




Active Participation and Representation but Lack of Agency: The Role of Political Participation of Women in Rural Areas in Achieving SDG 5, North-West Province, South Africa

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Abstract

Political participation is integral to a healthy democracy, as it legitimizes governance and fosters inclusivity. Despite global commitments such as SDG 5, which aims to ensure gender equality and empower women, the representation and participation of women, particularly in rural areas, remain limited. This study investigates the political participation of rural women in South Africa's North-West Province, focusing on progress towards SDG 5.5.1. Employing qualitative research methods, the study explores how historical, cultural and systemic barriers, including patriarchy, illiteracy and stereotypical perception further curtail women's political agency in rural areas. The findings highlight that while South Africa has made strides in achieving numerical and formal gender parity in local governance, substantive gender equality remains elusive because women in rural areas face significant challenges, such as restricted decision-making roles, political violence and structural barriers within political parties. Moreover, the intersection of race, gender and rurality exacerbates these challenges, leaving many women unable to



fully exercise political agency. Drawing on African feminism and social constructivism, the study emphasizes the need for grassroots interventions, including civic education, mentorship programs, and policy reforms, to dismantle patriarchal systems and empower rural women. Strengthening political will and engaging men as allies in promoting gender equality are critical to achieving SDG 5 and advancing women's socio-economic rights. The study concludes that a bottom-up approach, prioritizing rural women's participation, is essential for transformative change in South Africa's commitment to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5.

Keywords: political participation, SDG5, women in rural areas, South Africa, local government, representation.

Introduction

Political participation, as argued by Campbell (2011), forms the cornerstone of a healthy representative democracy. Increased participation legitimises the political system and shows that individuals' normative commitments to democracy are strong. On the contrary, declining participation puts democracy in existential danger as it risks being replaced by authoritarian rule. Although this statement is generally true, Campbell (2011) does not address issues around gender and whether less female participation and representation have an impact on the legitimacy of political systems. Vrbensky, writing in the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report (2016) on strengthening women participation, took the debate further and asserted that gender equality is essential to receptive and responsible democratic societies. Vrbensky (2016) noted that the key to the credibility of national institutions like parliament, national assemblies and local government is equal representation of the genders. The same UNDP report further stated that globally, women representation in local governance structures remains low. In instances where women get elected to these offices, they are confronted with gender stereotypes in connection to their roles and capabilities and are normally subjected to discriminatory legislation and culture.

Many studies, however, tend to generalize women's experiences, overlooking the nuanced challenges faced by different groups such as rural, young or economically disadvantaged women (Nnaemeka, 2004). For example, young women have different needs and face challenges quite differently from older women and similarly, women in rural areas and urban areas face different challenges and choices in life. Therefore, when brought into the South African context, political participation of women in rural areas (who are the focus of the study) is often curtailed by several factors which include patriarchy, illiteracy, tradition and culture, media influence and general stereotypical perspectives. Additionally, there is a tendency to perceive women as a homogeneous group, however, like all groups, women are permeated by differences and varied interests (Bari, 2005).

South Africa is one of the many countries across the globe struggling to achieve the global gender parity goal of 50/50 representation at local and national levels, despite gender parity policies recommended by international and regional organizations to which South Africa is a signatory (Hicks and Morna., 2016). The lack of gender equality is both historical and systemic. For example, during apartheid, life roles were shaped at birth by the colour of one's skin as well as biological sex and consequently, education, achievements in anything such as sports, status, jobs and economic status were pre-programmed (Cleancy, 2014). This disproportionately affected disadvantaged black women, who were systematically denied access to education and the tools necessary for political awareness, leaving them excluded from socio-political structures (Gasa, 2007). Political consciousness refers to an awareness of one's political rights, the ability to mobilize for collective action, and understanding the broader socio-political structures that shape one's life. During apartheid, this awareness was deliberately suppressed through systemic denial of education, restricted access to political platforms and reinforcement of traditional roles that kept women, particularly black women, excluded from the public sphere.

