of women in leadership and decision-making positions often

reshapes governance practices, enhances oversight, and strengthens mechanisms that hold officials responsible for service delivery outcomes (Martínez-Córdoba *et al*., 2023; Ayalew, 2024) [36, 9].

Furthermore, gender representation in local governance often results in more equitable prioritization of services, which is a form of accountability in itself (An *et al*., 2025; Adams *et al*., 2021) [5, 2]. Women leaders tend to focus on the needs of households, children, the elderly, and other marginalized groups, ensuring that resources are distributed fairly and that no population segment is systematically neglected (Caruso *et al*., 2022) [11]. This approach is especially important in local governments, where resources are often limited and competing demands can leave vulnerable communities underserved (Dube, 2024) [16].

By emphasizing social equity, women leaders enforce accountability not only to legal or procedural standards but also to ethical and community-based criteria (Imburgia *et al*., 2021) [26]. The presence of female decision-makers ensures that the benefits of local government services are distributed based on need and impact rather than political favoritism or elite capture, reinforcing the principle that governance must serve all citizens fairly (Martínez-Córdoba *et al*., 2023) [36].

3. Research Methodology
3.1 Research Design
The study adopted an exploratory case study, utilizing a mixed method approach.

3.2 Target Population
The target population for this study included all key stakeholders involved in the governance and service delivery processes within Mansa Municipal Council. This encompassed both elected and appointed officials, as well as community members who interact directly with municipal services.

3.3 Sample Size
The study consisted of 58 participants.

3.4 Sampling
Convenience sampling approach was used to select the study sample.

3.5 Data Collection Methods
Interviews were primarily conducted face-to-face, with electronic questionnaires also being utilized to collect information on the research variables. The main data collection method for this study was a structured questionnaire containing closed-ended questions.

4. Result Presentation
The respondent pool itself reflects the gender imbalance under investigation. With 51 men (83.3%) and only 7 women (16.7%), the data collection process encountered the same structural inequality present in the council's composition. Council employees formed the largest group of respondents (64.3%), providing a core administrative perspective.

Table 4.1.1: Gender Distribution of Respondents

Respondent Category	Male	Female	Total	% of Total
Councillors	6	1	7	11.9%
Council Employees	34	3	37	64.3%
Departmental Heads	5	3	8	14.3%
Traditional Leaders (Chiefs)	6	0	6	9.5%
Total	**51**	**7**	**58**	**100%**
% of Total	**83.3%**	**16.7%**	**100%**	

The age distribution indicates that most participants were between 30–39 years (50%), followed by those aged 40–49 years (30%). Participants aged 22–29 years and 50 years and above each accounted for 10%.
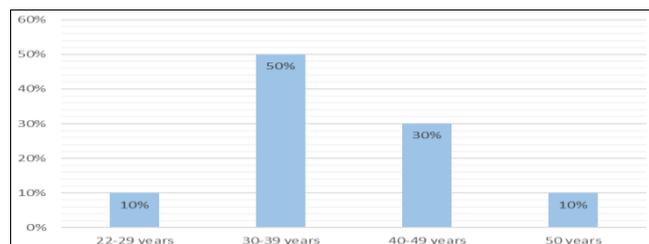

Fig 4.1.2: Participants' Age

4.1 The state of gender representation at Mansa Municipal Council
The data indicates a strongly male-dominated workforce across most departments. An overwhelming 88.1% of respondents reported their departments as "Mostly male," confirming a significant gender skew. Only 7.1% reported equal representation, while no department was identified as "Mostly female."
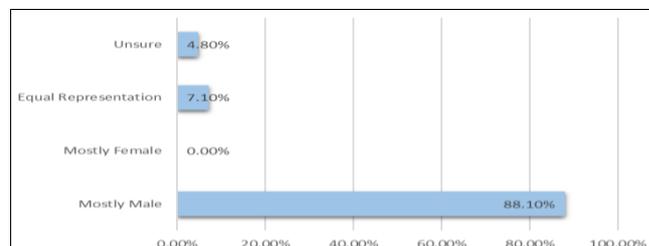

