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Assessing the Effectiveness of the Zambia's National Gender Equality Policy (2014) in Addressing Barriers to Women's Political Participation: A Case Study of Ndola District

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Abstract

This study assessed the effectiveness of Zambia's National Gender Equality Policy (2014) in addressing barriers to women's political participation, with a case study focus on Ndola District. The research aimed to identify socio-cultural, economic, and institutional challenges hindering women's political involvement and evaluate how effectively the policy addresses these issues. Employing a descriptive case study design, the study combined qualitative and quantitative methods. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis involving 40 participants, including female politicians, government officials, civil society representatives, and aspiring women politicians.

Findings reveal that socio-cultural barriers remain deeply entrenched, with 57% of respondents reporting hostile societal attitudes and 60% citing restrictive traditional practices that limit women's leadership opportunities. Economic barriers were pronounced; women reported significantly less access to campaign funding (35%) and political party support (26.7%) compared to men. Institutional weaknesses were also evident, with only 20% of participants perceiving the policy as fully implemented in Ndola District. Although 67% of respondents were aware of the policy, insufficient budget allocation (65%) and poor monitoring (40%) impeded effective execution.

The study concludes that while the Gender Equality Policy has increased political awareness and capacity-building efforts, its impact is constrained by persistent socio-cultural norms and inadequate institutional support. To enhance women's political participation, the study recommends increased funding, strengthened monitoring mechanisms, enhanced political party support, and targeted community sensitization to challenge patriarchal norms.

This research contributes valuable insights into the multifaceted challenges facing women in Zambian politics and underscores the need for integrated strategies to achieve gender parity.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Women's meaningful participation in political processes is a critical foundation of democratic governance and inclusive development. Global instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action emphasize the importance of gender parity in decision-making structures. Yet, in much of sub-Saharan Africa, women's engagement remains limited due to entrenched patriarchal norms, socio-economic inequalities, and institutional barriers that exclude them from political spaces (UN Women, 2020; Tamale, 2021). Zambia is no exception. Although the government has adopted gender equality policies, bridging the gap between policy commitments and actual practice has been a persistent challenge. Urban districts such as Ndola provide an important setting to examine these dynamics, given their relatively high literacy rates, economic activity, and political significance.

Despite progressive frameworks, Zambia has witnessed slow progress in female political representation. Following the 2021 general elections, women occupied just 18 percent of parliamentary seats—well below parity despite women constituting half of the population (GRZ, 2021). The underrepresentation has been attributed to factors such as cultural stereotypes, limited access to education and resources, political violence, and male-dominated party structures that often sideline female aspirants

(Nzomo, 2019). While official policies encourage gender inclusivity, societal resistance and weak enforcement mechanisms continue to undermine women's presence in decision-making roles.

Ndola District, one of the key industrial and political hubs on the Copperbelt, exemplifies these tensions. Despite its urban status and socio-economic advantages, women remain underrepresented at the ward, constituency, and municipal levels. Social expectations that tie women to domestic responsibilities, combined with political party structures dominated by men, create formidable obstacles for aspiring female leaders (Banda, 2020) [3]. Research suggests that even when women enter political parties, they are often confined to roles considered "soft" or non-strategic, such as welfare or education portfolios, while men dominate positions of higher influence (Sakala, 2019).

In response to these challenges, Zambia launched the National Gender Equality Policy (NGEP) in 2014 with the aim of promoting women's representation in leadership and institutional reform. The policy prioritizes strategies such as capacity building, stakeholder engagement, and resource mobilization (GRZ, 2014). However, its implementation has been inconsistent. Weak monitoring systems, limited dissemination of information, and inadequate resources have reduced its impact, with many political actors and citizens in Ndola reportedly unaware of its provisions (Mutesa, 2018). As a result, the policy's potential to transform political realities has not been fully realized.

Barriers to women's political participation in Ndola are further compounded by socio-economic inequalities. Women's limited access to campaign financing, coupled with the disproportionate burden of unpaid household work, leaves them at a disadvantage compared to men when competing for political office (Burns, Schlozman, & Verba, 2001). Structural features of Zambia's First-Past-The-Post electoral system, which tends to favor candidates with entrenched networks and financial resources, also reduce opportunities for women and other marginalized groups (UNDP, 2022). These systemic disadvantages point to the need for broader reforms beyond policy pronouncements to ensure equal participation.

Cultural and social conditioning also play a critical role. From early childhood, girls in Zambia are often socialized into domestic roles, while boys are encouraged to develop leadership skills. This reinforcement of gender hierarchies shapes political ambition, confidence, and leadership aspirations, often discouraging women from pursuing politics (Banda, 2020) [3]. Moreover, female candidates face hostility, harassment, and character defamation during campaigns, creating an unsafe political environment that deters participation (Sardenberg, 2010).

The gap between Zambia's policy frameworks and the lived realities of women in districts like Ndola necessitates deeper investigation. National statistics provide only a partial picture, failing to capture the localized socio-cultural, economic, and institutional factors that shape political participation. By focusing on Ndola, this study seeks to assess how the NGEP has been implemented at the district level, identify barriers that continue to hinder women's political agency, and provide recommendations for strengthening gender-inclusive governance. Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to building more equitable and participatory democratic structures in Zambia.

1.2 Problem Statement
Despite Zambia's commitment to gender equality through policies like the National Gender Equality Policy (NGEP) of 2014, women's political participation remains critically low. In the 2021 general elections, women occupied only 18% of seats in the National Assembly, far below the 50% representation they comprise in the population (Gender Links, 2021). At the local government level, women's representation stands at a mere 7%, highlighting a significant gender gap in political decision-making (UN Women, 2021) [41]. This underrepresentation persists despite Zambia's adherence to international instruments like the SADC Gender and Development Protocol, which aims for 50% women's representation by 2030 (Gender Links, 2021). The NGEP outlines strategies to eliminate gender-based discrimination and promote women's full participation in political processes. However, the policy's impact has been limited due to factors such as weak institutional capacity, lack of political will, and inadequate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms (Zambia UNFPA, 2021). In Ndola District, structural and cultural barriers continue to hinder women's political involvement. Patriarchal norms, limited access to campaign financing, and inadequate political mentorship are significant obstacles. Additionally, political violence and tokenistic inclusion of women in party structures further marginalize their participation (Democratic Governance Facility, 2021).

1.3 Research Objectives
1.3.1 General Objective
The overall objective of this study is to assess the effectiveness of Zambia's National Gender Equality Policy (2014) in addressing the barriers to women's political participation in Ndola District.

1.3.2 Specific Objectives
1. To identify and rank the prevalence of key socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers hindering women's political participation in Ndola District as perceived by female politicians, aspirants, and key stakeholders between 2014 and 2025.
2. To assess the perceived level of implementation of the National Gender Equality Policy (2014) in Ndola District by evaluating stakeholders' experiences regarding resource allocation, monitoring mechanisms, and institutional enforcement.
3. To document and analyze the lived experiences of women political aspirants and elected officials in Ndola District concerning the tangible support, obstacles, and overall impact of the National Gender Equality Policy (2014) on their political empowerment and campaign journeys.

1.4 Research Questions
This study seeks to answer the following research questions:
1. What are the key socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers that hinder women's political participation in Ndola District?
2. How do policy enforcement mechanisms and resource allocation influence the effectiveness of the National Gender Equality Policy (2014) in promoting women's political participation in Ndola District?
3. What are the experiences of women political aspirants regarding the role of the National Gender Equality

Policy (2014) in facilitating their political participation in Ndola District?

1.5 Significance of the Study
Women's political participation is internationally recognized as a cornerstone of democratic governance, inclusive development, and sustainable peace (UNDP, 2022; Dahlerup & Freidenvall, 2010). Yet, in Zambia, despite ratifying global instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and developing progressive domestic policies like the National Gender Equality Policy (2014), women remain underrepresented in formal political institutions, particularly at the district and ward levels (GRZ, 2014; UN Women, 2021 [41]). This study is significant as it will generate empirical evidence on how the NGEP has been implemented in Ndola District and assess whether it has achieved its intended purpose of dismantling systemic and cultural barriers to women's political inclusion. Such localized insights are vital to understanding whether national-level policies translate into substantive change on the ground.

The study further contributes to academic discourse by filling a notable gap in literature—there is limited district-specific research examining gender-focused policy implementation in Zambia. Most existing studies offer generalized national perspectives or are limited to electoral statistics without interrogating the lived realities of women engaging in politics (Chisala, 2020; Matenga, 2021). By capturing voices from women leaders, aspiring candidates, local officials, and civil society actors in Ndola, this research offers contextualized knowledge on political gatekeeping, institutional effectiveness, and socio-cultural barriers. It aims to challenge the assumption that policy presence equates to policy impact. The data and insights generated from this study are expected to influence both theoretical and practical debates surrounding gender and governance, thus enriching the broader body of feminist political scholarship in Southern Africa (Goetz, 2003 [13]; Tamale, 2021).

On a practical level, this study offers actionable insights for policymakers, gender-rights advocates, and development practitioners. It will provide evidence-based recommendations for refining the operational aspects of the NGEP and designing context-specific interventions that empower women to claim leadership roles in political spaces. Furthermore, it can inform training curricula, funding decisions, and monitoring tools used by local authorities and non-governmental organizations aiming to support gender-inclusive political processes (Gender Links, 2020; Tripp, 2015). International partners investing in gender equality programs will also benefit from the study's findings as a baseline for targeting their resources more efficiently. Ultimately, this research contributes to Zambia's ongoing struggle for gender justice by aligning academic knowledge production with the imperatives of inclusive, participatory democracy.

1.6 Scope of the Study
This study is confined to evaluating the National Gender Equality Policy (2014) and its effectiveness in promoting women's political participation within Ndola District, Zambia, covering the period from 2014 to 2025. The timeline allows for an assessment of both the initial implementation phase and subsequent developments, examining the policy's intended objectives, actions taken by stakeholders, and observable changes in women's representation over more than a decade (Ministry of Gender, 2014; UN Women, 2022). Geographically, the research is limited to Ndola, an urban district in the Copperbelt Province characterized by diverse socio-economic demographics, an active political culture, and the presence of key governmental and non-governmental actors (CSO, 2020). While the findings are context-specific, Ndola shares socio-cultural and institutional features with other urban and peri-urban districts in Zambia, making the insights potentially transferable to similar settings (Chisala, 2020; Matenga, 2021). Conceptually, the study focuses on women's access to, participation in, and representation within formal political processes, with broader aspects of gender equality—such as education, health, reproductive rights, and economic empowerment—examined only insofar as they impact political engagement (Tripp, 2015; Tamale, 2021). This delimitation ensures the research remains targeted on the alignment between NGEP provisions and the lived political experiences of women, generating actionable knowledge for advancing gender-inclusive governance in Zambia.

