

# Civil society's efforts in addressing barriers to women's political participation

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**Abstract:** *This article examines the pivotal role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in addressing barriers to women's political participation. Drawing from theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence, it analyzes the multidimensional barriers encompassing socio-cultural, economic, legal, and institutional factors that impede women's equal engagement in the political sphere. The study explores various strategies employed by CSOs, including awareness-raising campaigns, capacity-building initiatives, advocacy for policy reforms, and empowerment programs. Through case studies and cross-case analysis, the article evaluates the effectiveness of CSO interventions, highlights challenges and limitations, and proposes best practices and recommendations for enhancing CSOs' efforts in promoting gender equality and inclusive governance.*

**Keywords:** Women's political participation, Civil society organizations, Barriers, Gender equality, Empowerment, Advocacy, Capacity building, Policy reforms, Gender quotas, Leadership training, Grassroots mobilization, Intersectionality, Best practices, Inclusive governance

## 1. Introduction

Engaging women in political and decision-making processes is a crucial way forward to realizing the ideals of gender equality and guaranteeing inclusive governance in any country. It has been observed that over the years, though strides have been made, women and girls continue to face hundreds of problems and challenges that bar them from engaging in the political process on an equal level to their male counterparts. The Civil Societies Organizations (CSOs) have played a great part in the process, eliminating the barriers and ensuring improvement towards increased representation and empowerment of women at the political level.

### 1.1. Background

Women's political participation includes voting, running for office, and standing for the policy in a three-dimensional approach; it also covers taking part in the civil society organizations and finally, it is that persistent inequality and systemic barrier present in the form of gender-based discrimination, lack of access to education and access to resources prevailing due to socio-cultural norms etc that doesn't allow women to participate in political processes on an equal basis (Bari, 2005; Norris & Inglehart, 2001).

The significance of undertaking such an exercise transcends the values of gender equality and human rights. In the past, findings have shown that more women in political leadership and participation may have spillover effects, for instance, in improving governance and responsiveness to public needs, by making sound policy (Beaman, et al., 2012; Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). In addition to this, women's leadership contribution helps to attain sustainable development, in conflict resolution, and in peace and security (United Nations, 2015).

Civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations, women's rights groups, and grassroots movements champion the call for the entry of women into political participation; they work toward eliminating these obstacles. In such oeuvre, they undertake various strategies and interventions, for example, advocacy, capacity-building programs, and empowerment programs, among others, to accord the enabling environment for women in politics.

### 1.2. Research Objectives

The primary objective of this article is to examine the efforts of civil society organizations in addressing barriers to women's political participation. Specifically, the research aims to:

1. Identify and analyze the key barriers that impede women's political participation in different contexts.
2. Explore the various strategies and interventions employed by CSOs to address these barriers and promote women's political engagement.

3. Evaluate the effectiveness of CSO efforts and their impact on increasing women's representation and influence in political decision-making processes.
4. Highlight best practices and lessons learned from successful CSO initiatives to inform future efforts and policy recommendations.

### **1.3. Structure of the Article**

The article will be structured as follows: First, a theoretical framework will be presented, exploring the concepts of women's political participation, barriers to participation, and the role of civil society organizations. Next, the methodology section will outline the research design, data collection methods, and analytical techniques employed in the study. The subsequent sections will delve into the specific barriers to women's political participation and the efforts of CSOs in addressing these barriers, supported by relevant case studies and empirical evidence. The discussion section will critically analyze the effectiveness of CSO interventions, identify challenges and limitations, and propose best practices and recommendations. Finally, the conclusion will summarize the key findings, highlight implications for theory and practice, and suggest future research directions.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1. Conceptualizing Women's Political Participation**

Women's involvement in politics, therefore, is a multidimensional concept that entails varied forms of political involvement. This does not only include formalities like voting and holding an elected office but also a more comprehensive range of activities and behaviors that are involved in influencing political decision-making.

Scholars have developed classifying frameworks that address attempts to conceptualize women's political involvement. Perhaps one of the most frequently used is the traditional model, which emphasizes the classical modes of political involvement, such as voting, campaigning as well as standing for election or appointment in an official governmental capacity, among others (Norris & Inglehart, 2001). This model further illustrates that political representation and power for women are primarily predicated on formal political structures and mechanisms.

However, critics have argued that this conventional model is insufficient to explain the full scale of women's political participation—especially in conditions where formal political structures can sometimes be absent or exclusionary—Bari, 2005; Hassim, 2006. From this view of point, scholars have come up with more proactive frameworks, recognizing the various ways women participate in the political space.

