Barriers to Women's Engagement and Representation in the Gambia's Political Landscape

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Abstract

To better understand the obstacles to women's representation and participation in politics in The Gambia, this study used a survey design. The study discusses the problems of women's representation and involvement in parliament using a hybrid methodology. To gather data, structured questionnaires were employed. The study's conclusions indicate that most participants are doubtful or pessimistic about the likelihood of attaining gender parity in parliamentary representation. The results highlight the necessity of ongoing initiatives to remove obstacles and difficulties encountered by female politicians and advance gender parity in representation in The Gambia. Party quotas and other forms of affirmative action seem far off. The study included here makes the following recommendations: Political parties should create an atmosphere that is fair and conducive to women participating in The Gambia's democratic process. As a result, women's perceptions of politics should be changed through appropriate awareness campaigns that inform women of the need to change their negative perceptions of the field and how negative stereotypes about women lower their spirits and lessen their desire to engage in politics.

Key Words: Women, parliamentary, politics, Gambia

1. Introduction

In a significant declaration made in 1998, former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said *"Gender equality is more than a goal in itself. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development, and building good governance."* In Africa sometimes cultures, customs, and traditions serve as barriers to women's political participation (Africa Barometer, 2021). Politics in the Gambia has been largely thought of as a man's world. Men have traditionally outnumbered women in the field of political representation and not in election voting. Generally, women play latent roles in politics as supporters of men.

This, however, does not suggest that there are no policies and laws to support women. Since the Gambia's independence in 1965, several laws on women empowerment and gender equality have been passed, but they are not impactful on the level of female participation in politics (Nabaneh, 2022). However, women are the biggest supporters of men in their respective political parties (Nabaneh, 2014). According to UNFPA (2023), women are great at driving change if provided with the right opportunities for empowerment. After independence, women's engagement in politics at the presidential/state level has largely been to be a seconder to a man i.e., a vice president. This has happened at least twice. Historically, among the different ethnic groups, wollof women are found to be more active in Gambian politics compared to the other ethnicities (Fourshey, 2019).

The lack of female participation in politics is much more apparent at the level of parliament where only 3 of the 58 parliamentarians are females (UNFPA, 2023). If the voices of

women must be felt, it should be at the highest decision-making body i.e., the parliament. Without having more female representatives, issues affecting women will continue to be partly handled and we will not be able to achieve our development goals (UNDP, 2022). Women are always in a better position to represent and deal with women's issues (UNFPA, 2023). Women deserve more leadership roles (Sawo, 2021). As development relates to gender, without a specific consideration of women's role in politics especially their representation in the parliament, the future of mainstreaming gender in all sectors and levels of development would be blurred. To make a greater impact, women cannot continue to be mobilizers and supporters of male politicians while occupying the back seat; women must be at the forefront. Studies have shown that women groups known as '*yaye kompins'* are very influential and do help male politicians to win, but the groups themselves do not hold power within the government (Nabaneh, 2014; Janneh, 2021). Thus, the contribution of women in politics is often overlooked (Sillah, 2023).

The Gambia is not on track to meeting gender equality or have an appreciable percentage of female representation in the parliament; the Millenium Development Goal's (MDG) assessment report has shown that the Gambia missed the target of having at least 33% of its parliament members being women. The Gambia was able to have only 9.4% of its parliamentarians being females (MDG Status Report, 2015).

Therefore, it is crucial to have a strong commitment to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially goal 5 which has to do with achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. Besides having some important policies for women empowerment already in place in the Gambia, there is a need for specific endeavors on gender empowerment to achieve the gender equality Goals and improve female representation in the parliament. To ascertain the possible level of women's participation in politics, this study seeks to find the issues surrounding the very low participation of females in politics which also reflects in their representation in the parliament.

2. Methodology

This study uses a survey design to facilitate the aim of understanding the low political representation of women in The Gambia. This involves the engagement of women and parties of interest in the study through the administration of close-ended interview questionnaires. The population of the study is 200 people. It comprises National Assembly members, political party representatives, gender experts, and representatives of NGOs. The study adopts Slovin's statistical formula for the study. The sample size is 99.59 percent of the population of 200 participants in the study. The choice for the population was purposive and to provide an overall representation of the sample for the study.

The study adopts a mixed-method approach to discuss the issues of women's participation and representation in parliament. Structured questionnaires were used to garnish the research. A p-value of less than 0.05 using the correlation coefficients was employed. This can be argued to be the most suitable design since going deeper into a problem and focusing on one context have the advantage of giving a more detailed answer which enables a deeper understanding of the problem. Gender equality is looked upon as the dependent variable. By using female representation and participation as the independent variable. The participation of women in politics should not be seen solely as the number of women represented, but also their influence and role in politics must be measured. This study will explore both the substantial representation and the descriptive representation meaning both the role of women and the number of women represented in the national Parliament.