1.7 Operational Definitions
1. **Barriers:** These refer to socio-cultural, economic, institutional, and political constraints that limit women's ability to fully participate in political processes. Such barriers include patriarchal norms, limited access to resources, and exclusionary party structures (Tamale, 2021; UN Women, 2020).
2. **Equality:** A condition in which men and women have equal rights, opportunities, and access to political processes without discrimination, ensuring fair representation in governance (UNDP, 2022).
3. **Feminist:** A theoretical and practical perspective that challenges systemic gender inequalities and advocates for women's rights, representation, and participation in all spheres of public life, including politics (Fraser, 2013).
4. **Gender:** The socially constructed roles, behaviors, responsibilities, and expectations assigned to men and women, which influence access to power, resources, and political participation (Butler, 1990; Banda, 2020 [3]).
5. **National Gender Equality Policy (2014):** Zambia's official framework that aims to eliminate gender-based discrimination and promote equal opportunities for both men and women across political, economic, and social sectors (GRZ, 2014).
6. **Political Participation:** The active involvement of women in political processes such as voting, running for office, campaigning, advocacy, and engaging in decision-making structures at different levels of governance (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995).
7. **Policy:** A formal plan or principle adopted by government to address specific issues—in this case, the NGEP 2014, which seeks to institutionalize gender equality and enhance women's representation (GRZ, 2014).
8. **Politics:** The processes and structures through which power is acquired, decisions are made, and governance is carried out within a state or society (Heywood, 2019).

9. **Women's Empowerment:** The process through which women gain the capacity to make strategic decisions about their lives, including active participation in leadership and political structures, thereby challenging gendered power relations (Kabeer, 1999) [18].

2. Literature Review

This chapter provides a comprehensive review of existing literature related to women's political participation. It begins by examining the key socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers that continue to limit women's active involvement in political leadership. The chapter then explores how policy enforcement and resource allocation influence the effectiveness of the Gender Policy in creating equal opportunities for women in politics. Attention is also given to the lived experiences of women political aspirants, highlighting how the Gender Policy has shaped their empowerment and participation. The discussion is guided by feminist theory and the theory of political participation, which together provide a lens for understanding systemic barriers and potential interventions. The chapter concludes with a summary that synthesizes the main insights.

2.1 Key socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers that hinder women's political participation

Across the globe, socio-cultural expectations have been identified as major barriers to women's political participation. Studies from developed democracies such as the United States and the United Kingdom show that even in advanced systems, women face implicit bias shaped by cultural norms that associate leadership with masculinity. Comparative survey research conducted by Inglehart and Norris (2017) revealed that voters often perceive women as less capable of managing economic or security issues, which weakens their chances of being elected. The study, which drew data from more than 60 countries, concluded that cultural attitudes rather than formal rules continue to slow down women's political progress. These findings illustrate that socio-cultural barriers are not confined to developing nations but are deeply rooted in historical constructions of gender roles.

Religious teachings and traditional values continue to shape and complicate women's political participation globally. In many contexts, religious doctrines are interpreted in ways that discourage women from holding leadership positions, as such roles are often perceived as contradictory to prescribed gender roles. Tripp (2016), in a qualitative study of the Middle East and North Africa, revealed how religious institutions actively reinforce male dominance by labelling women "unfit" for leadership on moral and cultural grounds. Such attitudes persist even in environments where legal and institutional reforms exist, showing that structural change alone is insufficient without shifts in cultural values. These findings highlight that deeply entrenched religious and cultural ideologies remain among the most formidable barriers to gender equality in politics.

Traditional values, beyond religion, also perpetuate gender inequality in politics by prioritizing women's domestic roles over public service. In many societies, women are expected to focus on family obligations rather than political careers, which are often considered incompatible with their social responsibilities (Sadiqi, 2017). These cultural expectations exert pressure on women to withdraw from leadership pursuits or accept secondary roles in decision-making

spaces. The persistence of these traditions across regions—from African societies to Asian patriarchal systems—demonstrates that cultural attitudes are globally entrenched. Consequently, even in democracies where legal frameworks are relatively open, women's political engagement is constrained by the expectation that their primary identity lies in the private rather than public sphere.

Economic inequality adds another critical dimension to the obstacles women face in political participation. Political campaigning requires substantial financial resources, but women often lack equal access to credit, inheritance rights, or business opportunities that could support such ambitions. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (2019) conducted a mixed-methods study across 40 countries and found that women are systematically excluded from fundraising networks, while donors often favor male candidates who are deemed more "electable." This financial disadvantage is not merely a personal challenge but reflects broader structural inequalities in the economy that restrict women's opportunities. Without equal access to campaign financing, women are unable to compete fairly, reinforcing existing gender disparities in political representation.

The intersection of economic exclusion and cultural stereotypes further entrenches barriers to women's leadership. Even when women secure some financial resources, they often face skepticism about their ability to manage political power effectively, as leadership is still viewed as a male domain (Osei-Afful & Awal, 2020). This dual disadvantage not only deters women from contesting elections but also reduces their visibility in political discourse. Studies in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, for example, reveal that women candidates are more likely to self-censor or abandon campaigns when faced with financial shortfalls combined with cultural resistance (Nazneen & Mahmud, 2012). Thus, the economic and socio-cultural factors do not operate in isolation but reinforce one another, ensuring male dominance remains the norm in political systems worldwide.

Political parties, which function as critical gatekeepers of democratic processes, also contribute significantly to women's underrepresentation. Krook (2020) found in her research on Latin America that even with gender quotas in place, women were often nominated in "unwinnable" districts, ensuring that their presence was more symbolic than substantive. Party elites, who are predominantly male, frequently resist meaningful change, thereby undermining the intent of electoral reforms. This practice demonstrates that institutional barriers within political organizations themselves can neutralize broader policy efforts designed to enhance women's participation. Unless parties transform their nomination and support processes, women's political involvement will remain superficial, offering little real progress toward gender equality.

The global landscape indicates that barriers to women's political participation are multifaceted, intersecting across cultural, economic, and institutional dimensions. Religious and traditional values frequently limit women ideologically, prescribing leadership roles as primarily male domains and discouraging women from seeking public office. Studies in the Middle East and North Africa, for instance, show that women aspiring to political positions are often stigmatized as defying cultural or moral norms (Tripp, 2016). These ideological constraints demonstrate that legal reforms alone are insufficient; societal attitudes must also evolve to create

an environment conducive to women's political engagement.

Economic inequalities represent another significant obstacle. Campaigning for political office requires substantial financial resources, yet women often have limited access to capital or donor networks. Global analyses indicate that male candidates are more likely to receive funding from established political and business connections, reinforcing gender disparities in electoral competitiveness (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2019). Without targeted financial interventions, women remain structurally disadvantaged, unable to leverage policy frameworks for meaningful participation. Economic empowerment, therefore, is a critical component of any comprehensive strategy to enhance women's representation.

Institutional factors, particularly the internal structures of political parties, further marginalize women aspirants. Research by Krook (2020) shows that even where gender quotas exist, party hierarchies often assign women to "unwinnable" constituencies or fail to provide equal campaign support. These practices limit women's ability to influence political processes substantively, highlighting that formal reforms must be complemented by institutional accountability and a commitment to gender-inclusive decision-making. Institutional bias thus remains a persistent barrier to achieving genuine political parity.

Achieving meaningful gender parity in politics requires a holistic approach that addresses these interconnected barriers simultaneously. As Dahlerup (2018) emphasizes, legal quotas or formal reforms are necessary but insufficient on their own; they must be combined with cultural change, economic support, and institutional reform. Efforts to promote women's political participation must therefore involve civic education, capacity-building programs, equitable resource allocation, and sustained political will to dismantle entrenched hierarchies. Only by integrating structural, cultural, and economic interventions can initiatives move beyond symbolic inclusion toward transformative empowerment.

In Africa, socio-cultural stereotypes remain some of the strongest barriers to women's political participation. A study by Tamale (2021), using ethnographic methods in Uganda, revealed that cultural narratives consistently frame leadership as a male domain. Women reported being discouraged by family members and community elders from pursuing political ambitions, with many being told that politics was "not a woman's place." Similar findings have been echoed in Kenya, Nigeria, and Tanzania, where patriarchal norms reinforce the idea that women belong in the private rather than public sphere. These cultural narratives not only undermine women's self-confidence but also discourage them from contesting elections altogether. The African context illustrates that progressive constitutional provisions guaranteeing equal representation often remain ineffective when contradicted by deep-rooted traditions.

Linked to these socio-cultural stereotypes is the issue of public perception of women leaders. In many African societies, women who enter politics are frequently stigmatized as abandoning their families or behaving "unfeminine" (Akinola, 2018). Such perceptions discourage women from political engagement and can damage their social reputation within conservative communities. The pressure to conform to gendered expectations ensures that many capable women choose not to pursue leadership positions, fearing backlash or community disapproval. This social policing of women's ambitions demonstrates how political exclusion is not just a structural challenge but also a deeply cultural one.

Economic marginalization is another pervasive challenge across African nations, where women generally have fewer resources to fund political campaigns. Bauer and Darkwah (2020), in a survey of six African countries, found that women candidates consistently identified access to campaign financing as their greatest obstacle. The research revealed that female aspirants often relied on personal savings rather than institutional funding, unlike men who accessed wider financial networks, business linkages, and party sponsorship. Because campaigning requires extensive funds for mobilization, media visibility, and community engagement, women's limited access to resources directly undermines their competitiveness. This financial exclusion perpetuates gender inequality in politics, particularly in contexts where politics is heavily commercialized.

The intersection between economic marginalization and patriarchal norms exacerbates women's exclusion from politics. Women are often denied access to land ownership, inheritance rights, or credit facilities, limiting their ability to accumulate the wealth necessary for political campaigns (Nzomo, 2019). In many African societies, men control communal resources and business opportunities, giving them an advantage in financing political ambitions. Women, on the other hand, remain financially dependent on male relatives or spouses, reinforcing stereotypes of dependency. This structural inequality reveals that women's political exclusion cannot be separated from the broader economic systems that continue to privilege men over women.

Institutional barriers within African political parties further restrict women's opportunities to rise within the political arena. Tripp and Kang (2018), in their comparative study of Ghana, Nigeria, and South Africa, found that male-dominated party hierarchies consistently limited women's access to influential positions. While many party constitutions formally promote gender inclusion, informal practices such as patronage, favouritism, and manipulation of candidate list overwhelmingly benefit men. Women respondents revealed that their candidacies were often undermined by behind-the-scenes deals controlled by male elites. This demonstrates that party structures, which serve as critical entry points to politics, remain significant gatekeepers of women's exclusion.