One such framework is that of an independent model, which recognizes the importance of women's activism and civil society organization in advancing an agenda and the policy process (Hassim, 2006; Tripp, 2016). This model recognizes that women's political participation also can proceed through informal channels in terms of community organizing, advocacy campaigns, and protest movements, which are not conducted in direct political arenas but certainly affect political outcomes.

Indeed, another approach is the integrative model, a combination of the autonomous and the conventional model( Bari, 2005; Weldon, 2002 ). This model places a strong emphasis on formal political institutes, at the same time giving credit to civil society organizations and social movements that serve the best interests of good women politicians and enhancing the issues of the gender policy.

In addition, according to scholars, an intersectional element can be seen in the study of women's political participation: "women's experiences and opportunities to participate are molded by other multiple, intersecting base sources of identity, such as race, ethnicity, class, age, and disability status" (Crenshaw, 1991; Hancock, 2007). The intersections of these multi-dimensions bring to view the really multifarious and sometimes less empowered perceptions that one has to take into consideration while understanding and supporting the altar of women's political participation.

How women's participation in politics has come to be understood have increased within theoretical frameworks that have taken the phenomena as more complex and multi-faceted than merely the many formal or informal channels into which women enter the political spectrum, the very touchstones of women's lived realities with their interconnections of identities and positionings within social structures, be they enabled or disadvantaged.

### **2.2. Barriers to Women's Political Engagement**

While women's political participation is increasingly recognized as necessary in today's modern world, many barriers still exist to their full and equal participation in that sphere. These can be located within several dimensions, each as complex as the interplay of social, cultural, economic, and institutional factors that shape women's experiences and opportunities for political participation.

### **Socio-Cultural Barriers**

Indeed, one of the most pervasive barriers to women's political engagement has strong roots in social norms, cultural traditions, and gender stereotypes. Patriarchal attitudes and discrimination against genders remain strong in many contexts, which underscores the notion that political leadership and decision-making are areas of interest for males only. These socio-cultural barriers can manifest in various forms, such as restrictions on women's mobility, lack of access to education and information, and the disproportionate burden of domestic and caregiving responsibilities that rest on their shoulders alone (Bari, 2005; Hassim, 2006).

### **Economic Barriers**

Another economic barrier to be discussed is the limited access to financial resources, employment opportunities, and economic empowerment, which reduces women's political participation. Poverty and economic dependency generally reduce possibilities for political action. Most political activities require time, resources, and financial independence, which are absent in such cases of poverty and dependency start. Furthermore, wealth and access to resources are asymmetrically distributed in society, creating power imbalances that can continue to silence women's voices in many areas and levels of decision-making.

### **Legal and Institutional Barriers.**

In some instances, both the legal framework and the institutional structure are substantial barriers to women's political participation. This may include discriminatory laws and policies related to citizenship rights, land ownership, and political representation. In addition, the absence of gender-sensitive policies and institutional mechanisms has been an obstacle in most cases within political parties, electoral systems, and governance structures, further marginalizing women in accessing effective participation in decision-making.

### **Political and Structural Barriers**

Furthermore, the broader structural and systemic barriers in the political arena can also hamper women's political participation. This includes male-dominated political networks and power structures, the lack of gender-sensitive agendas in political parties, and the persistence of gender-based violence and harassment in this political sphere. Moreover, low representations of women in decision-making positions and structures may further foster a perception that politics is men's domain, thus discouraging women's interest even more.

Most of these barriers are interconnected and self-reinforcing, making them complex and multidimensional—the type of challenges that call for comprehensive and innovative strategies to surmount. Making sense of these different dimensions of barriers could assist civil society organizations and other stakeholders in designing proper interventions and advocacy activities about women's political participation while working toward the abolition of systemic inequalities that enable their marginalization from political spheres.

## **2.3. The Role of Civil Society Organizations**

Indeed, civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations, groups focusing on women's rights, and grassroots movements have been at the forefront in addressing barriers to political participation by women and promoting their political empowerment.

### **Advocacy and Awareness-Raising**

Other vital roles that CSOs play include advocacy raising awareness to challenge social norms, cultural stereotypes, and discriminatory practices that prohibit women's participation in politics. CSOs change societal attitudes and perceptions towards women's abilities for leadership and rights to take part in political decision-making processes through various campaigns, public education drives, and media sensitization.