Fig 4.2.1: Gender Composition of Departments

Leadership is perceived to be predominantly held by men, with 78.6% of respondents affirming this. Only 9.5% believed leadership was equally shared, underscoring a critical barrier to gender-inclusive decision-making at the council. A small minority (11.9%) were unsure or selected "None of the above."
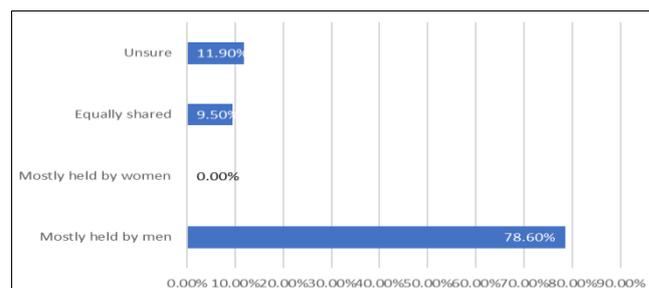

Fig 4.2.2: Distribution of Leadership Positions by Gender

The chi-square test examined the relationship between the gender composition of departments and the gender distribution in leadership positions within the Council. The results showed a statistically significant association between the two variables, $\chi^2(6, N = 100) = 96.667$, $p < .001$. This indicates that the gender composition of a department is related to the gender distribution in its leadership. Departments that were mostly male tended to have leadership positions predominantly held by men, while departments with more female staff showed relatively higher female representation in leadership. The absence of a significant linear-by-linear association ($p = .177$) suggests that the relationship may not follow a simple linear pattern but rather reflects categorical clustering across gender-dominated departments.

Table 4.2.1: Association Between Departmental Gender Composition and Leadership Gender Distribution

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	96.667ᵃ	6	.000
Likelihood Ratio	112.288	6	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	1.820	1	.177
N of Valid Cases	100		

This finding directly quantifies the scale of underrepresentation. A decisive 83.3% of respondents estimated that women constitute less than a quarter of the total workforce. This aligns with the demographic data of the respondent pool and confirms that female representation falls far below the SADC and national policy targets of 30-50%.
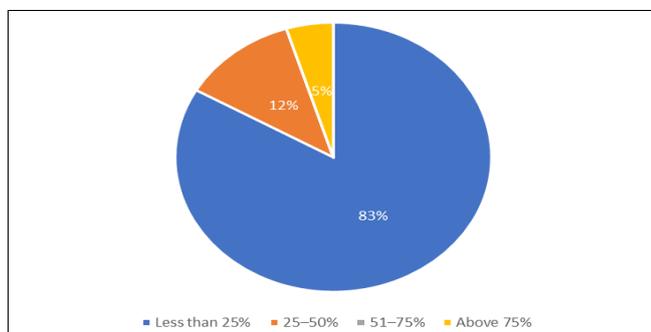

Fig 4.2.3: Female Representation in Total Workforce

Respondents identified Human Resource and Administration as the departments with the highest female representation, a common trend where women are often clustered in support and "soft" functional areas. In contrast, Technical Services, which typically includes engineering and public works, was not seen as a domain with significant female presence.
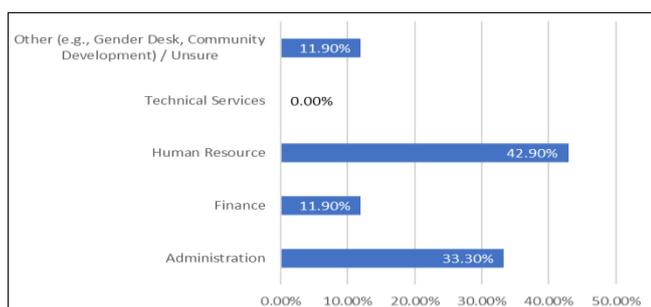