Another institutional challenge arises from the inconsistent implementation of gender quotas and other affirmative action policies. Although several African countries have adopted gender quotas, their effectiveness varies widely. For example, Krook (2020) notes that in some cases, women are nominated in "unwinnable" constituencies to fulfil the letter but not the spirit of the law. This tokenistic approach inflates statistics without substantially changing women's access to real decision-making power. The discrepancy between policy frameworks and actual outcomes reveals that quotas, while important, are insufficient without genuine institutional reforms and political will.

Political violence and intimidation further constrain women's political participation across Africa. A study by Berry, Bouka, and Kamuru (2021) on electoral violence in Kenya revealed that women candidates were disproportionately subjected to harassment, threats, and

character assassination. The researchers used interviews with female aspirants and documented cases of electoral violence, showing how the political space is often unsafe for women. Similar patterns have been recorded in Zimbabwe and Nigeria, where women's campaigns are derailed by physical attacks and social media abuse. The prevalence of such intimidation tactics discourages many women from engaging in politics altogether. Violence thus operates not only as a barrier to entry but also as a mechanism for maintaining male dominance in politics.

In Zambia, socio-cultural beliefs remain significant barriers to women's political participation. Banda (2019), in a qualitative study that used focus group discussions with women leaders in Lusaka, found that cultural expectations of obedience to male authority discourage many women from pursuing political positions. Participants reported that female leadership was often framed as an act of defiance against tradition, which reduced community support for women candidates. This cultural pressure forces women to weigh their political ambitions against family and community acceptance, often leading them to withdraw from political contests. The findings suggest that even with progressive frameworks like the National Gender Policy, cultural norms continue to exert stronger influence than legal provisions, thereby restricting women's full engagement in politics.

The persistence of patriarchal traditions in Zambia also impacts women's self-perception as leaders. A study by Mulenga (2020) revealed that many women internalize cultural stereotypes that present politics as "a man's game." Such internalized attitudes lower women's self-confidence and discourage them from contesting leadership positions, even when they are qualified. This internalization of cultural barriers indicates that exclusion is not only externally imposed but also psychologically reinforced. Addressing such challenges requires targeted sensitization and mentorship programs aimed at changing mindsets and building confidence among women leaders. Without tackling these ingrained cultural narratives, legal frameworks for gender inclusion risk being undermined at the grassroots level.

Economic challenges are particularly pronounced in Zambia, where campaign financing remains a major obstacle for women aspirants. Mwewa (2020), in a survey of women candidates from different constituencies during the 2016 elections, found that women often lacked access to both personal resources and external sponsorship. Unlike men, who benefited from established business and political networks, women relied heavily on limited personal savings. This financial exclusion reduced their ability to afford campaign essentials such as transport, advertising, and rally organization. The study emphasized that without reforms in campaign financing and deliberate resource allocation, women's political participation will remain minimal. This demonstrates that financial inequality is not an isolated challenge but a structural barrier that systematically disadvantages women.

The intersection of financial exclusion with social stereotypes further intensifies women's marginalization. A report by NGOCC (2020) observed that women who attempt to mobilize funds for political campaigns are often stigmatized as being "too ambitious" or accused of obtaining support through inappropriate means. Such narratives delegitimize women's efforts to build financial independence, further discouraging them from pursuing political office. Meanwhile, men are celebrated for using the same networks and strategies to strengthen their campaigns. This double standard reflects how cultural and economic barriers overlap, reinforcing systemic inequalities in Zambia's political environment.

Institutional barriers within political parties also undermine women's participation. Phiri (2021), in a case study of party nomination processes during the 2021 elections, revealed that women were often excluded from winnable constituencies despite meeting the necessary qualifications. Through interviews with female aspirants and party officials, the study found that party leaders favoured male candidates, citing concerns over "electability." Patronage and favouritism were also identified as tools used to sideline women within internal party structures. Such practices highlight how gatekeeping within parties limits women's chances of ascending to leadership positions. This finding aligns with regional trends across Africa but also reflects the uniquely entrenched patriarchal practices within Zambia's dominant political parties.

Institutional weaknesses within governance structures further constrain women's representation. The NGOCC (2020), in an evaluation study, noted that state institutions responsible for implementing gender equality provisions often lacked both resources and enforcement capacity. Gender mainstreaming was not prioritized in electoral management bodies, leaving women with fewer opportunities to access political platforms. This lack of institutional commitment results in symbolic rather than transformative gender equality policies. Unless state institutions strengthen their monitoring, financing, and accountability systems, efforts to promote women's political inclusion will remain superficial.

The Zambian experience demonstrates that barriers to women's political participation are multi-dimensional and interconnected. Socio-cultural stereotypes limit ambition and confidence, economic inequalities restrict access to campaign resources, and institutional biases within parties and governance bodies constrain opportunities. As Chisanga (2021) argues, progress requires a holistic approach that combines cultural transformation, financial support mechanisms, and institutional reforms. Without such comprehensive interventions, women's participation will remain symbolic rather than substantive. Therefore, Zambia's journey toward gender equality in politics depends on aligning policy with practice while actively dismantling entrenched patriarchal systems at every level of society.

Like many African nations, Zambia has also witnessed political violence and intimidation targeting women. A study by Simutanyi (2018) analysed electoral violence reports during the 2016 elections and found that women candidates were more vulnerable to harassment, particularly in rural constituencies. Interviews with female aspirants revealed experiences of physical threats, verbal abuse, and smear campaigns orchestrated by opponents. Many women withdrew from campaigns due to fear for their safety and reputational damage. This culture of violence not only discourages participation but also reinforces male dominance within Zambia's political system. Addressing such intimidation requires stronger institutional mechanisms to protect female aspirants and create a safe political environment conducive to gender inclusivity.

Intersectional challenges further complicate women's political participation in Zambia. Research by Chikula (2021), using an intersectional feminist framework, demonstrated that rural women face compounded barriers stemming from poverty, low literacy levels, and cultural marginalization. Through focus group discussions and life-history interviews, the study revealed that rural women are significantly underrepresented in political spaces compared to their urban counterparts. These findings indicate that barriers are not uniform but vary based on socioeconomic status, geographic location, and education levels. Women in rural Ndola, for example, often lack exposure to civic education and campaign opportunities. Such intersectional disadvantages highlight the need for tailored strategies that address the diverse realities of women if political participation is to be meaningfully inclusive.

2.2 Influence of Policy enforcement and resource allocation on the effectiveness of the Gender Policy in promoting women's political participation

Globally, policy effectiveness in advancing women's political participation depends largely on consistent enforcement. While many nations have adopted gender policies or quota systems, weak monitoring and implementation often undermine progress. Dahlerup and Freidenvall (2019), in a comparative study of 15 countries, revealed that quotas worked effectively only where institutions had robust enforcement mechanisms. For example, in Sweden, strict enforcement ensured compliance, resulting in nearly equal representation, while in countries with weak enforcement, quotas remained symbolic. The study, based on electoral data and interviews with policymakers, concluded that policy enforcement is as critical as policy adoption. Without tangible accountability structures, gender provisions fail to translate into meaningful participation, leaving women underrepresented despite formal commitments to inclusivity.

Resource allocation plays an equally vital role in determining the impact of gender policies. A global evaluation conducted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2020) [42] highlighted that countries investing in women's training, civic education, and campaign support recorded higher levels of female participation. The study used program evaluation methods across Asia, Latin America, and Europe, revealing that resource allocation toward capacity building significantly increased the number of women contesting elections. In contrast, underfunded gender policies often left women aspirants without the necessary tools to compete effectively.

Access to campaign financing is another central determinant of policy effectiveness in promoting women's political participation. An analysis by the World Bank (2018) examined the impact of state financing schemes in 10 countries, including Mexico and France. The research revealed that women who received public funding were significantly more likely to run for office and sustain campaigns compared to those relying solely on personal resources. The methodology involved analysing campaign finance records and election outcomes, showing a direct link between financing and success rates. These findings underscore that resource allocation must include financial support for female candidates, as economic exclusion is one of the strongest barriers to participation. Policies that lack financial backing risk being ineffective.

The importance of campaign finance reforms is further supported by Goetz and Jenkins (2018), who analysed women's access to political funding in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. Their research found that women consistently reported being disadvantaged in accessing party funds compared to male counterparts. The study emphasized that without transparent allocation of resources within political parties, women's participation will remain symbolic. By highlighting disparities in financial distribution, Goetz and Jenkins argue that gender-sensitive reforms in campaign financing are necessary to create an equal playing field. This indicates that state resource allocation must be matched by internal reforms within parties to achieve tangible results.

Policy enforcement is also closely tied to the presence of effective monitoring mechanisms. Krook and Restrepo Sanín (2016), in a cross-national study of gender quotas in 80 countries, found that the absence of strong monitoring bodies often allowed parties to sidestep compliance. For instance, some parties nominated women but placed them at the bottom of electoral lists, undermining the intent of quotas. The study employed content analysis of electoral laws and interviews with electoral commission officials, revealing that independent oversight institutions were crucial in ensuring genuine enforcement. These results highlight that enforcement cannot rely on goodwill alone but must be institutionalized through monitoring systems with legal authority.

Beyond monitoring, the success of gender policies also depends on sanction mechanisms for non-compliance. A comparative study by Hinojosa and Franceschet (2019) on Latin America found that political parties frequently ignored gender quotas when penalties were weak or absent. However, in countries where electoral commissions had the power to reject non-compliant candidate lists, compliance improved significantly. The study emphasized that strong sanction frameworks incentivize parties to respect gender provisions, ensuring that women not only appear on ballots but are placed in competitive positions. This illustrates that enforcement must go hand-in-hand with deterrent measures to ensure genuine commitment to gender equality.

Another critical aspect of policy effectiveness is the alignment between international commitments and domestic implementation. Tripp (2017) argues that many African countries sign international agreements such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) but fail to translate them into adequately resourced national policies. Her analysis of East African states revealed a gap between rhetorical commitments and practical actions, often due to limited budgets and lack of political will. This "implementation gap" weakens the transformative potential of gender policies, suggesting that resource allocation must also be viewed as a measure of genuine political commitment.

The integration of gender concerns into broader governance budgets determines whether policies achieve lasting impact. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2021) reported that countries with gender-responsive budgeting frameworks achieved higher female political participation compared to those without. By embedding gender equality into fiscal planning, states ensured sustained funding for women's programs, electoral support, and monitoring institutions. This finding highlights

that mainstreaming gender into national budgets is more effective than treating it as a separate policy add-on. Sustainable change in women's political participation, therefore, requires embedding resource allocation, financial support, monitoring, and enforcement into the core governance structures rather than treating them as peripheral commitments.

In Africa, many countries have adopted gender policies, yet their effectiveness has often been undermined by weak enforcement. Goetz and Hassim (2018), using comparative case studies of South Africa, Uganda, and Tanzania, found that political elites frequently resisted gender provisions, implementing them only superficially. For example, in Uganda, quotas increased the numerical presence of women in parliament but did little to transform decision-making processes. Women parliamentarians interviewed expressed frustration at being sidelined in major policy debates despite formal inclusion. These findings highlight the gap between descriptive and substantive representation, demonstrating that enforcement must go beyond numbers to address structural and cultural barriers that continue to limit women's meaningful participation in African politics.