### **Capacity-Building and Empowerment.**

Through CSOs, women willing to start political careers or seek involvement in other political processes also have very significant capacity-building and empowerment programs that include training for leadership, acquisition of different skills, and mentorship

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towards acquiring knowledge and capabilities to engage in effective participation in politics (Bari, 2005; Hassim, 2006; Tripp, 2016; Weldon, 2002).

### **Policy Advocacy and Law Reform**

CSOs lead in policy advocacy and legal reforms to dismantle the institutional and structural barriers to women's political participation. These will also include activities aimed at lobbying for adopting gender-sensitive policies, quotas, and legislative reforms, further enhancing women's presence in political institutions and organs of decision-making.

### **Monitoring and Accountability**

CSOs are also instrumental in monitoring what actual actions the governments and political institutions do, vis-à-vis their public declarations, about gender equality and women's political participation. This could mean monitoring the translation of policies and laws with gender dimensions into action and reporting on the progress—or rather the absence of progress—toward targets for gender equality.

### **Networking and Coalition-Building**

CSOs often work in coordination and solidarity with other organizations to have some impact on their advocacy work by using pooled resources, networks, and expertise. These forms of networks and coalitions could facilitate knowledge-sharing and strategy alignments regarding the advocacy schedule and give a strong, collective voice to women's rights organizations toward the influencing process of political agendas and decision-making.

CSOs have played varied roles in different strategies and interventions in the struggle to raise women's political participation and to combat the odds set against them within the political sphere. Their work stands against the foundational setting that facilitates women's empowerment, mitigates deeply settled social norms and cultural traditions, and exhorts systemic and institutional changes toward parity of gender representation in politics and decision-making.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1. Research Design**

In this regard, a qualitative research design will be employed to try and establish the efforts that civil society organizations are making toward surmounting such barriers. Qualitative methods offer a perfect platform for studying complex social phenomena and gathering in-depth insights, capturing subtleties and context that shapes the experiences and views of various stakeholders.

The multiple case study approach will, in particular, be applied to allow for a deeper understanding of various CSO initiatives and interventions in different geographical and socio-cultural contexts. An approach allowing exploration of common themes and singular factors influencing the strategies and effectiveness of CSOs in addressing barriers to women's political participation.

### **3.2. Data Collection Methods**

Data collection methods to be used will ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research topic by triangulating:

Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with key stakeholders, including CSO representatives, women's rights activists, policymakers, and women engaged in political processes. This way, the emerging data will consist of rich accounts of firsthand strategies that would have been employed by CSOs, challenges encountered, and perceived effects of the intervention for CSOs.

2. Document analysis: This will imply an analysis of relevant documents, in particular, reports from CSOs, policy documents, advocacy material, and media coverage. This helps to understand the various initiatives that the CSOs take in terms of campaigns and advocacy efforts within a broader political and sociocultural context in which they work.

3. Participant observation: This will be conducted at any relevant events, workshops, or activities by CSOs where and when feasible and appropriate. Using this tool in data collection, the dynamics, interactions, and processes involved in CSO interventions are intensely understood, together with the experiences of the different stakeholders, at junction DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011; Yin, 2018.

### **3.3. Sampling and Participant Selection**

A purposive sampling strategy will be employed in selecting the case studies and participants of the research. Particularly, the selection of the cases will be based on urban and rural city–country diversity, sociocultural context, and the presence of CSO initiatives addressing particularly critical issues.

Participants for each case study will be purposively drawn and after that snowballed from critical informants involved in relevant CSOs, rights organizations of women, and political institutions. Key informants will also help identify and assist in recruiting critical participants or any other possible informant who may instantly shed light on the issue at hand. Using help from these participants, the respondents will be requested to suggest some other candidate who can hold appropriate perceptions and experiences that would have a well-resulted contribution to the research results.

The sample size for the study will be determined by data saturation principles, consisting of the point when no new substantial information or themes relative to the study objective are discovered using additional participants or cases in the study (Patton, 2015; Saunders et al., 2018).

### **3.4. Data Analysis Techniques**

In any case, a systematic and rigorous approach to analyzing qualitative data collected from interviews, document analysis, and participant observation will guarantee the credibility and trustworthiness of the presented findings.

The use of thematic analysis as the main method of analysis, which includes identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns or themes within the data. Thematic analysis is a technique grounded in the marshaling of content from text to describe phases of certain phenomena (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). Thematic analysis was conducted based on the following:

1. Familiarization with the data: The researcher will become familiar with the data and read the transcripts over and over, together with all the field notes and documents, with the intent of an overview of the information content.
2. Coding: The data would be systematically coded using the identification and labeling of relevant segments of text that capture meaningful concepts, ideas, or experiences relating to the research questions.
3. Theme development: Codes will now be organized and grouped under broader themes, capturing patterns or critical concepts across the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017).
4. Review and Refine Themes: The themes identified are reviewed and refined to ensure they are clear, consistent, and distinctive and that they represent the data.
5. Theme interpretation and analysis: The final themes were interpreted and analyzed about the research questions, theoretical framework, and available literature.