Fig 4.2.4: Department with Highest Female Representation

The council's approach to gender balance is largely perceived as passive or non-existent. Nearly half of the respondents (47.6%) stated there was "No specific mechanism," while another 38.1% believed recruitment was based on "Merit-based only," which often ignores structural barriers. Only 14.3% were aware of formal policies like an Equal Opportunity Policy.
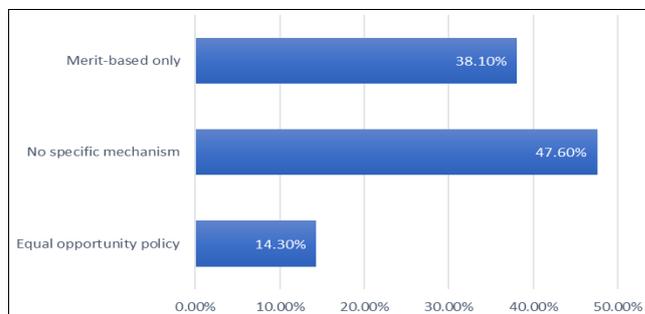

Fig 4.2.5: Recruitment Process Structure for Gender Balance

4.2 The effect of gender representation on service delivery efficiency in Mansa

A strong majority of respondents (76.2%) perceive that gender diversity enhances collaboration in service delivery. This aligns with findings that mixed-gender teams and female leaders foster more inclusive and participatory approaches. Only a small minority (7.1%) felt it created conflict or reduced efficiency.
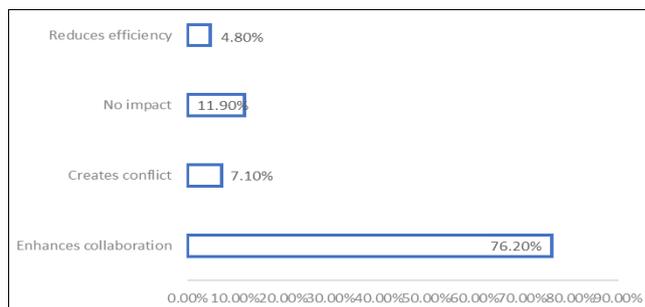

Fig 4.3.1: Effect of Gender Diversity on Teamwork

Community engagement is overwhelmingly identified as the area most positively influenced by gender balance, with 81.0% of respondents selecting it. This directly supports the study's finding that female councillors were more proactive in community consultations and inclusive planning, leading to services that better reflect local needs.

Figure 4.3.2 Area Most Influenced by Gender Balance
Over two-thirds of respondents (69.1%) believe that gender representation encourages creativity and innovation. This is likely linked to the diverse perspectives women bring, leading to more community-centric solutions, such as the improved siting of water points and health outreach programs noted in the study.
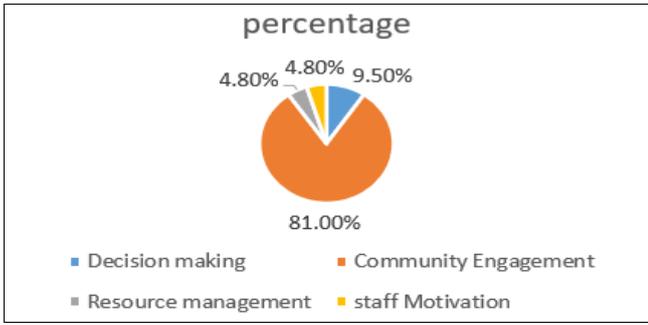
Fig 4.3.3: Influence on Innovation in Service Delivery

The positive impact of gender inclusion is clear, with a combined 83.3% of respondents observing improved timeliness or better quality services. This correlates with the data showing reduced project delays and higher community satisfaction in female-led wards, particularly in waste management and water access.
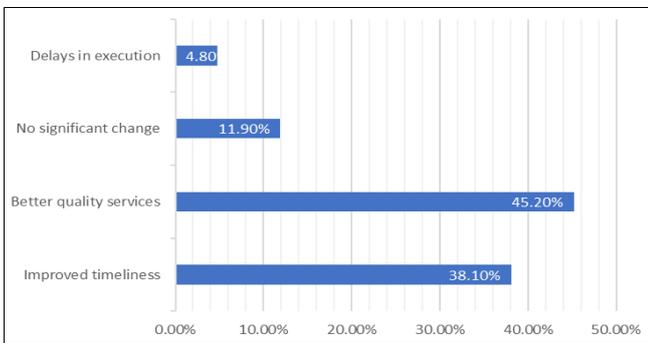