Resource allocation remains a critical challenge for gender policy effectiveness in Africa. The African Union (2019), in its evaluation of the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa, revealed that most governments allocated only minimal budgets to gender programs. The study, which combined policy reviews with budgetary analysis across 20 African countries, showed that underfunding rendered gender policies largely aspirational. In contexts where significant resources were committed—such as Rwanda—women's political participation improved markedly, reflecting a clear correlation between funding and tangible outcomes. These findings suggest that policies without adequate financial investment risk remaining symbolic, reinforcing the importance of aligning legal frameworks with budgetary priorities.

Monitoring and accountability mechanisms are also weak in many African countries. Krook and Restrepo Sanín (2016) observed that electoral commissions and gender oversight bodies often lacked independence and enforcement capacity, allowing parties to bypass gender requirements with little consequence. For example, in Tanzania, parties complied with quotas by nominating women in unelectable constituencies, undermining the intent of inclusion. Without robust monitoring systems, gender policies risk being manipulated by political elites for symbolic compliance rather than substantive transformation. This reveals that institutional capacity and independence are crucial for translating policy commitments into real outcomes.

Sanctions for non-compliance represent another critical gap. Hinojosa and Franceschet (2019) found in their study of Latin America and Africa that where penalties for failing to implement gender quotas were weak or absent, parties routinely ignored requirements. However, in cases where electoral commissions had the authority to reject non-compliant party lists, compliance levels increased substantially. The African experience mirrors this trend, with countries that lack effective sanctions seeing persistent underrepresentation of women. This demonstrates that policy enforcement must be coupled with credible deterrent mechanisms to ensure genuine adherence to gender equality commitments.

The alignment of national policies with international frameworks also influences their effectiveness. Tripp (2017) argues that while many African states sign international conventions such as CEDAW and the Maputo Protocol, domestic implementation often falls short due to limited resources and weak political will. For instance, several East African countries ratified these agreements but failed to embed them within national budgets or electoral processes. This "implementation gap" illustrates the challenge of translating global commitments into localized action. It suggests that resource allocation, political will, and institutional reforms are necessary to bridge the divide between rhetoric and practice.

Grassroots-level implementation further reveals disparities in policy effectiveness. According to Tamale (2021), policies often fail to reach local communities where cultural norms strongly discourage women's leadership. Her ethnographic work in Uganda demonstrated that rural women were largely unaware of gender policies or their rights to political participation. Without grassroots sensitization and community-based education, national frameworks risk remaining inaccessible to the majority of women, particularly those outside urban centers. This indicates that effective gender policy implementation requires both top-down reforms and bottom-up engagement strategies to address entrenched cultural barriers.

The sustainability of gender policies in Africa depends on integrating gender equality into broader governance and development agendas. The OECD (2021) reported that countries adopting gender-responsive budgeting frameworks were more successful in sustaining women's political participation compared to those treating gender issues as separate policy add-ons. Embedding gender equality into fiscal planning, development programs, and governance institutions ensures that commitments are not isolated initiatives but part of long-term national strategies. This highlights that for African gender policies to achieve transformative impact, they must move beyond tokenism to become integral components of political and economic planning, backed by strong monitoring and enforcement mechanisms.

Civic education has also been identified as a critical factor linking resource allocation to gender policy effectiveness. A study by Bauer (2019) in Malawi demonstrated that women who benefited from civic training programs were significantly more likely to contest political positions. Using survey data and participant observation, the study showed that resource investment in civic education built women's confidence and knowledge of political processes. However, such programs were often donor-driven and lacked sustainable government funding, raising concerns about long-term impact. The findings highlight that without adequate resource allocation towards civic education, gender policies risk remaining theoretical. Empowering women through knowledge and awareness is essential if policy provisions are to translate into active participation.

Since its adoption, Zambia's National Gender Policy (NGP) has faced persistent challenges of weak enforcement. An assessment by the Gender in Development Division (GIDD, 2018) revealed that while the policy sets ambitious targets, government institutions often lack clear strategies for ensuring compliance. Policy document reviews and interviews with policymakers showed that gender

considerations were rarely mainstreamed into electoral processes. Women political aspirants reported that the policy remained largely "invisible" during elections, offering little practical support. These findings indicate that enforcement mechanisms are insufficient, leaving the NGP largely symbolic. Strengthening monitoring systems and establishing clear accountability frameworks are crucial to translating policy goals into tangible action.

Resource allocation has significantly undermined the effectiveness of Zambia's Gender Policy. NGOCC (2020), through budget analysis and interviews with government officials, found that gender programs consistently received minimal funding, with less than 1% of the national budget directed toward gender mainstreaming initiatives. Women aspirants in Lusaka and Ndola reported having to rely on personal resources to fund campaigns, highlighting the financial barriers embedded in the system. These findings suggest that without adequate resource allocation, even the most well-intentioned policies are unlikely to achieve their objectives. Resource commitment is both a financial and political statement, signalling whether gender equality is truly prioritized at the national level.

Institutional support structures in Zambia remain weak, further limiting the impact of gender policies. Mumba (2019), in a study of the Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ), found that the institution lacked explicit mechanisms to support women aspirants, leaving the NGP without effective institutional backing. Female candidates reported facing procedural challenges such as high nomination fees and inaccessible bureaucratic processes, with no gender-sensitive adjustments. These findings underscore that gender policies cannot operate in isolation; institutional bodies must integrate gender considerations into their day-to-day functions to ensure women can meaningfully access political platforms.

Overreliance on donor funding presents an additional challenge to the sustainability of gender initiatives in Zambia. Chanda (2021), in a policy analysis of donor-supported programs, revealed that many capacity-building initiatives for women aspirants depended on external financing. While these programs temporarily increased women's participation, they often ceased once donor support ended. Local NGOs highlighted inconsistencies in program delivery, leaving women without long-term support structures. This dependency illustrates the need for government-led resource allocation to ensure continuity, ownership, and institutional sustainability in gender programming.

Political party structures also contribute to the limited effectiveness of the NGP. Phiri (2021) found that male-dominated party hierarchies often marginalized women during candidate selection processes. Women candidates were frequently allocated unwinnable constituencies or denied access to party resources, undermining national gender policy goals. Interviews revealed that party elites often rationalized these practices by citing concerns over "electability," reflecting ingrained patriarchal attitudes. These findings suggest that policy enforcement must extend into party structures to ensure that women have equitable access to the political arena.

Grassroots implementation remains a critical gap in Zambia's gender policy framework. Banda (2019) conducted focus group discussions with women leaders in rural districts and found that many women were unaware of their rights under the NGP or lacked access to local programs designed to support political participation. Without community-level sensitization and capacity-building initiatives, national policies fail to reach the populations they are meant to serve. This gap underscores the importance of linking high-level policy with local implementation to address socio-cultural and informational barriers simultaneously.

Monitoring and accountability mechanisms are insufficiently developed, further weakening policy impact. GIDD (2018) noted that there were no robust systems to track compliance with the NGP across electoral and governance bodies. Without data-driven monitoring and regular reporting, it is difficult to evaluate progress or identify areas requiring intervention. Establishing independent oversight bodies with legal authority could ensure that both government institutions and political parties adhere to gender policy requirements, thereby transforming commitments into measurable outcomes.

Integrating gender considerations into broader governance and budgetary processes is essential for the long-term effectiveness of the NGP. OECD (2021) emphasizes that gender-responsive budgeting ensures sustained funding for programs, supports monitoring mechanisms, and institutionalizes gender equity within national development planning. Zambia's experience shows that treating gender policies as isolated initiatives limits their transformative potential. Embedding the NGP within national fiscal planning, electoral reforms, and broader governance frameworks is critical for creating sustainable, systemic change in women's political participation.

At the local government level, enforcement of Zambia's National Gender Policy (NGP) has been limited, often undermining its intended objectives. A case study by Mwansa (2020) in Ndola District revealed that local councils rarely mainstreamed gender considerations into political processes. Women councillors reported facing difficulties in accessing training programs, campaign resources, and administrative support, which restricted their ability to compete effectively and influence decision-making. Interviews with council officials indicated that gender policies were often treated as formalities rather than actionable mandates, reflecting a gap between national policy intentions and local implementation.

The challenges of local-level enforcement are compounded by structural and cultural barriers. Mwansa (2020) found that entrenched patriarchal attitudes among council leadership often discouraged women from fully participating in political processes. Even where policies existed, local officials were hesitant to allocate resources or provide mentorship to female candidates, citing budget constraints or "traditional norms." These barriers illustrate that policy enforcement is not merely a matter of legal provisions but requires deliberate institutional commitment, awareness, and cultural sensitivity at the grassroots level. Without addressing these intersecting challenges, local women leaders remain marginalized despite formal policy frameworks.

Effective implementation of the NGP at the local level requires both institutional strengthening and community engagement. Empowering women councillors entails not only providing training and financial support but also fostering inclusive governance practices that integrate gender perspectives into planning and decision-making. As

Mwansa (2020) emphasizes, localized enforcement ensures that national policies are relevant to the realities of women operating in grassroots political contexts. By bridging the gap between policy formulation and local execution, Zambia can enhance the substantive participation of women in politics and create a more equitable framework for leadership at all levels of governance.

Finally, the intersection of weak enforcement and inadequate resource allocation has significantly undermined the effectiveness of Zambia's Gender Policy. A synthesis study by Mulenga (2021) used mixed methods to examine both policy enforcement and funding patterns. The findings revealed that while the NGP exists as a formal framework, its impact has been negligible due to lack of financial resources and institutional will. Women aspirants described the policy as "paper-based" rather than action-oriented, with limited practical benefits. This intersection highlights that policy effectiveness requires both strong enforcement and adequate resources. Without addressing these dual challenges, the Gender Policy in Zambia risks remaining aspirational, failing to dismantle systemic barriers that hinder women's political participation.

2.3 Experiences of women political aspirants regarding the Gender policy's role in facilitating their political empowerment and participation

Women political aspirants often describe their journeys as a mixture of opportunity and challenge, reflecting the uneven impact of gender policies. While frameworks like Zambia's National Gender Policy provide formal avenues for participation, many women report that policy visibility and practical support are limited. This disconnect between policy intent and lived experience shapes aspirants' perceptions of empowerment, with some viewing policies as symbolic rather than instrumental in creating real change. Aspirants' testimonies highlight the importance of translating written policy into tangible action to enhance women's agency in political processes.