During the analysis phase, triangulation with more than one source of data or methods and peer debriefing by discussing findings with colleagues will be conducted to enhance the credibility of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017).

This can be done with the help of any qualitative data analysis program, such as NVivo and MAXQDA, to facilitate coding, organization, and management of the data.

### **3.5. Ethical Considerations**

It is essential to consider the ethical concerns regarding the human factor in the research process. The following ethical principles and guidelines will be adhered to during this process:

1. Informed consent: Participants will be provided with all details regarding the aim/purpose of the study, their role in it, and associated risks and benefits. Their free and informed consent will seek out data collected before that (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2015).
2. Confidentiality and anonymity: Participants' confidentiality and anonymity would be ensured by putting precautions in place, such as using pseudonyms or codes to protect the identity of participants in any reports and publications for the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2015).
3. Protection of data: All data to be collected, including audio recordings, transcripts, and documents, will apply the protection of data regulations and guidelines securely (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2015).

4. Cultural sensitivity: The research will be guided by concern for cultural norms, values, and practices and also by necessary sensitivity to potential power dynamics or vulnerabilities among participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2015).
5. Harm minimization: Possible risks and physical and psychological harm to the participants will be minimized by checking that the participants are okay and further help or referrals offered where necessary (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2015).
6. Ethical review and approval: The research proposal will be forwarded for ethical review and approval by the institutional review board or ethics committee before data collection.

The ethical principles and guidelines outlined are fundamental for the integrity, trustworthiness, and ethics of the research; the protection of rights, dignity, and welfare of participants can be guaranteed only based on these.

#### **4. Barriers to Women's Political Participation**

The myriad of interlocking barriers that accrue from resilient socio-cultural norms, entrenched structural inequalities, and systemic discrimination inhibit women's political participation. These can emanate from the socio-cultural, economic, legal, and institutional spheres, presenting complex problems that require comprehensive and multifaceted strategies to overcome.

##### **4.1. Socio-Cultural Barriers**

Probably the most deeply entrenched and pervasive socio-cultural barriers to women's political participation are those rooted in societal norms, cultural traditions, and gender stereotypes supporting the perception of political leadership and decision-making as male preserves.

As Paxton et al. note in 2007 and Tripp in 2016, there continues to be strong evidence of patriarchal attitudes and gender-based discrimination, which form a very significant backdrop against which women continue to be politically marginalized in many contexts. Common manifestations include but are certainly not limited to, a variety of constraints on mobility, access to education and information, and an unequal burden of domestic and caregiving responsibilities brought about by such attitudinal and institutional barriers.

Moreover, the stereotypes and perceptions in society that define the leadership capabilities of women and their proper roles in society can deter them from entering political careers or participating in political activities. Stereotypes were usually perpetuated through gender socialization, media representations, and a lack of female role models in view of relevant positions of political power.

##### **4.2. Economic Barriers**

Another significant factor in low participation by women in politics stems from economic barriers. Poverty, lack of access to financial resources, and economic dependence might act as barriers to restricting women's involvement in political activities since these require time, resources, and financial independence.

Women across most societies still face many worrisome gender gaps in opportunities for employment, wage-rate differences, and, above all, access to economic resources such as land, property, and credit (Tripp, 2016; Weldon, 2002). Such economic inequalities might foster power imbalances that severely undermine the voice and influence women could have in political decision-making processes.

Moreover, running for political office or campaigns and involved resources require relatively very high expenses, which may turn out to be a powerful deterrent for women getting into politics in the first instance, especially in such contexts where they lack economic resources and support networks. This disadvantage further perpetuates the underrepresentation of women in political institutions and decision-making bodies.

It is a vicious circle, as sociocultural and economic barriers are intertwined: societal norms and stereotypes lower the chances of women for financial opportunities, which in turn diminish the potential for participation in the political sphere. How could this chain be broken? It calls for comprehensive strategies targeting cultural and structural barriers to women's empowerment and political participation.

##### **4.3. Legal and Institutional Barriers**

Apart from the socio-cultural and economic barriers, women's political participation is almost invariably hindered by legal and institutional obstacles that entrench gender inequalities and women's marginalization in the political sphere.