Fig 4.3.4: Outcome of Gender Inclusion in Project Implementation

4.3 The relationship between gender representation and accountability in local government service delivery

A significant majority of respondents (71.4%) believe that female employees show higher adherence to accountability standards. This perception aligns with the study's findings that female leaders are more proactive in community engagement, transparency, and responsive service delivery. Only 4.8% felt male employees were better, while 19.0% saw both genders as equal.
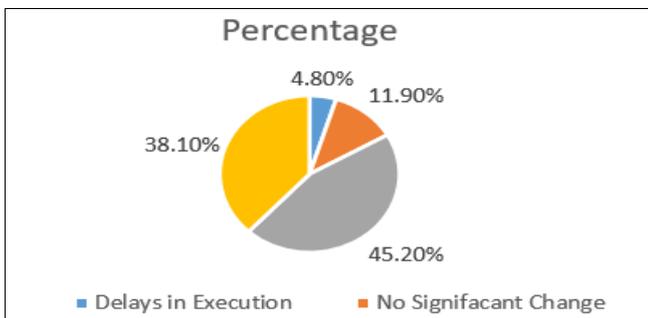

Fig 4.4.1: Adherence to Accountability Standards by Gender

Over three-quarters of respondents (76.2%) reported that gender diversity improves transparency in financial management. This supports the study's observation that women in leadership roles often emphasize inclusive planning and budget monitoring, leading to greater accountability in resource use. Only 7.1% felt it reduced transparency, while 11.9% saw no effect.
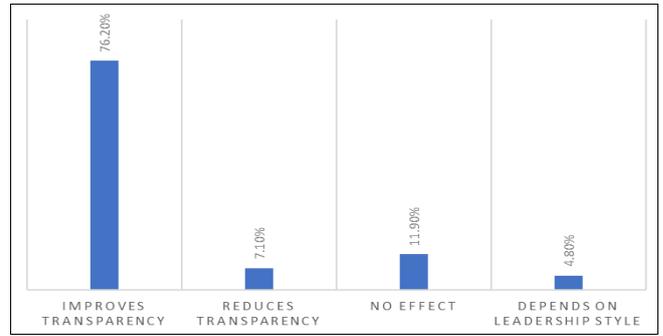

Fig 4.4.2: Influence of Gender Diversity on Financial Transparency

Most respondents (73.8%) indicated that gender representation increases ethical conduct in decision-making. This reflects the study's themes that women leaders often prioritize community needs and equitable service delivery, fostering a culture of integrity. A small minority (9.5%) believed it decreases ethics, while 11.9% saw no effect.

Figure 4.4.3 Role of Gender Representation in Ethical Decision-Making

A strong majority (71.4%) believe that gender-balanced teams improve reporting accuracy, likely due to the diverse perspectives and thoroughness women bring to data collection and documentation. This aligns with the study's emphasis on female leaders' attention to detail and community feedback. Only 7.1% felt it reduces accuracy.
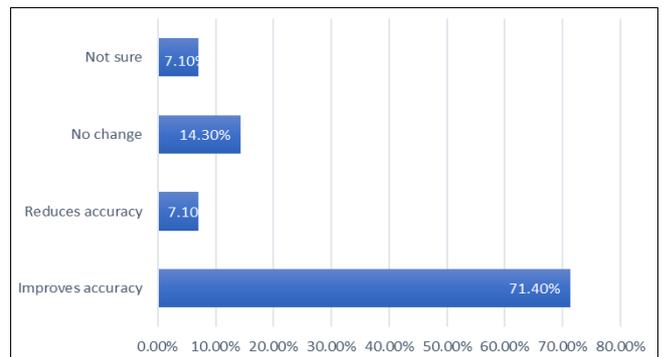