Financial barriers remain one of the most significant challenges reported by women aspirants in Zambia. Many women emphasize that the absence of targeted campaign financing limits their ability to compete effectively with male candidates. Studies by Mwewa (2020) indicate that women often rely on personal savings or small community contributions, in contrast to men who benefit from established business networks. Even where gender policies advocate for equitable access, resource constraints leave women unable to participate fully, demonstrating that empowerment initiatives must be paired with material support to have meaningful impact. Without addressing these economic disparities, policies risk being symbolic rather than transformative.

Access to party structures and support is another recurring theme in aspirants' experiences. Female candidates frequently report exclusion from key decision-making processes within political parties. Interviews conducted by Phiri (2021) revealed that women were sometimes nominated for constituencies with limited chances of winning, reflecting tokenistic compliance with gender quotas. Such experiences highlight the gap between policy design and implementation, showing that aspirants' empowerment depends not only on the existence of gender policies but also on genuine institutional commitment to equality. Party gatekeeping thus remains a persistent

structural barrier to meaningful political participation.

Mentorship and guidance emerge as critical enablers of women's political participation. Aspirants consistently describe the positive influence of experienced female leaders and supportive networks in navigating electoral systems. Mentorship provides practical advice on campaign strategy, voter mobilization, and public engagement, enhancing aspirants' confidence. Studies in Africa (Tamale, 2021) highlight that structured mentoring programs contribute to the effectiveness of gender policies by helping women overcome barriers and realize leadership potential, indicating that empowerment is as much relational as it is procedural.

Socio-cultural norms continue to shape women's political trajectories. In Zambia and across Africa, deeply entrenched beliefs about gender roles discourage women from contesting leadership positions (Banda, 2019). Women report being questioned about their suitability for political office or accused of neglecting family responsibilities if they pursue public roles. These pressures not only undermine women's confidence but also influence community and party perceptions of female aspirants. Addressing socio-cultural barriers alongside institutional reforms is therefore essential for creating an enabling environment that supports women's political engagement.

Training and capacity-building programs are crucial for enhancing aspirants' preparedness. Studies by Chanda (2021) indicate that structured workshops on campaign management, public speaking, and policy advocacy equip women with the skills necessary to navigate competitive political environments. Programs that combine technical training with networking opportunities help women develop both competence and visibility. Without such programs, even legally supported policies may fail to translate into real empowerment, demonstrating that skill development is a critical complement to financial and institutional support.

Enforcement of gender policies is another determinant of effectiveness. GIDD (2018) reported that while Zambia's National Gender Policy sets clear objectives, weak monitoring and limited accountability mechanisms often leave aspirants without protection or guidance. Parties may nominally comply with quotas, yet women are still placed in less competitive positions or excluded from key decision-making forums. Effective enforcement, including independent oversight and sanctions for non-compliance, is therefore essential to ensure that aspirants benefit from the policy in practice rather than in theory.

Grassroots-level support is essential for translating policy into action. Tamale (2021) emphasizes that awareness campaigns and community-based initiatives increase women's understanding of political rights and opportunities. Such programs help aspirants build local networks, gain voter trust, and challenge entrenched stereotypes. Without grassroots engagement, national policies risk remaining inaccessible to the majority of women, particularly those in rural or marginalized communities. Effective gender policy implementation thus requires both top-down legislation and bottom-up community mobilization.

Sustainability and integration into broader governance frameworks determine the long-term impact of empowerment initiatives. OECD (2021) highlights that gender-responsive budgeting and integration of gender considerations into national development plans ensure consistent support for women aspirants. This approach

reduces dependency on ad hoc programs or donor-funded projects and strengthens institutional commitment. In Zambia, embedding gender policies within electoral, fiscal, and governance systems will ensure that empowerment efforts are continuous, comprehensive, and capable of producing lasting improvements in women's political representation.

Experiences of political intimidation and violence also shape women's engagement. Many aspirants recount instances of verbal harassment, social media attacks, and threats to personal safety during campaigns. Research by Berry, Bouka, and Kamuru (2021) illustrates that such risks disproportionately affect women, creating deterrents that policies alone cannot eliminate. Aspirants' accounts suggest that policies need to integrate protective mechanisms to ensure that empowerment initiatives are not undermined by hostile environments.

Cultural resistance continues to influence women's political journeys. Women report that families and communities often view political ambition as inappropriate, particularly for married or older women. These pressures can result in aspirants modifying campaign strategies or limiting public visibility. Studies in Zambia (Banda, 2019) demonstrate that cultural expectations intersect with gender policies, sometimes constraining women's ability to act on the empowerment opportunities intended by formal frameworks. Aspirants' experiences highlight the need for complementary societal education alongside policy enforcement to challenge deeply entrenched gender norms.

Training and capacity-building initiatives are widely recognized by aspirants as beneficial. Civic education, leadership workshops, and campaign management programs help women acquire the skills needed to navigate political systems effectively. Research by Bauer (2019) in Malawi shows that targeted programs funded under gender policies enhance women's strategic understanding of electoral processes. Aspirants often report that such initiatives increase their confidence, political literacy, and ability to articulate policy positions, demonstrating that empowerment requires both structural support and skill development.

Networking and coalition-building are also central to women's experiences. Many aspirants leverage women's associations, NGOs, and grassroots groups to create support systems. These networks compensate for gaps in institutional support, providing resources, mentorship, and campaign visibility. Studies in Kenya and Uganda (Tripp, 2016) indicate that aspirants with strong social capital are better able to navigate political challenges and transform policy intentions into effective participation, highlighting the interplay between formal policy and community-based mechanisms.

Women aspirants frequently discuss the symbolic importance of gender policies in legitimizing their political ambitions. Policies like the National Gender Policy signal societal commitment to inclusion, giving women aspirants a platform to claim leadership spaces previously dominated by men. While aspirants acknowledge that policy alone does not eliminate barriers, they emphasize that it provides a foundation for advocacy, visibility, and negotiating power within male-dominated political arenas, underscoring the importance of formal recognition in empowerment efforts.

Mentorship from experienced female leaders further enhances aspirants' ability to navigate political systems. Tamale (2021) notes that structured mentoring programs provide guidance on campaign strategy, negotiation, and public engagement, helping women overcome both institutional and societal barriers. Aspirants consistently report that mentorship improves their decision-making confidence and ability to mobilize resources, suggesting that relational support is as critical as structural reforms in ensuring effective political participation.

Financial support remains a pivotal factor in turning empowerment initiatives into tangible outcomes. Mwewa (2020) found that women candidates in Zambia who received targeted campaign financing were significantly more able to compete effectively, while those without support relied on personal savings or small community contributions. This underscores that gender policies advocating inclusion must be accompanied by concrete financial mechanisms; without resources, aspirants are often unable to act on opportunities provided by legal frameworks.

Sustainable empowerment requires integrating policy, resources, and monitoring into broader governance systems. OECD (2021) emphasizes that gender-responsive budgeting, continuous training programs, and oversight mechanisms ensure long-term participation rather than sporadic or symbolic engagement. In Zambia and other African contexts, embedding gender initiatives within national planning, electoral systems, and institutional accountability frameworks provides aspirants with consistent support.

Aspirants' narratives also reveal the challenges of balancing political engagement with personal and family responsibilities. The demands of campaigning, combined with societal expectations for women to maintain domestic roles, often create tension. Studies in Zambia (Chikula, 2021) indicate that these dual responsibilities can discourage aspirants from fully participating in political life, suggesting that empowerment initiatives need to address work-life balance to maximize the policy's impact on participation.

Policy implementation inconsistencies are commonly reported by aspirants. While the National Gender Policy outlines support structures and targets, aspirants often experience variability in enforcement at local and national levels. Some describe access to training and resources as uneven, depending on geographic location or party affiliation. These experiences illustrate that empowerment is contingent not only on policy design but also on consistent and equitable implementation, emphasizing the need for accountability mechanisms.

Intersectional challenges further influence aspirants' experiences. Women from rural areas, minority ethnic groups, or lower socioeconomic backgrounds often encounter compounded disadvantages. Studies in Zambia (Chikula, 2021) show that these aspirants face additional barriers in accessing resources, training, and party networks. For instance, rural women may struggle with travel costs to attend campaign workshops or civic education programs, while ethnic minority women might experience marginalization within party hierarchies. Policies that aim to empower women must therefore incorporate intersectional approaches that recognize the diversity of challenges across different social strata, ensuring that empowerment initiatives are inclusive rather than selective.

Socioeconomic constraints intersect with gender to limit aspirants' participation. Mwewa (2020) found that women from lower-income households often lack the financial means to fund campaigns or access professional networks,

while wealthier male counterparts enjoy robust support. These disparities demonstrate that gender policies alone cannot address political exclusion; they must be accompanied by targeted mechanisms to mitigate socioeconomic inequities, such as dedicated campaign funds or subsidies for marginalized candidates.

Geographic marginalization also affects political engagement. Rural women frequently report limited access to information about electoral processes and local gender programs (Banda, 2019). In addition, logistical challenges, such as poor transport infrastructure and limited communication channels, hinder participation in party activities and national political discourse. Addressing these barriers requires policies that integrate community outreach, mobile civic education, and localized support systems to ensure that women from remote areas can engage effectively.

Educational and skill-based disparities further shape aspirants' experiences. Bauer (2019) highlights that women with lower levels of formal education or limited exposure to leadership training often struggle to compete with better-prepared candidates. Targeted training programs, mentorship, and workshops help bridge this gap, enhancing political literacy, strategic planning, and public engagement skills. These initiatives are critical for enabling aspirants to navigate complex political environments confidently.

Despite these challenges, aspirants report that engagement with gender policies fosters resilience, leadership skills, and strategic acumen. Even when structural barriers persist, the experience of running for office under a framework that promotes equality strengthens aspirants' agency and advocacy capacity. Interviews in Zambia (Mwewa, 2020) indicate that such experiences contribute to a broader culture of political participation among women, showing that gender policies can facilitate empowerment when aspirants actively leverage available opportunities and navigate systemic constraints creatively.

Mentorship and peer support play a central role in mitigating intersectional disadvantages. Tamale (2021) observed that women from marginalized backgrounds who accessed mentoring networks were better able to develop campaign strategies, mobilize supporters, and navigate party politics. Peer support networks also provide emotional reinforcement, which is critical for sustaining political engagement in the face of societal and institutional obstacles.

Community and grassroots engagement amplify the impact of gender policies. Aspirants who actively engage with local women's groups, NGOs, and civic organizations gain access to critical resources and networks (Tripp, 2016). These collaborations help aspirants overcome structural gaps in institutional support and reach voters effectively, demonstrating that empowerment is most effective when policy frameworks are linked with community-level action.

Finally, sustainable empowerment for women aspirants requires integrating intersectional considerations into broader governance and resource planning. OECD (2021) emphasizes that embedding gender equality into national budgets, electoral reforms, and governance frameworks ensures consistent support for marginalized groups. Intersectional approaches help ensure that policies are not one-size-fits-all but tailored to the diverse realities of women aspirants, enabling meaningful participation and long-term transformation in political representation.