Legal barriers include unjust laws and policies about citizenship rights, land holdings, or even representation at political levels. In some situations, legal provisions often exclude women from voting, holding office, and participating in political processes with men in many cases.

There is almost a total lack of gender-sensitive policies and mechanisms within political parties, electoral systems, and governance structures that are exacerbating the underrepresentation of women. In the absence of mechanisms to ensure fair representation—gender quotas or reserved seats for political office in legislative assemblies, there are leeway limitations on political representation opportunities and, hence, influence.

Meanwhile, institutional barriers include biased recruitment mechanisms, inadequate support systems, and hostile or discriminatory work environments within political institutions (Bari, 2005; Hassim, 2006). And therefore, they can seriously impede political careers or shut off opportunities at higher decision-making levels.

#### **4.4. Political and Structural Barriers**

Aside from legal and institutional barriers, there could also be broader obstacles within the political arena, which act as structural and systemic barriers to women's political participation.

One of the significant barriers is that the political networks and structures of power continue to be mainly controlled by men. Hence, they tend to continue excluding women from decision-making processes and limiting their access to resource and support systems. These networks often work through informal channels and unwritten rules, making them very hard for women to circumvent and break into.

Moreover, the lack of any gender-sensitive political agendas and the continuance of gender-based violence and harassment in the political arena both perpetuate hostile environments that discourage women's entry and depreciate women's safety and well-being (Bari, 2005; Hassim, 2006; Tripp, 2016).

Moreover, the underrepresentation can lead to deeper rooting of the perception that politics is men's business and thus act further against stirring women for participation but sustain a cycle of exclusion (Paxton et al., 2007; Weldon, 2002).

Most political and structural barriers are deeply entrenched, reinforced by societal norms, cultural traditions, and institutional practices that make them particularly hard to dismantle. Indeed, surmounting these barriers requires comprehensive and sustained efforts that challenge existing power structures for gender mainstreaming in political processes, promoting enabling environments, and supporting and encouraging women's political participation.

### **5. Civil Society's Efforts in Addressing Barriers**

The CSOs have been at the forefront of the fight against these multi-dimensional barriers to women's political participation. CSOs have been involved in some innovative strategies or interventions to change societal norms, advocating policy reforms, and assist women in making political involvement possible.

#### **5.1. Awareness-Raising and Capacity-Building Efforts**

Other key strategies being implemented by the CSOs have been sensitization and building capacities for empowering women with the requisite knowledge and skills to participate in political activities, dismantling socio-cultural barriers effectively.

The stereotype-changing intervention that awareness-raising campaigns have to occur at a deep, almost unconscious level of gender stereotypes, norms, and attitudes to have a bearing on the political marginalization of women; this alone often reinforces women's lack of involvement in political activities. Such awareness-raising campaigns use primarily indirect means through media outreach, community engagement, and educational programs to advocate positive narratives about women's capabilities for leadership and their essential roles in decision-making processes.

Besides, several CSOs provide capacity-building programs that help women to be better equipped with proper knowledge and skills for competing in the political arena. These can include training in leadership, public speaking, campaigning management skills, and mentorship opportunities. Of course, all such activities are taken up with the idea of building confidence, developing political acumen, and expanding networks to overcome hurdles to remain active in political processes.

#### **5.2. Advocacy and Lobbying for Reforms in Policies**

Another critical strategy that CSOs have engaged in is advocacy and lobbying geared towards influencing policy reforms and institutional changes for women's political participation and representation.

CSOs join in policy advocacy campaigns through active lobbying of governments and decision-makers for gender-sensitive policies and legislative frameworks that can effectively help women represent political institutions and decision-making institutions. Indeed, this may call for advocating for adopting gender quotas reserved seats for women candidates within legislative assemblies, or reforms to electoral systems that enhance opportunities for women's political representation.

Thirdly, such CSOs lobby for repealing such discriminatory laws and policies affecting women's political participation about citizenship rights, property rights, and access to resources, among others. Empadocle: Advocacy efforts, therefore, go to making an enabling legal and institutional environment that will encourage and promote women's participation in political life.

CSOs also track and report on gender-related policies and legislation, therefore holding governments and other institutions accountable to the commitments made toward gender equality and women's empowerment. This accountability mechanism ensures that policy reforming is suitably translated into change on the ground and improved women's representation in political processes.

### **5.3. Empowerment and Leadership Development Programs**

CSOs are aware that empowering women and building their leadership capacities are incredibly crucial in promoting the political participation and representation of women. In this context, CSOs have run different empowerment programs and undertaken initiatives for capacity-building and leadership development aimed at empowering women with proper skills, confidence, and support networks essential to enable them to function in the political sphere effectively.