3. Qualitative Survey Questionnaire

The survey questionnaires will be the core tool used to collect material for this study. The survey will represent the main actors that are considered relevant and important influences in the

question of women's political participation. Political parties are represented with both male and female members and women MPs are chosen since it is their perception of their possibilities that are interesting for the study. Representatives from NGOs working with gender issues are seen as both representatives from their organisation and as gender equality experts. From these questionnaires, the aim is to find answers to the research questions about women's experienced role in politics and what obstacles hinder the more extensive political participation of women in decision-making. The questions asked were Likert scale for all respondents. Among the first steps in the research was to identify which parties should be included. The selection was made by looking at the results of the latest national parliamentary elections of 2022 and establishing which parties now are represented in the Parliament. These are the National People's Party (NPP), The United Democratic Party (UDP), the People's Democratic Organisation for Independence and Socialism (PDOIS), Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction (APRC) of the Republic of The Gambia. The opposition was able to participate in interviews.

4. Qualitative Textual Analysis

There have been previous studies concerning hindrances for women to participate in politics around the globe (See Sabedashvili 2002, Nodia & Scholtbach 2006). However, these studies' main aim is often something else than mine and they only touch the subject on the surface. The results of these and others will be used as a complement to the conversational interviews. What it said about women's political participation from these researches is of interest, why the qualitative textual analysis is used. It is thus, only parts of the text that will be focused on and thoroughly read to systemize the substance and include them in the classification scheme of what the possible hindrances are for women to participate in politics.

5. **Test of Assumptions**

Table 1 Validity of the Questionnaire

Statement	Pairwise Correlation	P-Value (sig)
Since the First Republic to date women's representation and participation in parliament has been steadily improving.	0.44	0.000*
There is an unjustifiably disproportionate Women representation and participation in parliament	0.67	0.000*
Political parties are doing adequately enough to enhance and advocate women's representation and participation in parliament.	0.471	0.000*
Women's participation is not as adequately felt as their representation in the parliament	0.399	0.000*
There is a centrality of structural explanations to the problem of women's electoral under-representation	0.615	0.000*

There is a dashing of the idealistic hope that women will soon or even ever achieve parity in representation in the parliament.	0.607	0.000*
Religious influences have strongly hindered women's participation in parliament.	0.508	0.000*
Cultural stereotypes and ethnocentrism are a great hindrance to women's participation in the Gambia.	0.405	0.000*
The biological role ascribed to women is a contributing hindrance to women's participation in parliament	0.568	0.000*
The lack of radical and affirmative actions by the state is a major contributing factor to women's representation and participation in parliament	0.428	0.000*
Lack of financial resources to be considered meaningful members of political parties	0.658	0.000*
Lack of access to appropriate information serves as a barrier to women's participation in politics	0.577	0.000*
The male-dominated model of politics that tends to undermine the value of women's contributions and their participation is a hindrance to women's political participation	0.554	0.000*
Lack of formal or political education and self-confidence	0.484	0.000*
Lack of political experience is hindering women from participating	0.416	0.000*
Women do not support fellow women participating in politics	0.425	0.000*
Lack of party support and exclusion from decision-making party structures	0.401	0.000*
The dual burden and a disproportionate share of domestic work is a contributing factor	0.437	0.000*
Lack of campaign funds	0.485	0.000*
The perception of politics as "dirty" by women in The Gambia	0.462	0.000*
Lack of media coverage and gender-based stereotypes and bias in the	0.493	0.000*

media		
Training and leadership programmes for women will enhance Women's Political Participation at the Subnational level project provides for the development and holding of offline and online training events	0.684	0.000*
Mentoring which may include Special mentoring (tutorship) Political (party) mentoring programmes	0.604	0.000*
Inter-factional associations and groups that aim to ensure gender equality help women champion important issues in politics.	0.557	0.000*
The gender policy of political parties provides the basis for developing programmes and policies that enable and help women move up the career ladder and become more publicly visible and recognizable	0.809	0.000*
Quotas are necessary if legally imposed a certain percent mandatory quota on nominating candidates and drawing up political party lists.	0.704	0.000*

Source: Field Survey, 2023

To test the validity and reliability of our results we employed the validity and reliability tests the results show the instruments were valid and reliable in measuring the Promotion of Gender Equality Through the Participation and Representation of Women in Legislation in The Gambia. Table 1 shows the correlation coefficient for each of the statements of the Level of Women's Participation and Representation in Parliament in The Gambia. All the correlation coefficients are large. The p-values (Sig.) are less than 0.05, thus all the correlation coefficients are significant at the 5% level. Thus, we can say the statements are consistent and valid to measure what it was set for.