Fig 4.4.4: Effect of Gender Composition on Reporting Accuracy

Gender balance is seen to lead to high compliance with Council policies by 66.7% of respondents, reflecting the study's observation that women leaders often enforce rules and standards more consistently. Another 23.8% reported moderate compliance, while only 2.4% saw no correlation.
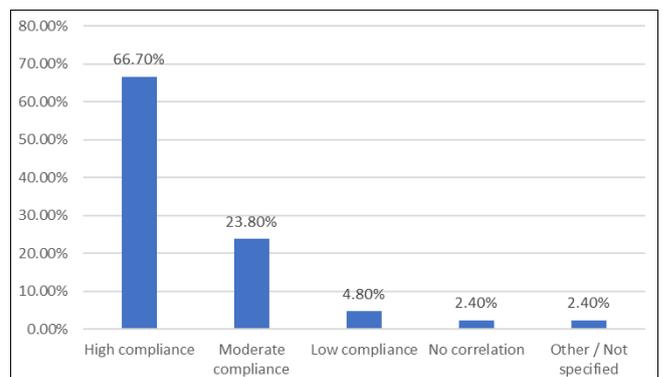

Fig 4.4.5: Impact of Gender Balance on Policy Compliance

Female officials are perceived as more involved in ensuring audit transparency by 61.9% of respondents, underscoring their role in promoting financial accountability and oversight. However, 26.2% believed both genders are equally involved, indicating that while women are prominent, men also contribute in this area.
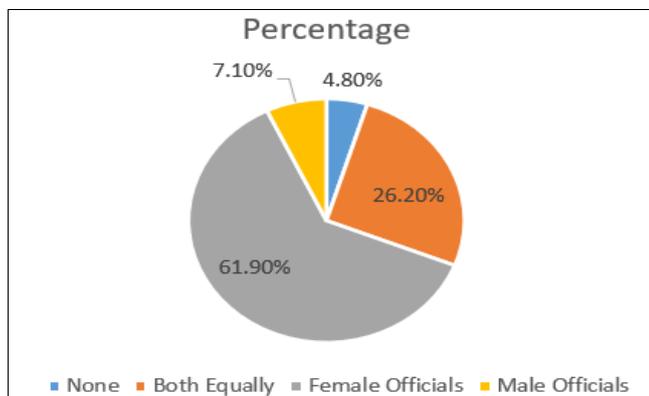

Fig 4.4.6: Gender Group Involvement in Audit Transparency

5. Discussion
The study on gender representation and service delivery at Mansa Municipal Council shows that women remain significantly underrepresented in both the workforce and leadership, a pattern shaped by socio-cultural norms, economic barriers, and institutional practices. Most departments are male-dominated, with women concentrated in administrative roles and excluded from key decision-making committees, reflecting limited institutional support and weak enforcement of gender equity policies. Economic and educational constraints further limit women's access to leadership and technical roles, while the absence of proactive gender policies sustains male dominance. Despite these barriers, the study found that gender representation positively influences service delivery and accountability, as women are perceived to demonstrate stronger adherence to ethical standards, transparency, and reporting accuracy. Gender diversity was linked to better financial management, policy compliance, and citizen engagement, indicating that inclusive leadership improves governance quality. However, the benefits of female representation are constrained by structural and cultural factors that restrict women's influence in decision-making. The findings suggest that improving gender balance alone is insufficient; institutional reforms, capacity-building, and policy enforcement are required to translate representation into effective accountability and enhanced service delivery in local government.

6. Conclusion
The study concludes that gender representation at Mansa Municipal Council remains significantly imbalanced, with men dominating both the workforce and leadership positions. Women are mainly concentrated in administrative and human resource roles, while technical and decision-making departments remain male-controlled. The absence of clear gender equity mechanisms, combined with reliance on merit-based recruitment, has perpetuated these disparities. Despite this imbalance, the study found that gender diversity positively affects service delivery and accountability. Departments and teams with higher female participation reported improved collaboration, innovation, community engagement, and service quality. Women leaders were perceived to uphold higher standards of transparency, ethical conduct, and financial accountability, enhancing reporting accuracy and policy compliance. Statistical analysis confirmed a strong association between departmental gender composition and leadership structure, indicating that gender balance within departments influences leadership outcomes. Overall, the findings demonstrate that while gender inclusion strengthens efficiency, ethics, and accountability in service delivery, achieving these benefits on a larger scale requires deliberate institutional reforms, policy enforcement, and proactive strategies to increase women's participation in leadership and decision-making roles.

7. Acknowledgement

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