Another key feature of the programs is women training in leadership and mentorship opportunities. This essentially works by building competencies among women to take on norms of effective public speaking, negotiation skills, strategic thinking, and so forth, with leadership principles, while providing role models and guidance from more experienced political leaders or women's rights advocates.

Moreover, CSOs provide networking and peer-support platforms conducive for women to meet up, share experiences, and forge solidarity. Indeed, these networks, according to Bari, 2005; Tripp, 2016, supply not only essential support systems but also foster feelings of collective empowerment in women and soundboards through which they can amplify their voices within the political arena. Equally important, many women-focused empowerment interventions aim to raise women's awareness of rights, legal frameworks, and political participation. For example, this is how CSOs can empower women: by organizing training that focuses on their legal entitlements and how to access political processes to surmount obstacles or act in their best interests.

### **5.4. Monitoring and Reporting on Gender Equality**

Besides advocacy, monitoring progress and reporting on where things stand in achieving gender equality in political representation and participation in decision-making processes is one of the critical roles CSOs play. This monitoring and reporting function is essential in holding the government and institutions accountable for the commitments they have made in the promotion of women's political participation, overcoming the continual barriers.

CSOs routinely conduct data collection and analysis for indicators associated with the participation of women in political institutions, decision-making processes, and operation of gender-related policies and legislation. Afterward come reports, scorecards, and assessments of their own, which, therefore, expose where progress could be noted, what hinders overcoming remaining challenges, and hence offer recommendations for further action.

Monitoring and reporting, thus, find variegated functions of great importance. First, it offers an evidence base while assessing the effectiveness of the current policies and interventions to make strategies based on evidence and to point out areas of attention, particularly at the national, regional, and local levels (Bari, 2005, Tripp, 2016); second, it does contribute to increased transparency and accountability such that monitoring can therefore be carried out for all relevant processes inasmuch to enable that CSOs hold the government and institutions to account for results and for their commitment for action in promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women (Hassim, 2006; Weldon 2002).

Likewise, there are monitoring and reporting efforts that can feed into advocacy and lobbying strategies that provide CSOs with arguments and evidence to support calls for reforming policy or taking up new measures that will better address prevalent barriers.

## **6. Case Studies**

The following section provides two country/regional case illustrations, further advanced by cross-case analysis and comparison, to attempt to develop more depth of context within which the efforts that civil society has made towards the amelioration of these barriers to the political participation of women can be understood.

### **6.1. Country/Region 1: Rwanda**

Rwanda has been among the leading nations in both efforts to increase the representation of women politically, where women held 61.3 percent of seats in the lower house of parliament in 2020. It is an accomplishment partly attributable to the efforts of civil society in overcoming the obstacles in existence and standing against women to be politically inclusive.

After the 1994 genocide, CSOs in Rwanda emerged as an active source of advocacy for gender-sensitive policies as well as institutional reforms. Specific organizations at the forefront of the campaign for constitutional provisions and legislative quotas providing for no less than 30% representation of women include Pro Femme/Twese Hamwe and the Rwandan Women's Network.

Other capacity-building programs that were implemented among women CSOs are othersead's key to empowering them through the skills and knowledge concomitant that would make them take effectively central roles in the political process. These initiatives included leadership training, civic education, and mentorship opportunities to build a pipeline of women leaders and candidates.

Moreover, importantly, CSOs created awareness and challenged everyday practices in society that obstructed the woman's way to political engagement (Tripp, 2016; Weldon, 2002) through public campaigns and community engagements, and also engagement with traditional leaders, CSOs cushioned and coaxed positive narrations that mostly ignited the leadership potentials of women and the needs for their voices in decision-making processes (Burnet, 2008; Hassim, 2006).

### **6.2. Country/Region 2: India**

Indeed, organizations from civil societies have helped address different obstacles to promoting women's participation in governance, more so within India. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts of 1992 introduced a one-third reservation for women in local governing bodies at the level of both panchayats and municipalities.

CSOs such as the Self-employed Women's Association and the Mahila Samakhya program directed their focus on the empowerment of women and the building of their capacities to a level that they could get involved in the governance process at lower levels.

These included leadership training, political education, and women's collective and network building opportunities (Beaman et al., 2012; Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). Another major area of CSO activity was raising awareness through campaigns aimed at shifting broad societal attitudes and perceptions about the role of women as leaders in rural areas and on issues related to marginalized groups (Bari, 2005; Tripp, 2016).