Kurebwa (2013) is of the view that women have historically participated in political activities such as speaking at public meetings and contributing to candidates at a lower rate than men. One of the many explanations for this phenomenon is women's under-representation in political institutions, which compromises their sense of political efficacy. This has been attributed to the patriarchal systems permeating numerous political systems of different states, thereby curtailing women's political participation. Manyevere-Matambo (2025) agrees with Kurebwa's claim that the constructed system of patriarchy took away women's human rights, such as their right to political participation and life autonomy.

Despite the implementation of the 50%-50% gender quotas to formalize women's representation in local governance (CGE, 2003), questions remain about their practical influence in public decision-making, particularly in rural settings (Tamale, 2020). For instance, while women may occupy 50% of council seats, studies indicate that their involvement in key decision-making roles is limited, with many being assigned to less influential positions such as secretarial or welfare committees (Reddy and Maharaj, 2008). Furthermore, data from the North West Province reveals that despite meeting representation quotas, rural women often lack access to resources or support systems to effectively exercise political agency. In 2008, through the Southern African Development Community (SADC), South Africa committed itself to the Gender and Development Protocol, obligating targets to drive women's development and attainment of socio-economic rights, including the attainment of 50% women's representation in all leadership positions (Southern African Development Community, 2008). To this end, South Africa adopted the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, an extension of the Millennium Development Goals aimed at sustainably advancing human development. To emphasise its commitment to sustainable growth, South Africa premised its National Development Plan on the SDGs and the aspirations and targets of the Southern African Development Community and African Union Agenda 2063.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research design to explore the political participation of rural women in the North-West Province and measure progress towards SDG 5, specifically indicator 5.5.1. This exploratory case study method allowed for an in-depth investigation of women's representation, participation and agency at the local governance level. The qualitative approach was selected for its ability to capture the nuanced and rich lived experiences of rural women, often overlooked in traditional quantitative evaluations. This design aligns with methodologies that prioritize marginalized voices and contextual complexities (Creswell, 2013; Nnaemeka, 2004).

The North-West Province, a predominantly rural region in South Africa, was selected due to its historical marginalization during apartheid and its unique socio-political dynamics. As a former homeland under apartheid, the region faced systemic exclusion and oppression that shaped its current socio-political landscape. These factors make it an ideal case for exploring how intersections of race, gender, and governance impact progress towards achieving SDG 5 (Statistics South Africa, 2019; Gasa, 2007).

Participants were purposively sampled to include key stakeholders such as female councillors, municipal managers and community leaders, ensuring diverse perspectives on women's participation. These participants were drawn from four district municipalities: Bojanala Platinum, Ngaka Modiri Molema, Dr. Ruth Segomotsi Mompati and Dr. Kenneth Kaunda. The purposive sampling approach was critical for capturing the varied socio-political dynamics and lived experiences of rural women across different local governance structures.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in Setswana and English, ensuring both linguistic inclusivity and cultural sensitivity. The interviews were designed to capture participants' nuanced experiences and focused on three primary areas: their perceptions of political agency, the barriers they face in achieving effective participation and their assessments of the implementation and impact of gender

quotas in local governance. The process also included follow-up questions to explore contextual dynamics specific to the North-West Province.

The study employed thematic analysis, guided by the principles of African feminism and social constructivism. This dual framework enabled the deconstruction of entrenched patriarchal narratives, focusing on how cultural and social norms limit women's agency. At the same time, it emphasized the resilience and adaptive strategies employed by rural women to navigate and challenge these constraints. By drawing on African feminism, the analysis centred on contextualized, intersectional perspectives that recognize the unique experiences of African rural women (Nnaemeka, 2004; Tamale, 2020).

Social constructivism and traditional feminism perspectives in relations to the political participation of women in rural areas

Jackson and Penrose (1994) define social constructivism as concerned with the way human beings think and structure the world to categorize or to create a class. Daddow (2017) agrees with Penrose and Jackson, stating that constructivism is a theory that sees the world as socially constructed and explains the way human beings structure their experiences and analysis of the world. Wendt (1999) endorses the scholars, explaining that social constructs or social constructions define meanings, notions or connotations that are assigned to objects and events in the environment and people's notions of their relationships to and interactions with these objects.