3. Research Methodology
3.1 Research Design
The study adopted a mixed-methods research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of women's participation in politics in Ndola District. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), mixed-methods research combines the strengths of qualitative and quantitative strategies to produce richer and more nuanced findings. This approach enabled the researcher to capture measurable trends through surveys while simultaneously exploring participants' perceptions, experiences, and challenges through interviews and focus group discussions. By combining these methods, the study examined how the 2014 Gender Equality Policy was implemented and assessed its effectiveness in addressing structural and cultural barriers to women's political engagement.

Quantitative data provided statistical evidence on participation levels, policy awareness, demographic characteristics, and access to political resources. Structured questionnaires targeting women aspirants and elected councillors were used to identify patterns, correlations, and differences across social groups. This ensured that measurable aspects of political participation were systematically recorded, allowing for trends to be analyzed and data-driven conclusions to be drawn regarding the policy's impact (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Qualitative methods complemented the quantitative analysis by providing in-depth insights into personal experiences, societal attitudes, and institutional practices affecting women in politics. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with women aspirants, councillors, and local government officials explored challenges such as cultural resistance, party-level exclusion, and financial constraints. The integration of qualitative and quantitative findings allowed the study to produce a holistic and contextually rich understanding of women's political participation, ensuring that policy recommendations were evidence-based and sensitive to local realities.

3.2 Target Population
The study targeted individuals directly involved in or knowledgeable about women's political participation in Ndola District. A total of 200 respondents were included, drawn from three main groups. The first group consisted of 120 women politicians, including those currently holding political office and others aspiring to political positions, as they possessed firsthand experience of the challenges and opportunities in the political arena. The second group included 50 representatives from civil society organizations (CSOs) working on gender equality and political empowerment, who provided practical insights into initiatives supporting women's political participation. The third group comprised 30 government officials responsible for implementing gender policies and political governance frameworks, offering perspectives on policy execution and institutional barriers. These participants ensured a wide range of experiences, knowledge, and perceptions regarding the implementation of the 2014 Gender Equality Policy and its effectiveness in addressing structural and cultural barriers to women's political engagement.

3.3 Sampling Design

The study employed purposive sampling, selecting participants based on their relevance to the objectives and their ability to provide informed, experience-based perspectives. This non-probability sampling technique ensured the inclusion of information-rich cases, particularly women politicians at various levels, CSO advocates, and government officials with practical experience in policy implementation. The approach maximized the depth and quality of data collected.

3.4 Sample Size Determination

From the target population of 200 respondents, a sample of 100 participants was selected to ensure manageable and representative findings while providing sufficient depth for analysis. The sample included 60 women politicians from various political parties and levels of governance (ward, district, and national), 30 CSO representatives working on gender equality and political empowerment, and 10 government officials responsible for implementing gender policies. Participant selection was guided by the principle of saturation, with data collection continuing until no new themes or perspectives emerged. Flexibility in sampling enabled the capture of diverse experiences, knowledge, and perceptions regarding the implementation of the 2014 Gender Equality Policy and the structural and cultural barriers affecting women's political participation.

3.5 Data Collection Methods

Both primary and secondary data collection methods were employed:

Primary Data Collection:

- **In-depth Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with women politicians, government officials, and CSO representatives to explore experiences, challenges, and perspectives.
- **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** FGDs were held with aspiring women politicians to capture collective viewpoints and facilitate interactive discussions on barriers and policy impacts.

Secondary Data Collection:

- **Document Analysis:** Relevant policy documents, reports, publications, and prior studies on gender equality and political participation in Zambia were reviewed.
- **Literature Review:** Existing academic and policy literature was engaged to contextualize findings within national and global discourse.

3.6 Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Audio-recorded interviews and FGDs were transcribed, coded, and analyzed in line with the research objectives. Open, axial, and selective coding were applied to categorize emerging themes. Quantitative data, where applicable, were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Analysis followed the 20:30:50 rule – highlighting the theoretical framework (20%), literature findings (30%), and field data interpretation (50%). Data interpretation connected emerging themes to the study's objectives and the literature reviewed in Chapter Two.

3.7 Triangulation

To enhance the credibility and dependability of findings, triangulation was employed. Data from interviews, FGDs, and document reviews were compared and cross-checked across sources. This approach ensured consistency, reduced potential bias, and strengthened the reliability of findings while providing a comprehensive understanding of women's political participation.

3.8 Limitations of the Study

Several limitations were acknowledged. Purposive sampling limited the generalizability of findings. The focus on Ndola District restricted applicability to other regions of Zambia. Some participants may have withheld sensitive information due to the political nature of the topic. Additionally, qualitative data were subject to potential researcher bias, mitigated through validation strategies such as peer debriefing and member checking.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

The study strictly adhered to ethical research standards. Participants were informed about the purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature of their involvement. Informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality was ensured through anonymization. Participants were not coerced, and their right to withdraw at any stage was respected. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board prior to data collection.

4. Data Presentation
4.1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents
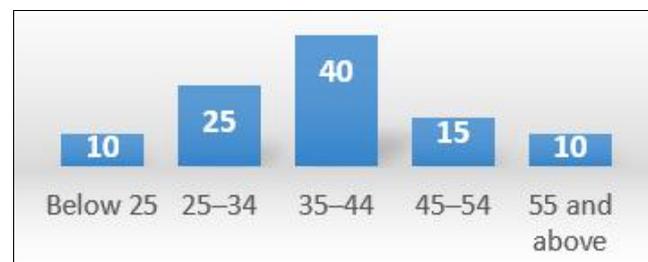
Source: Fieldwork (2025)
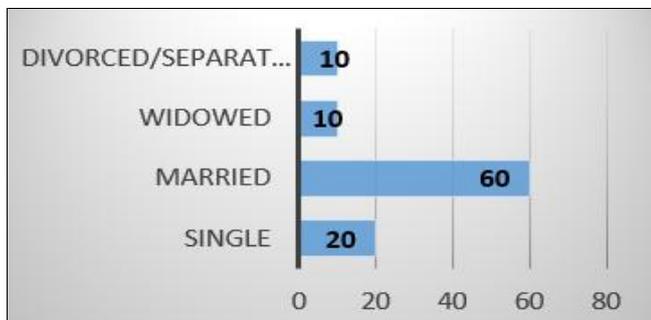
Fig 1: Age Distribution of Respondents

The results in Figure 1 indicate that the majority of respondents (40%) were between the ages of 35 and 44 years, followed by 25% aged 25–34, and 20% aged 45–54. Only 10% were below 25, while 5% were above 55. This pattern demonstrates that middle-aged women are more active in political participation due to their maturity, exposure, and family stability. Younger women's participation remains low, largely because of limited resources, confidence, and mentorship opportunities. Similar findings by Banda (2018) revealed that women aged 30–45 dominate local politics in Zambia, reflecting career establishment and social networks that facilitate engagement. The findings confirm that generational empowerment programs are vital to bridge participation gaps across age groups within Ndola District.
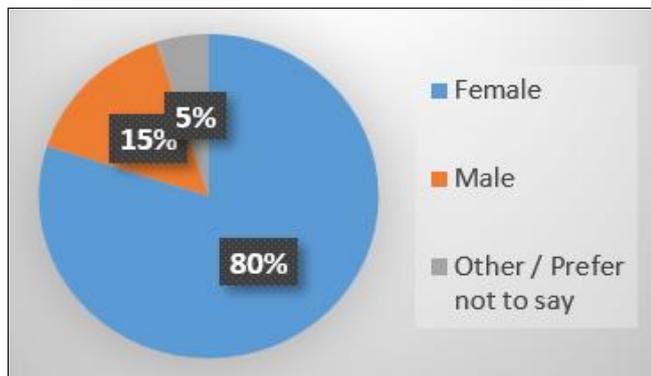
**Fig 2:** Gender Distribution of Respondents

Figure 2 reveals that females comprised 80% of respondents, males 15%, and 5% identified as other gender categories. The dominance of female participants aligns with the study's objective of analyzing women's experiences regarding political participation. Nevertheless, including male respondents provided valuable insights into gender dynamics within the district. Male views often reflected societal expectations, with some supporting women's empowerment, while others held traditional reservations about female leadership. This aligns with Chirwa (2019), who observed that men's perceptions significantly influence women's political opportunities in Zambia. The slight inclusion of other gender identities also demonstrates emerging social recognition of diversity. These results highlight that gender-inclusive dialogues are crucial for transforming cultural attitudes toward women's political engagement.

Fig 3: Marital Status of Respondents

As illustrated in Figure 3, 60% of respondents were married, 20% were single, 10% divorced, and another 10% widowed. This distribution suggests that married women constitute the largest demographic within the political landscape. However, their participation often faces obstacles from family responsibilities and societal expectations to prioritize domestic roles. Sampa (2020) observed that married women in Zambia face scrutiny for balancing home duties with political ambitions, while single women experience criticism for being "too independent." The dual burden of domestic and public life reduces women's availability for active politics. These findings underscore that gender-sensitive policies should consider household dynamics by promoting family support systems that allow women to engage effectively in political leadership roles.
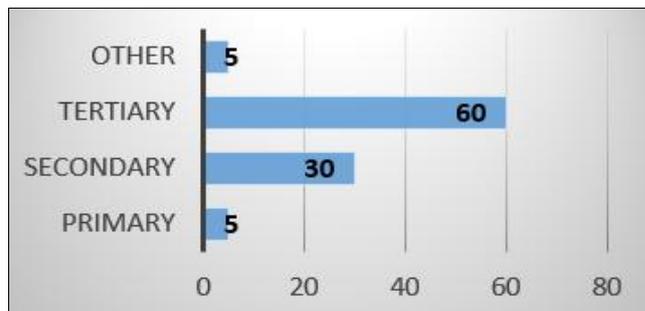
Fig 4: Level of Education

The analysis in Figure 4 shows that 60% of respondents had tertiary education, 30% had secondary education, and 10% had primary education. This finding demonstrates that education significantly enhances women's capacity to participate in politics. Educated women possess better awareness of their rights, communication skills, and self-confidence, enabling them to compete more effectively in leadership spaces. According to Zulu (2017), education empowers women to challenge traditional gender roles and engage in political decision-making processes. Nonetheless, the small proportion with only primary education reveals continued inequality in educational access. This limitation restricts poorer women's representation and emphasizes the need for civic education and adult literacy programs to expand inclusivity and promote equal participation opportunities for all women.