Moreover, CSOs have been at the forefront in following up on the implementation of reservation policies and ensuring the accountability of local authorities in terms of an active and meaningful participation and representation of women. This included documenting and reporting instances of discrimination, harassment, or exclusion of women representatives and advocating with relevant authorities for corrective measures to set things right.

### **6.3. Cross-Case Analysis and Comparison**

A comparative analysis of cases on the efforts that civil societies in Rwanda and India are making shows some similarities and differences. In both cases, as expected, CSOs played a crucial role in calling for the policy change and institutional reform necessary to support women's political representation, visualized through the constitutional provisions or legislative quotas/reservation policies. Besides, the building of capacity and empowerment was a crucial intervention in the preparation of the women who intend to be involved in political processes effectively.

However, that which made the difference and, therefore, determined the specific strategies and focus areas of CSOs were the socio-cultural and political contexts unique in each country. In Rwanda, for example, the challenge to CSOs was huge because intent upon addressing the after-effect of genocide was the issue of reconciliation and gender equality as a component of nation-building exercises. In India, CSOs focused their activities on empowering women at the local government level, especially in rural and erstwhile socially deprived scheduled communities.

In addition, the influence of the CSOs has been shaped by the broader political and institutional framework in each country. In Rwanda, the context is such that several CSOs could ride on the favorable political climate in the country and take up strong partnerships with the government to formulate gender-sensitive policies and institutional reform agendas.

It much depended on the more complex and decentralized governance structure within India in the sense that CSOs usually have to deal with differential state and local governance policy support and resistance authorities in the Centre itself (Bari, 2005; Beaman

et al., 2012). Nonetheless, despite these contextual variations, what emerges from these case studies is the critical role played by civil society organizations in surmounting such barriers and furthering gender equality in both rightful political representation as well as political decision-making processes.

## 7. Discussion

### 7.1. Evaluating the Effectiveness of Civil Society Interventions

The attempts by CSOs to address barriers to women's political participation have seen different levels of success and had varied impacts across various contexts. It is within this scope that the interventions have to be evaluated to understand the extent to which they worked or failed in some situations.

A significant indicator of the success of CSO interventions would involve the verifiable increase in reach and impact of women on political decision-making. Case studies and empirical research show that the overall positive effects on general women's political representation and specifically in countries/regions that are implementing gender quotas, reserved seats, or affirmative action policies have resulted in improved efficacy and effectiveness in governance due in part to CSO efforts (Bari, 2005; Beaman et al., 2012; Burnet, 2008; Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004).

For instance, in Rwanda, the advocacy and lobbying of CSOs played a massive role in getting constitutional provisions and legislative quotas to be passed requiring, by law, that at least 30% of those represented in the country's decision-making bodies must be women (Burnet, 2008; Tripp, 2016). Today, the government has 61.3% of women owning a share of its lower house of parliament, as of 2020 (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2020).

The most notable of such initiatives is the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts in India, which provides for reserving one-third of seats in local governing bodies for women, a result of CSO advocacy and engagement with the state and policymakers who champion these policies (Beaman et al., 2012; Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). It is believed that this reform, in some indirect way, has increased participation and the immediate presence of women in local governance, especially at the grass-roots level in rural and marginalized communities (Bari, 2005; Tripp,

However, there is an important caveat: greater numbers of representation do not always bring about higher levels of influence or better quality of decisions for substantively affecting the final course of an issue or a policy. Sometimes, in certain circumstances, women representatives experience tokenism, marginalization, and lack of support from others in political institutions that can limit their effective influence upon and advocacy for gender-related issues and policies (Hassim, 2006; Weldon, 2002).

This has been further repeated considering that the effectiveness of CSO interventions is sometimes contextual- and situation-specific, as determined by the existence of general political and institutional environments, social-cultural norms, and access to resources and support systems previously existing at that time and available to the platform lines before its establishment (Bari, 2005; Tripp, 2016). This may expose CSO efforts to significant resistance and countersurge when the relationships prescribed in them are deeply entrenched as social norms and patriarchal attitudes.

It also bears relevance to consider effectiveness beyond the numerical representation by CSOs but to broader societal impacts. CSOs have been very pivotal in raising awareness, challenges gender stereotypes, and fostering upbeat narration of the ability of women leadership among citizens (Bari, 2005; Tripp, 2016; Weldon, 2002). Such efforts have created a change in societal norms and outlook, which can have a bearing on the long-term outcomes associated with women's political participation and empowerment.