Table 2 Reliability of the Questionnaire

Field	Cronbach's Alpha
The level of women's participation and representation in parliament in The Gambia.	0.5051
The hindrances for women's participation and representation in politics in The Gambia.	0.7691
The constitutional framework that supports women's participation and representation in Legislation in The Gambia.	0.6854

Source: Field Survey, 2023

To check the reliability of the questionnaire below, Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient was used. This method measures the reliability of the questionnaire between each field. The higher the Cronbach's Alpha the higher the degree of internal consistency. Thus, the table below shows the values of Cronbach's Alpha for each field which range from 0.5051 to 0.7691. This range shows moderate to very high reliability of the questionnaire. We conclude that there is very good reliability of the questionnaire.

The findings from this study objective indicate that the majority of participants in the study believed that women's representation and participation in The Gambia's parliamentary system have been steadily improving since the first republic. This is a positive indication of progress towards gender equality in politics. However, the findings also suggest that there is a perception among participants that women's participation is not adequately felt despite their representation in parliament, indicating a need for further efforts to address the issue. Additionally, participants in the study recognized the importance of structural explanations for the problem of women's electoral under-representation. This suggests that efforts to promote gender equality in politics must address not only individual-level factors but also structural barriers and challenges.

Finally, the findings indicate that there is a sense of doubt or pessimism among participants regarding the prospect of achieving gender parity in parliamentary representation. This underscores the need for continued efforts to address the barriers and challenges faced by women in politics and promote gender equality in representation. The findings of this objective highlight both progress and challenges in women's participation and representation in The Gambia's parliamentary system, emphasizing the need for continued efforts to promote gender equality in politics.

6. Results

Table 3: *The Hindrances in Women's Participation and Representation in Politics in The Gambia.*

	Strongly Disagree		**Disagree**		**Undecided**		**Agree**		**Strongly Agree**	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Religious influences have strongly hindered women's participation in parliament.	5	5.1%	9	9.1%	15	15.2%	42	42.4%	28	28.3%
Cultural stereotypes and ethnocentrism are a great hindrance to women's participation in the Gambia.	2	2.0%	14	14.1%	11	11.1%	37	37.4%	35	35.4%
The biological role ascribed to women is a contributing hindrance to women's participation in parliament	8	8.1%	18	18.2%	19	19.2%	37	37.4%	17	17.2%
The lack of radical and affirmative actions by the state is a major contributing factor to women's representation and participation in parliament	9	9.1%	18	18.2%	21	21.2%	35	35.4%	16	16.2%
Lack of financial resources to be considered meaningful members of political parties	6	6.1%	12	12.1%	20	20.2%	42	42.4%	19	19.2%
Lack of access to appropriate information serves as a	5	5.1%	18	18.2%	16	16.2%	44	44.4%	16	16.2%

barrier to women's participation in politics										
The male-dominated model of politics that tends to undermine the value of women's contributions and their participation is a hindrance to women's political participation	5	5.1%	12	12.1%	10	10.1%	50	50.5%	22	22.2%
Lack of formal or political education and self-confidence	3	3.0%	17	17.2%	11	11.1%	44	44.4%	24	24.2%
Lack of political experience is hindering women from participating	5	5.1%	15	15.2%	13	13.1%	39	39.4%	27	27.3%
Women do not support fellow women participating in politics	6	6.1%	11	11.1%	24	24.2%	38	38.4%	20	20.2%
Lack of party support and exclusion from decision-making party structures	8	8.1%	8	8.1%	17	17.2%	38	38.4%	28	28.3%
The dual burden and a disproportionate share of domestic work is a contributing factor	4	4.0%	10	10.1%	24	24.2%	46	46.5%	15	15.2%
Lack of campaign funds	6	6.1%	17	17.2%	16	16.2%	45	45.5%	15	15.2%
The perception of politics as "dirty" by women in The Gambia	4	4.0%	18	18.2%	17	17.2%	43	43.4%	17	17.2%

Lack of media coverage and gender-based stereotypes and bias in the media	6	6.1%	15	15.2%	11	11.1%	51	51.5%	16	16.2%

Source: Researcher's Field Survey, 2023

The responses of participants about how religion prevents women from serving in parliament are shown in Table 3.3. There are five response categories in the table: Agree, Strongly Agree, Disagree, and Undecided. 99 individuals' responses served as the basis for the statistics. The table shows that the majority of participants (42 out of 42, or 42.42 percent) indicated that they agreed with the statement that religious influences have made it more difficult for women to participate in parliament. With 28 participants, those who strongly agreed made up the second-largest group (28.28 percent). A considerable majority of participants (15.15 percent) expressed uncertainty regarding the impact of religion, but a lower percentage (14.14%) expressed disagreement or strong disagreement with the statement. These results imply that most research participants recognized the role that religion plays in preventing women from entering parliamentary politics.