In the field of social constructionist thought, a social construct is an idea or notion that appears to be natural and obvious to people who accept it, but which may or may not represent reality, so it remains largely an invention or artifice of a given society (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p. 13). Gender roles and identities are constructs and as Lorber (1994) argues 'gender is constantly created and recreated out of human interactions, out of social life and is the texture and order of that social life.' Thus, social constructivism will help us to

deconstruct the gendered political spaces and the challenges emanating from attempts to allow more women participation and representation.

Additionally, the study used traditional feminist perspective, which notes that representative democracy should and must be inclusive of all genders, particularly women in all aspects of life; from political, economic and social settings (Lovenduski and Norris, 1993) and further expresses that democracy should be accountable and gender responsive. Feminism emphasizes women's agency as performers, who day-by-day make tremendous commitments to society and the difficulties that the man-centric institutional systems, structures, procedures, standards and qualities oblige women to make compelling usage of their abilities for effecting transformative change (Freedman, 2006). Thus, on top of reinforcing the social constructivist perspective on political participation and representation, the traditional feminist perspective will help us unpack issues around agency.

Women in the struggle for political participation

During the Apartheid era, African women were not permitted to live in towns and were forced to live in rural and informal settlements unless they had permission to be employed in urban areas. Extending the Pass Laws to them made it more difficult for women without an occupation to take their children and join their spouses in urban areas where their spouses worked. Across the country, many challenges against the Pass Laws for African women occurred before the Federation of South African Women and the African National Congress Women's League mobilised a massive protest in Pretoria. These events are some of the first instances of African women's political participation (Landsberg and Mackay, 2003).

In these instances, African women displayed their political participation through demonstrations, which later contributed to women's enfranchisement. In contrast, this was an achievement only for white women in South Africa. Although demonstrations by women in urban areas were planned through

various women's movements, in the rural areas, demonstrations were unstructured and spontaneous. According to Healy-Clancy (2017), the government attributed rural women's political participation as the work of external influences. This assumption has bled into the contemporary political landscape; rural women are thought of as incapable of sound decision making skills, however political parties continue to exploit their illiteracy and economic status by encouraging political participation in the form of voting and canvassing. Nonetheless, (Malinga, 2016) disputes this claim by Healy-Clancy, asserting that women were acting on their initiative and according to their understanding of how the extension of the pass laws would affect their lives. Maling (2016), further emphasises that while women who worked in urban areas brought home new tactics, insights, and information when they returned to the homelands, they were simply contributing to a momentum that had gathered on its own there. The women in rural Zeerust joined the resistance; their demonstrations started peacefully but eventually spiralled into violence. The women revolted for their reasons also: for the rights of the family; against the traditional authorities and for their husbands, as the administration had made decisions regarding the women without asking their husbands' opinions.

Post-apartheid, the African National Congress (ANC), which was the governing party, did not prioritise gender responsiveness, similar to many post-conflict societies; the government prioritized state reconstruction and peacebuilding in South Africa (Gouws, 2005). Hicks, Morna and Fonnah (2017) concur with (Gouws, 2005) by asserting that in the initial stages of post-apartheid South Africa, gender was not considered as it took a backseat in the intricacies of discussions around restricting and transforming local government to include women in electoral processes. Although the South African government pushed back on the gender agenda, the governing party, the ANC, adopted a gender quota of 50/50 representation in all levels of government. According to the Parliamentary Research Unit, women in rural areas' representation in local government is necessary for gendered development and women are likely to be affected by inadequate service delivery

and therefore their participation and representation in local government is an exceptional factor in measuring the progress of gendered developmental legislated equality.

Malinga (2016) argues that Post-Apartheid South Africa has not made any significant progress since the dawn of democracy, particularly in rural areas where there is abject poverty, a high rate of illiteracy and evident patriarchal inequalities rooted in cultural and traditional social systems. He further adds that the challenges that South Africa face are gendered, thus agreeing with Healy-Clancy (2011)'s assertion, that Apartheid was a gendered political system, which had the agenda to suppress native women's social, economic and political freedom to benefit from the labour of men who had to fend for their families. As such, the legacies of apartheid are present in South African society post-apartheid. These can be traced in rural areas where households are women-led whilst men lead the public and contribute largely to productive labour whereas women are tasked with reproductive labour.