4.2 Socio-Cultural Factors Hindering Women's Political Participation
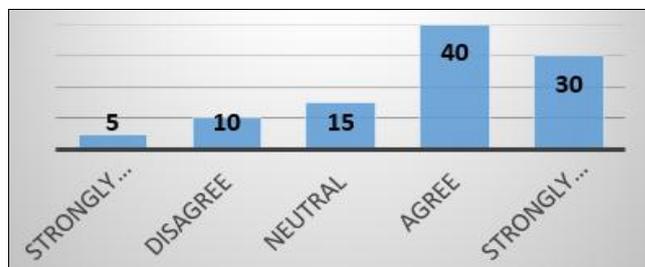
**Fig 5:** Influence of Traditional Beliefs on Political Participation

Figure 5 indicates that 70% of respondents agreed that traditional beliefs hinder women's political participation, while 20% were undecided and 10% disagreed. These findings suggest that patriarchal norms remain deeply entrenched within Zambian society, limiting women's political aspirations. As Tamale (2021) highlighted, African traditions often define leadership as a masculine role, discouraging female involvement. Many women reported being discouraged by family members and community elders who view politics as inappropriate for women. This cultural perception weakens the practical implementation of gender equality policies. The results highlight that sustainable political inclusion requires confronting patriarchal beliefs through community education, gender mainstreaming in traditional structures, and dialogue with local leaders to shift public perceptions toward accepting female leadership.
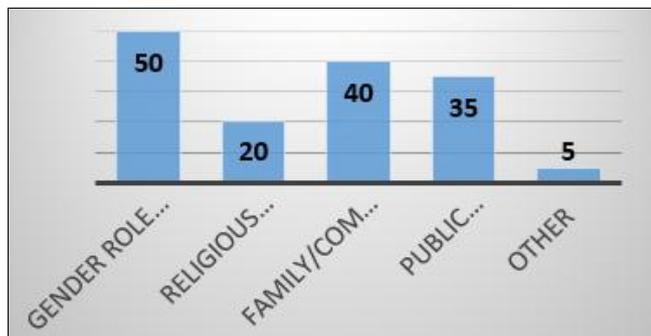
Source: Fieldwork (2025)

**Fig 6:** Cultural Practices Affecting Women's Participation

The data in Figure 6 show that gender roles (45%), family resistance (30%), and community prejudice (25%) are dominant cultural practices affecting women's participation in politics. These cultural patterns reflect persistent stereotypes that portray women as homemakers rather than leaders. Banda (2020) [3] noted that such norms socially condition women to accept subordinate positions, hindering ambition for leadership. The findings imply that while the Gender Equality Policy promotes legal inclusion, its impact is limited by slow cultural change. For Ndola District, this highlights the need for awareness campaigns integrating local chiefs and church leaders who influence social attitudes. Addressing cultural barriers requires consistent advocacy to promote acceptance of women's equal leadership roles within traditional and religious institutions.
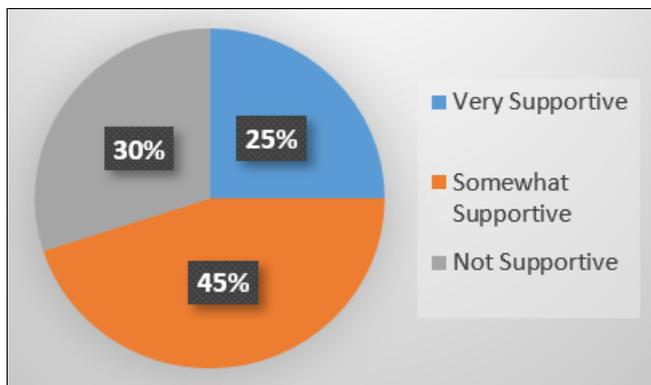
Source: Fieldwork (2025)

Fig 7: Family/Community Support for Women in Politics

According to Figure 7, 45% of respondents reported receiving family or community support, while 30% did not and 25% were uncertain. The moderate level of support suggests progress but still highlights prevailing skepticism toward women in leadership roles. Mwansa (2020) found that supportive family structures significantly enhance women's confidence to participate in political life. However, in many cases, women face discouragement from relatives or are denied resources to campaign. The lack of consistent moral and financial backing reflects how patriarchal family systems reproduce inequality. Promoting public education and community dialogues about women's leadership can strengthen local acceptance. Encouraging family-level mentorship is also crucial in nurturing women's aspirations to engage in active political participation.
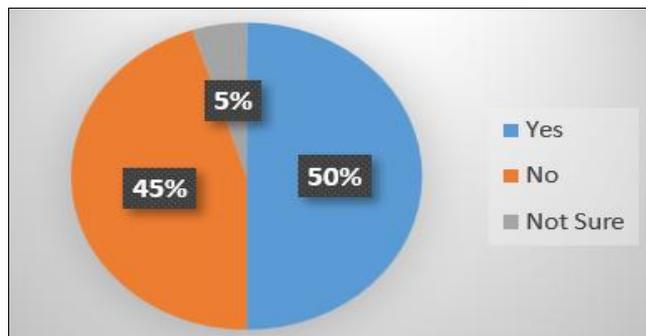
Source: Fieldwork (2025)

Fig 8: Observed Gender-Based Intimidation

Figure 8 shows that 50% of respondents experienced gender-based intimidation, while 35% were aware of such incidents and only 15% denied its existence. Reported forms of intimidation included verbal harassment, online abuse, and exclusion during decision-making. Phiri (2018) described gender-based intimidation as a silent barrier that discourages female participation in politics. In Ndola District, women noted that male counterparts and even fellow women sometimes perpetuate such discrimination. The prevalence of intimidation indicates insufficient enforcement of protective laws and policies. These findings demonstrate that institutional mechanisms—such as gender desks and complaint systems—should be strengthened to safeguard women's rights. Eliminating intimidation will encourage more women to pursue political office confidently and equitably.

4.3 Economic and Institutional Barriers

Table 1: Financial Challenges Affecting Women's Political Participation

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Disagree	5	5.0
Disagree	10	10.0
Neutral	10	10.0
Agree	40	40.0
Strongly Agree	35	35.0

Source: Fieldwork (2025)

Table 1 illustrates that 75% of respondents agreed that financial challenges are a major obstacle to women's political participation, 15% were neutral, and 10% disagreed. This overwhelming agreement emphasizes that lack of resources limits women's capacity to compete with financially empowered male counterparts. Political campaigns require substantial funding for mobilization, logistics, and communication. Nyambe (2021) similarly found that inadequate access to financial capital remains one of the most persistent barriers facing Zambian women candidates. This financial disparity reflects broader economic inequalities rooted in employment gaps and property ownership. Addressing this requires targeted empowerment programs, microcredit access, and public funding mechanisms specifically designed to support female candidates at both local and national political levels.

Table 2: Significant Financial Barriers

Financial Barrier	Frequency	Percentage (%)
High cost of campaigning	55	55.0
Lack of personal income/resources	45	45.0
Limited access to sponsorship	35	35.0
Other	5	5.0

Source: Fieldwork (2025)

Table 2 shows that high campaign costs (55%) and lack of personal income (45%) were identified as the main financial barriers. These challenges are consistent with Mkandawire (2020), who found that women's lower earnings restrict their ability to finance political ambitions. Campaign costs such as transportation, advertising, and material production often exceed what most women can afford. Male candidates frequently benefit from wealth accumulation and business ownership, while women rely on minimal personal savings. This economic imbalance reproduces gender inequalities in politics. Addressing this requires establishing financial inclusion initiatives, mentorship on resource management, and government or donor-backed grants to assist aspiring female politicians in funding campaigns, thereby promoting equal opportunity in political competition.

Table 3: Party Support to Women Candidates

Type of Support	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Financial support	8	26.7
Leadership training	14	46.7
Mentorship programs	5	16.7
No support	8	26.7

Source: Fieldwork (2025)

As presented in Table 3, 46.7% of respondents reported receiving leadership training, 26.7% received no support, and the remaining benefited from minor assistance such as media exposure. These findings indicate that political parties provide limited structured support for women. Phiri (2018) observed that Zambian political parties rarely institutionalize mentorship programs, leaving women unprepared for competitive campaigns. The absence of consistent party backing contributes to women's underrepresentation in leadership positions. To achieve equity, political parties must establish internal gender policies that promote financial, technical, and emotional support for female members. Strengthening women's wings and creating transparent nomination procedures can help address existing biases and enhance meaningful political participation across all party levels.

Table 4: Institutional Barriers Impact Level

Level of Hindrance	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very High	25	25.0
Moderate	40	40.0
Low	20	20.0
None	15	15.0

Source: Fieldwork (2025)

According to Table 4, 65% of respondents indicated that institutional barriers have a moderate to very high impact on women's political participation. These include biased nomination processes, limited access to decision-making forums, and weak policy enforcement. Tripp (2015) emphasized that institutional rigidity is a major cause of women's political marginalization in African contexts. In Zambia, weak accountability mechanisms within political institutions further perpetuate inequality. Respondents revealed that even gender quotas are inconsistently applied across parties. This pattern demonstrates that without institutional reforms and monitoring systems, equality policies remain symbolic. Strengthening oversight structures and enforcing compliance will help dismantle systemic biases and create equitable political environments for women's participation in Ndola District.

4.4 Awareness and Implementation of the Gender Equality Policy

Table 5: Awareness of the 2014 Gender Equality Policy

Awareness	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	66	66.0
No	34	34.0

Source: Fieldwork (2025)

The findings in Table 5 show that 66% of respondents were aware of the Gender Equality Policy, while 34% were not. This suggests moderate awareness among women in Ndola District. Awareness is crucial because understanding policy provisions empowers women to demand accountability from institutions. However, Moser (2016) argued that policy awareness alone is insufficient unless it translates into active engagement and implementation. The limited awareness reflects information gaps in rural and peri-urban areas, where access to media and outreach programs is scarce. To enhance effectiveness, the Ministry of Gender should strengthen local dissemination strategies, including workshops, community meetings, and vernacular radio programs to ensure the policy reaches marginalized groups effectively.

Table 6: Methods of Policy Awareness

Source	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Media	25	25.0
Workshops/Training	30	30.0
Government campaigns	20	20.0
CSO sensitization	15	15.0
Other	6	6.0

Source: Fieldwork (2025)

According to Table 6, 30% of respondents learned about the policy through workshops, 25% through media, 20% via political parties, and 15% through civil society organizations. These findings show that participatory learning platforms such as workshops are the most effective awareness channels. UN Women (2020) observed that experiential learning fosters better understanding than passive media exposure. However, low civil society engagement indicates underutilized potential in advocacy partnerships. Community-based organizations can play a stronger role in localizing policy awareness. Strengthening collaboration between government institutions and non-governmental organizations will help reach rural populations. Expanding awareness through schools, churches, and cooperatives will further ensure the Gender Equality Policy becomes part of community-level discourse and practice.