Table 4.3 reveals that 35.35 percent of the participants strongly concur that cultural prejudices and ethnocentrism provide a significant obstacle to women's political engagement in the Gambia. Furthermore, the statement is agreed upon by 37.37 percent of respondents, disagreed upon by 14.14 percent, undecided by 11.11 percent, and strongly disagreed by 2.02 percent.

Table 4.3 presents the answers provided by 99 participants to the following statement: "Women's participation in parliament is hindered by the biological role given to them." Of those surveyed, 8.08 percent disagreed and 18.18 percent strongly disagreed with the statement. 37.37 percent of respondents agreed with the statement, while 19.19 percent were unsure. Lastly, the statement was highly agreed with by 17.17% of respondents. In general, a larger proportion of individuals disagreed or were unsure, whereas the majority strongly agreed or agreed that the biological role that is assigned to women is a contributing barrier to their involvement in parliament. Table 4.3 indicates that a considerable proportion of participants agree or strongly agree that one of the main factors influencing women's representation and involvement in parliament is the state's absence of bold and affirmative action initiatives. In particular, 16.16 percent strongly agreed and 35.35 percent agreed, for a total of 51.51 percent of respondents holding this opinion. However, just 27.27 percent of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with this assertion, leaving 27.27 percent of respondents uncertain. This shows that a significant portion of respondents think the government should support women's representation and involvement in parliament by implementing more drastic and proactive measures.

Based on the results, the majority of the respondents (42.42%) agree that lack of financial resources is a hindrance to women being considered meaningful members of political parties. 19.19% of the respondents strongly agree with this statement, while 12.12% disagree and 20.20% are undecided. The results suggest that financial resources are an important factor in women's ability to participate meaningfully in political parties. Based on the survey results, there is a general agreement among the respondents that lack of access to appropriate information serves as a barrier to women's participation in politics. 44.44% of the respondents agreed with this statement while 16.16% strongly agreed. On the other hand, 18.18% disagreed and 16.16% strongly disagreed, while 16.16% were undecided. This suggests that providing women with the necessary information and knowledge about politics could help increase their participation in politics.

According to Table 3.3, a sizable proportion of respondents concur that women's poor political participation is largely due to their lack of formal or political education as well as their lack of confidence. 44.44 percent of the 99 participants agreed with this statement, and 24.24

percent strongly agreed. Conversely, 3.03 percent of respondents strongly disagreed, while 17.17 percent disagreed. Eleven percent remained indecisive. This suggests that there is a perceived need for education and confidence-building programs to encourage more women to participate in politics. According to Table 4.3, a significant proportion of respondents agree or strongly agree that the lack of political experience hinders women from participating in politics. Specifically, 39.39% of the respondents agree, while 27.27% strongly agree. On the other hand, 15.15% of the respondents disagree and 5.05% strongly disagree. There were also 13.13% of undecided respondents. These results indicate that many perceive the lack of political experience as a barrier to women's participation in politics and suggest that efforts should be made to provide opportunities for women to gain political experience and overcome this obstacle.

Based on Table 3.3, it appears that a significant proportion of respondents have varying opinions regarding women's support for fellow women to participate in politics. 38.38% of the respondents agreed, while 20.20% strongly agreed that women do not support fellow women participating in politics. On the other hand, 11.11% of the respondents disagreed, and 6.06% strongly disagreed. Additionally, 24.24% of the respondents were undecided on this matter. These results suggest a divided perception among respondents regarding women's support for each other's political participation, with a substantial number expressing agreement or strong agreement that such support is lacking.