In South African politics, women in rural areas are the largest marginalized group; women in urban and semi-urban areas enjoy post-apartheid South Africa's women empowerment initiatives more than women in rural areas. Moreover, women's progress in representation at the national and provincial level is progressing much faster than that at the local level. The 6th democratic national elections in post-apartheid South Africa, led to 45% of national parliamentary seats held by women, 50% of the seats occupied by women in provincial government and 41% at local government (Parliament of South Africa, 2014). Contrary to Malinga (2016)'s assertion that women's political representation in government has somewhat remained stagnant, Gender Links (2016) reports that 'the role of South African women in politics has increased since the end of apartheid through policy changes and organisations set up to enable women's rights.'

Progressive national rates of women's political participation and representation act as a disguise, masking the scant representation and participation of women in local

government. This notion is similar to Malinga (2016), as the scholar argues that women's political participation is not satisfactory, particularly in post-apartheid South Africa, where equality, as championed by democracy, must accommodate every individual. Todes *et al.* (2007), continue to emphasise that there is lack of concentrated effort on women in rural areas representation in local government and women are often endorsed as 'councillors and within the management of local government as a whole, rather than on informing and transforming the work of municipalities including analysing challenges faced by women as leaders.'

Patriarchal features are dominant in local government, consequently contributing to the challenges women in rural areas experience at the level of local politics. The former statement is supported by Reddy and Maharaj (2008), as they are of the view that women in local government are given 'soft tasks' such as secretary and welfare offices; they further explain that senior management offices are occupied by men.

Findings

The North-West Province has four district municipalities and eighteen local municipalities. Chapter 7 of the Constitution, object 152.1. (e), outlines the objective of local government, which is to 'encourage the involvement of communities and community organizations in the matters of local government' (South African Constitution, 1997). Therefore, these findings were analysed using SDG 5.1.1 indicator and the South African Constitution Chapter 7 on local government. Over the years, research has suggested that women remain marginalized, which has been proven to be a lived reality of many women, however, women have progressed in local government and such a shift in development should be a feature in feminist discourses. In so doing, more efforts will be geared towards addressing women's challenges around agency and efficacy. According to the data collected from all four district municipalities in the North-West Province, the conclusion is that women in rural areas are represented in local government as they made up 50% or more of representatives in local government

structures in 2016, although this regressed in the 2021 local government elections.

Women's Political Participation in Rural Areas

Elections provide opportunities for citizens to express their levels of satisfaction regarding how effectively the government has been able to meet their socio-economic and other needs. Such an opportunity is also important for citizens, particularly those able to exercise the right to vote, to pass judgment on those in positions of power responsible for government decisions that affect their lives. Women's political participation in rural areas has increased since the 2011 local government elections nationwide. In the 2016 local government elections, women were the majority of registered voters (58%) compared to men (42%). Women's representation in local government increased from 38% to 41% between 2011 and 2016. While steady progress has been made since 1995 (with a slight dip of 2% in 2011), the 2021 figures show that total women's representation in local councils has further fallen by 4.1% since the 2016 elections. Women's PR seats decreased significantly in the 2021 local government elections, from 48% in 2016 to 24.2% in 2021, while representation in ward seats fell from 33% in 2016 to 12.7% in 2021 (Gender Links, 2022; IEC 2021).

South Africa's goal is to achieve a balanced representation and participation of women in decision-making processes as per SDG Goal 5 and the African Union Agenda 2063, Goal 17. The North-West Province has displayed inconsistent growth results in women's political participation and representation, with a 48% PR (Proportional Representation) representation in 2016 decreasing slightly to 45% in 2021. This decline can partly be attributed to COVID-19's socio-psychological effects. Although women in rural areas have made impressive strides in local government in the North-West Province, they still encounter stereotypically gendered challenges, rendering their political participation almost inadequate. Women face various challenges, including political parties that remain patriarchal in nature, limiting the space for expressive political leadership.