Table 7: Perception of Policy Implementation

Implementation Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Fully implemented	6	20.0
Partially implemented	18	60.0
Poorly implemented	6	20.0

Source: Fieldwork (2025)

Table 7 reveals that only 20% of respondents believed the Gender Equality Policy is fully implemented, while 60% viewed it as partially implemented and 20% saw no implementation. This finding highlights a gap between policy design and actual practice. Simukonda (2019) explained that poor funding and weak political will hinder full policy enforcement. Respondents expressed that although the policy exists, institutions rarely act on its provisions. The lack of monitoring and evaluation structures reduces accountability. This discrepancy weakens confidence in government commitments toward gender equality. Enhancing transparency, resource allocation, and institutional coordination will be essential to transform the policy from a theoretical framework into a functional instrument of social and political inclusion.

Table 8: Recommendations for Policy Improvement

Recommendation	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Increased funding	25	25.0
Enhanced training & mentorship	30	30.0
Community sensitization	20	20.0
Stronger monitoring & evaluation	15	15.0
Policy revision	10	10.0

Source: Fieldwork (2025)

The data in Table 8 indicate that respondents recommended mentorship programs (30%), enhanced funding (25%), community sensitization (20%), monitoring mechanisms (15%), and legal enforcement (10%) to improve policy outcomes. These recommendations align with the Ministry of Gender (2019) [24], which emphasized that sustained funding and grassroots involvement are crucial for gender policy success. Mentorship helps empower new female leaders, while sensitization combats persistent stereotypes. Effective implementation also requires performance monitoring systems that track progress across districts. Respondents suggested stronger partnerships between government and civil society to ensure accountability. Overall, these recommendations demonstrate that multi-stakeholder collaboration is key to improving the policy's impact and advancing genuine gender equality in political participation.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations
5.1 Conclusion
The study has critically examined the complex and intersecting barriers that constrain women's political participation in Ndola District, focusing on socio-cultural, economic, and institutional dimensions. The findings indicate that while women's engagement is visible at grassroots levels and among middle-aged cohorts, broader inclusion remains limited. Grassroots involvement highlights opportunities for political mobilization and leadership skill development, yet structural constraints inhibit advancement to higher levels of decision-making. These dynamics suggest that participation is mediated by a combination of social expectations, cultural norms, and

institutional frameworks. Understanding the interplay of these factors is essential for designing targeted interventions that move beyond symbolic inclusion toward substantive representation. The study thus situates women's political engagement within a context of layered systemic barriers that require multi-faceted policy responses.

The study found that socio-cultural factors remain the most significant barriers to women's political participation in Ndola District. Respondents indicated that patriarchal attitudes, restrictive traditional norms, and negative societal perceptions continue to limit women's opportunities to engage in political leadership. Many women are expected to prioritize domestic responsibilities over public involvement, reducing their visibility and influence in decision-making processes. The findings also revealed that limited mentorship opportunities, scarcity of female role models, and exposure to intimidation discourage participation. Overall, the study concludes that unless these socio-cultural barriers are systematically addressed, women's advancement in politics will remain restricted despite the presence of supportive policy frameworks.

Economic barriers were equally pronounced, shaping the practical feasibility of women's political participation. The study revealed that women consistently face limited access to campaign financing, party resources, and media platforms, which are critical for building visibility and competitiveness. Respondents emphasized that financial constraints restrict their capacity to mobilize voters, organize events, and engage effectively in party structures. This inequality not only undermines political agency but also reinforces male dominance in electoral competition. Women's exclusion from resource allocation reflects broader systemic disparities embedded within political institutions, demonstrating that policy frameworks alone cannot redress structural inequalities without concurrent financial support and empowerment initiatives.

Institutional barriers further limit women's political engagement, with inconsistent support from political parties creating uneven opportunities. Respondents reported that many parties lack formalized mentorship, training programs, or financial assistance, leaving women underprepared for electoral processes. Leadership pipelines are often male-dominated, and institutional practices frequently reinforce gendered hierarchies that hinder women's progression. The absence of standardized mechanisms to support female aspirants illustrates a disconnect between policy intentions and practical implementation. These structural deficiencies highlight the need for reform that embeds gender-sensitive practices within political party operations, ensuring that women have equitable access to decision-making spaces, financial resources, and leadership development opportunities.

The National Gender Equality Policy (2014) has provided a foundational framework to address some of these constraints, particularly in raising awareness and promoting capacity-building initiatives. Approximately seventy percent of respondents reported awareness of the policy, indicating a moderate level of dissemination. Leadership training and networking programs facilitated under the policy have contributed to skill development and confidence building among female politicians. Participation in these initiatives has enabled women to navigate political processes more effectively, enhancing their understanding of electoral systems, advocacy strategies, and governance structures.

This evidence demonstrates that targeted policy interventions can create meaningful opportunities for women, particularly when accompanied by practical programs that translate awareness into actionable empowerment.

Despite these gains, policy implementation remains partial and inconsistent. Only a portion of respondents reported meaningful engagement with the mechanisms outlined in the Gender Equality Policy. Persistent challenges, including inadequate funding, weak monitoring frameworks, and limited political will, undermine the policy's capacity to achieve sustained impact. Resource constraints limit the reach and effectiveness of training and mentorship initiatives, while gaps in accountability prevent systematic assessment and improvement. Political commitment appears uneven, with support often fluctuating depending on electoral cycles or party priorities. Consequently, the transformative potential of the policy is curtailed, revealing the limitations of policy frameworks in contexts where structural, cultural, and institutional barriers remain unaddressed.

The interplay between socio-cultural and economic barriers further compounds women's marginalization. Cultural expectations often dictate that women balance domestic responsibilities alongside political ambitions, while resource scarcity restricts their capacity to participate effectively. This dual burden is exacerbated by weak institutional mechanisms that fail to provide structured support or equitable access to leadership opportunities. Women frequently encounter environments in which both informal societal pressures and formal institutional practices reinforce male dominance, creating a cycle of exclusion that limits political agency. Addressing these interconnected barriers requires integrated strategies that simultaneously target cultural norms, economic empowerment, and institutional reform.

Monitoring and evaluation deficits have further weakened the policy's effectiveness. Respondents emphasized that many programs lack robust reporting mechanisms, feedback systems, and evidence-based adjustments. Without systematic assessment, gaps in implementation remain undetected, and successes are rarely scaled up or replicated. Strengthening monitoring frameworks is essential for ensuring accountability, informing corrective measures, and demonstrating tangible outcomes in women's political participation. Effective M&E systems would allow policymakers and stakeholders to evaluate resource allocation, program efficacy, and institutional support mechanisms, enabling iterative improvements that align with both policy objectives and the lived realities of female politicians.

Political intimidation and limited role modeling also continue to constrain participation. Women frequently encounter harassment, social ridicule, or exclusion within party structures and community spaces. The scarcity of visible female role models diminishes confidence and perpetuates perceptions that leadership is primarily a male domain. Mentorship programs, while beneficial where implemented, remain insufficiently widespread, leaving aspiring female leaders without guidance or practical support. The study suggests that targeted mentorship, visibility of successful female politicians, and community advocacy are critical interventions to counteract these barriers, fostering both psychological and structural conditions conducive to increased political engagement.

The policy has also struggled to fully address entrenched gendered expectations embedded in cultural and institutional practices. Weak enforcement of quotas, limited engagement with male allies, and insufficient collaboration with traditional and religious leaders reduce the impact of inclusion initiatives. These structural gaps indicate that legal frameworks alone cannot transform socio-cultural realities. Integrated approaches that combine policy enforcement, community engagement, capacity building, and mentorship are required to achieve meaningful change. Without addressing both formal and informal dimensions of political exclusion, women remain vulnerable to systemic marginalization despite the existence of progressive legislation.

Overall, the study confirms that the 2014 Gender Equality Policy has achieved moderate success in promoting women's political engagement, particularly through awareness campaigns and capacity-building initiatives. However, its implementation remains hampered by financial, institutional, and cultural constraints. Structural inequalities embedded within political parties, persistent socio-cultural norms, and inadequate resourcing continue to limit the policy's transformative potential. Achieving substantive gender parity requires more than policy design; it demands coordinated interventions that address interrelated barriers and promote sustained empowerment for women at all levels of political engagement.

In conclusion, achieving meaningful and sustained gender equality in political participation necessitates a multi-dimensional approach. Stronger enforcement of policy provisions, increased financial and institutional support, and robust monitoring mechanisms are essential to overcoming persistent challenges. Integrated strategies must simultaneously address socio-cultural, economic, and institutional constraints to foster inclusive political environments. Only through sustained commitment, practical interventions, and systemic reform can the aspirations of the 2014 Gender Equality Policy be fully realized. The study underscores the imperative of combining legislative frameworks with grassroots initiatives and political accountability to create conditions where women can participate equitably and meaningfully in Zambia's political sphere.

5.2 Recommendations
Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

Government and development partners should allocate sufficient financial and human resources to gender equality programs, ensuring that initiatives for women's political empowerment are sustainable, adequately funded, and far-reaching.

Establish robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks with clear indicators and independent assessments to track policy implementation, measure outcomes, and identify gaps within the Gender Equality Policy.

Political parties should formalize gender mainstreaming policies, providing structured support, including campaign financing, leadership training, and mentorship specifically for women candidates.

Implement comprehensive community sensitization programs aimed at transforming patriarchal attitudes,

dismantling restrictive cultural norms, and fostering acceptance of women's political leadership.

Develop and support mentorship networks linking aspiring female politicians with experienced leaders to enhance confidence, political skills, and networking opportunities.

Encourage fair and balanced media representation of women politicians to challenge stereotypes, increase visibility, and enhance public perceptions of female leadership competence.

Review and strengthen legal frameworks to ensure effective enforcement of gender quotas, affirmative action, and anti-discrimination measures, with penalties for non-compliance clearly specified.

5.3 Future Research

Although this study has offered critical insights into the effectiveness of Zambia's National Gender Equality Policy (2014) in Ndola District, further research is essential to expand understanding and inform policy refinement. Comparative studies across multiple districts could illuminate regional variations in policy implementation, revealing contextual factors that either facilitate or hinder women's political participation. Such analyses would enable identification of adaptable best practices that could be scaled nationally, providing evidence-based recommendations for harmonizing implementation strategies. By situating Ndola's experience within a broader comparative framework, policymakers and scholars can better understand how local socio-cultural, economic, and institutional dynamics interact with national policy objectives.

Additionally, future research should explore the perspectives of key stakeholders who shape the political environment, including male actors and young women. Examining the roles of men within political structures can elucidate how they either facilitate or impede gender equality initiatives, highlighting opportunities for strategic engagement. Similarly, investigating the barriers and motivators influencing young women's political engagement would inform interventions aimed at cultivating the next generation of leaders. Collectively, these research directions would generate a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the systemic, cultural, and generational factors affecting women's political participation in Zambia, ultimately supporting more effective and context-sensitive policy development.

6. Acknowledgements

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