The study reveals that a considerable number of respondents agree or strongly agree that the lack of party support and exclusion from decision-making party structures hinder women's participation in politics. Specifically, 38.38% of the respondents agree, while 28.28% strongly agree with this statement. On the other hand, 8.08% of the respondents disagree, and another 8.08% strongly disagree. Additionally, 17.17% of the respondents remain undecided on this issue. These results indicate a perceived gap in party support and inclusivity for women in decision-making processes within political parties, which is seen as a barrier to their active participation in politics. According to Table 4.3, a significant proportion of respondents agree or strongly agree that the dual burden and a disproportionate share of domestic work contribute to women's limited participation in politics. Specifically, 46.46% of the respondents agree, while 15.15% strongly agree with this statement. On the other hand, 10.10% of the respondents disagree, and 4.04% strongly disagree. Additionally, 24.24% of the respondents remain undecided on this issue. These findings suggest that the unequal distribution of domestic responsibilities, along with the added burden of political engagement, is seen as a hindrance to women's active involvement in politics. Efforts to address this issue may help alleviate the challenges faced by women in balancing their domestic and political roles.

Table 3.3 shows the distribution of responses to the statement "Lack of campaign funds is a hindrance for women's participation in politics." Out of 99 respondents, 6 (6.06%) strongly disagreed, 17 (17.17%) disagreed, 16 (16.16%) were undecided, 45 (45.45%) agreed, and 15 (15.15%) strongly agreed. The majority of the respondents (60.61%) either agreed or strongly agreed that the lack of campaign funds is a hindrance to women's participation in politics. Only 23.23% of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. The remaining 16.16% were undecided. This suggests that campaign funds are an important factor that affects women's participation in politics. It also highlights the need for political parties and other organizations to provide financial support for women who are interested in running for political office. In this statement, we see that the perception of politics as "dirty" by women in The Gambia is a factor that may hinder their participation in politics. While 4.04% strongly disagree that politics is perceived as dirty, the majority of participants (60.6%) either agree or strongly agree that politics is perceived as dirty by women in The Gambia. However, 17.17% are still undecided on this issue. This perception can discourage women from getting involved in politics, especially if they believe that they have to compromise their integrity or engage in unethical behaviour to

succeed in politics. This highlights the importance of creating an environment where women feel empowered to participate in politics without compromising their values.

According to Table 3.3, 51.52% of the respondents agreed that the lack of media coverage gender-based stereotypes, and bias in the media are contributing factors hindering women from participating in politics. 15.15% disagreed, 11.11% were undecided, and 16.16% strongly agreed. Only 6.06% strongly disagreed. This suggests that a significant proportion of the respondents believe that the media plays a role in hindering women's political participation in The Gambia, either by not providing adequate coverage or by perpetuating gender-based stereotypes and biases.

7. Conclusion

The largest response category among participants was Agree, with 36 participants (36.36%) indicating that they agree with the statement that there is a dashing of the idealistic hope for women to achieve parity in representation in the parliament. The second-largest group was those who Strongly Agree, with 26 participants (26.26%). A significant number of participants (26.26%) were Undecided about the likelihood of achieving parity, while smaller proportions disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. These findings suggest that a majority of participants in the study shared a sense of doubt or pessimism regarding the prospect of achieving gender parity in parliamentary representation. These findings underscore the need for continued efforts to address the barriers and challenges faced by women in politics to promote gender equality in The Gambia.

Although women are considered by many as people with enormous challenges as far as political expeditions in Africa and in particular The Gambia, opinions based on the study demonstrated however that, there is still hope for meaningful participation and representation in politics. Inadequate awareness of the potential of women and their lack of high self-esteem might have contributed immensely and impeded the democratisation process to allow for full participation in politics. It is also true that women play a significant role in a nation's development in a greater spectrum.

8. Recommendations

1. The participation of women in politics especially their representation in the parliament could improve if political parties take the lead. Political parties need to empower their female members to take important positions and participate in parliamentary and mayoral elections in the Gambia. Even though in this study, the majority of participants believe political parties are doing enough to enhance and advocate for women's representation and participation in parliament, this is not reflective of the reality considering the number of women in the parliament; currently, only about 8.6% of the parliamentarians are women which is just 5 seats out of 58 seats. Among the 5 women, only 3 were elected and only one of them represented a political party (UN, 2022). indeed, shows the gap between women's political participation and party representation. There is a need for more research on this gap.
2. For a meaningful achievement to be made in women's political participation, there is a need to debunk the myth of women as being better supporters of men in politics instead of aspiring for positions themselves. Women should be seen as equally capable to handle critical positions and make decisions, especially regarding women. These structural barriers that limit women could be gradually eradicated with education and awareness campaigns.
3. According to the 1997 constitution of the Republic of the Gambia, the president could select/nominate 5 members of the parliament. As such, to boost female participation in politics, this executive power could be utilized to nominate more females. Most importantly there is a need to introduce a special quota allocated for female representation

in the parliament as recommended by The Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDGs) on achieving Gender equality and empowering all women. Caution should be taken in doing so that we do not only have the numbers but also the impact of those numbers.

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