Barriers and Violence Against Women

Source A, a municipal manager interviewed on 21 April 2019, elaborated on this issue, explaining that while the African National Congress (ANC), as the governing party, allows women to participate fully in local politics, other political parties such as the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), Democratic Alliance (DA), and Freedom Front Plus (FF+) curtail women's participation in rural areas. For example, the ANC has more women in leadership positions compared to the EFF or DA. During the 2016 local government elections, political parties promoted fewer female ward candidates. Evans (2017) suggests that this gendered selection reflects voter preferences for male candidates in directly elected roles.

Prior to any election, men typically comprise the majority of candidates contesting seats, even though women make up more than 50% of registered voters nationally. Despite this, in 2016, women surpassed the 50/50 representation target for mayors in the North-West Province: three out of four district mayors were female. Source B, a female ward councillor interviewed on 30 April 2019 and 20 April 2024, highlighted the aggressiveness of political practices in the province. She described experiencing violence and threats, ranging from coercion to vote in a given way to threats against family members. The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) argues that violence against women in elections (VAWE) undermines the electoral process and democracy by eliminating female voices (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2020). UN Women (2018) concurs, noting that violence against women in politics impedes their participation and full contribution to political life.

Challenges to Agency

The findings reveal that while women in rural areas may be represented in local government, their agency is not guaranteed. The proportional representation (PR) party system allows political parties to select candidates, often placing women lower on the list. This undermines gender equity goals. Political parties'

prioritization of their agendas over women's issues further limits progress. Source C, a female ward councillor, explained that political parties support gender representation to appear progressive but rarely allow women to fully exercise decision-making power. Goetz (1998) supports this view, arguing that state capacity and political will are key to achieving gender equity policies. Despite reserved seats and gender parity measures, sheer numbers are insufficient. Effective participation requires political will, resources, and the dismantling of patriarchal systems and the study concludes that while progress has been made in numerical representation, achieving substantive gender equality requires addressing the structural and cultural barriers that limit women's agency.

The intersection of race, gender, and rurality in the North-West Province presents unique challenges that must be tackled through a combination of policy reforms, grassroots advocacy and sustained political will. Strengthening these areas will not only advance SDG 5 but also contribute to broader social and economic development in rural communities. The study concludes that while progress has been made in numerical representation, achieving substantive gender equality requires addressing the structural and cultural barriers that limit women's agency. The intersection of race, gender, and rurality in the North-West Province presents unique challenges that must be tackled through a combination of policy reforms, grassroots advocacy, and sustained political will.

Conclusion

Therefore, to fully achieve the requirements of SDG5 in rural areas, there is a need for sustained political participation of women in the voting process and decision making. A civic education campaign is necessary to reconstruct the perspective of the masses on the role of women as voters but also as decision-makers.

The political parties that do not meet their quotas of female representatives need to be fined with funding cuts for the next elections. But above all the women need to be empowered

through education and mentorship to take up positions of leadership. Not to forget, the provincial and national leadership of different political parties needs to avail key positions for women which will help establish new norms in the society about the ability of women to lead not only in the household but also on the political platform and play a crucial role in changing the attitudes and perceptions of men towards women. More women in leadership, will help drive the SDG5 and combat issues around domestic violence, femicide and non-empowerment of women for example with education.

The bottom-up approach is far more necessary and efficient than that of the top-down approach. According to the progress on the goal, it merely discusses women's political participation and leadership in local government. This then presents a need to explicitly talk about women in rural areas and draw the debate from grassroots, subsequently embracing overall women's participation at all levels of government. Moreover, South Africa is a developing country, and the majority of women reside in rural areas, therefore for a country-specific UN SDG 5, South Africa needs to highlight its country-specific issues around SDG 5.5.1 and focus on rural areas, eventually moving up to urban areas. This will also minimize the work at national and provincial levels and have effective and progressive programmes aimed at contributing to SDGs and the NDP.

Overall, the overriding factor is the presence of a political will to address the imbalances and also address the structural violence against women. The presence of a political will means that it is not only women who are pushing the gender equality agenda but also men which will remove the existing perception that women are trying to sidestep their traditional roles and venture into spaces they should not.

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