Besides, CSOs have highly contributed to the building of capacities and leadership abilities for women by bestowing knowledge and confidence to deal with the political sphere effectively. Therefore, such capacity-building women empowerment projects can stir some sort of multiplier effect towards motivating and enabling more women to join politics and decision-making in earnest.

### 7.2. Challenges and Limit

While civil society organizations (CSOs) have done what they can to advance women's political space, their efforts are often countered with challenges that hamper the effectiveness and impact of these initiatives.

This is one of the most dominant impediments CSOs face: a fabric of social and cultural norms, stereotypes, and traditions that continuously reproduce the social exclusion of women within this sphere of political operation and to society in general (Bari, 2005; Norris & Inglehart, 2001). No matter how awareness is heightened and campaigns are organized, those deep-seated attitudes and beliefs always resist change, especially when patriarchal ideologies are entrenched in a particular society (Hassim, 2006;

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Tripp, 2016). On top of resource deficiencies, most CSOs face constraints in funding, capacity, and human resources that may limit their scope and sustainability in implementation strategies (Bari, 2005; \*Weldon, 2002). Most CSOs, particularly those acting in developing nations and on cases differing from the consequences of wars, do not receive enough financial support and hence rely a lot on external donors or international agencies for funds (Hassim, 2006; Tripp, \*2016).

Such dependency on external funding may pose its challenges in clearly setting priorities, ensuring local ownership, and maintaining programmatic continuity in the long term.

Moreover, CSOs often face severe resistance and backlash from elite classes and vested interests that consider women's political power threatening their control over political and other material resources (Bari, 2005; Hassim, 2006). Specific contexts can also be found to exhibit the way annoying harassment, intimidation, and even violence are deliberately aimed at CSOs and women's rights activists while supporting such work of advocacy.

An additional challenge involves CSOs' lack of coordination and collaboration, often leading to their division and duplication of efforts (Bari, 2005; Tripp, 2016). It also might result in a waste of resources, confusion in messaging, and a loss of opportunities for combined strength and impact (Hassim, 2006; Weldon, 2002).

In addition, according to Bari (2005) and Tripp (2016), CSOs often struggle to make headway in complex political and institutional environments, particularly in contexts of poor political will or commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment. Bureaucratic bottlenecks, power relations, and acquiring access to the appropriate decision-makers are cumbersome challenges that act as obstacles to the productive influence of CSOs on policy and institutional change, as stated in the various studies by Hassim (2006) and Weldon (2002).

This is a situation in which the impact of CSO intervention can be constrained by more comprehensive, structural, and systemic barriers, such as economic inequality, legal and institutional discrimination, and political marginalization. Although CSOs might still have a vital role to play in making inroads on these barriers, their work by itself will be inadequate without complementary efforts and commitment of governments, political institutions, and the larger society. Quite literally, these turn out to apply across the board, whatever your particular concern: democracy, economic development, stability, security.

Yet, in such an environment, CSOs keep playing a critical role as torchbearers in promoting women's political participation and advocating for gender equality. Overcoming these limitations requires engaged effort, strategic alliances, and comprehensive strategies addressing the multiracial and pluralistic reality of the obstacles women are engaging in.

### 7.3. Best Practices and Recommendations

Civil society organizations (CSOs) play a crucial role in advocating for women's political participation and addressing the barriers that impede their full and equal engagement in the political sphere. Based on the findings of this study and the existing literature, several best practices and recommendations can be highlighted for CSOs to enhance their efforts in this domain.

1. Holistic Approach: Breaking down barriers to political participation by women requires inclusive and multifaceted approaches. CSOs have to engage in a wide array of strategies—awareness campaigns and capacity-building programs, the impact of legal advocacy, and advocacy for gender-sensitive policies (Norris & Inglehart, 2001)—as a comprehensive approach to challenges women face.

2. Encouraging grassroots mobilization: Doing special attention to grassroots mobilization, attracting the attention of local and community dwellers, and aligning all processes with coordination of women at grassroots levels creates a unique opportunity for CSOs perceiving problems for women in different contexts and thereby to make individual intervention in respect of the susceptible groups (Karam & Lovenduski, 2005). In that way, women would be seen as actors of change in the community.

Promoting Gender-Sensitive Legal and Policy Reforms: CSO leaders should actively advocate for appropriate reforms in laws and policies that pursue and work toward gender equality and remove practices discriminating and handicapping women from effectively participating in politics. Such may include the adoption of gender quotas, electoral reform processes, and policies addressing violence against women in politics.

4. Building Strategic Partnerships: Collaboration and partnership are critical to maximizing the impact of CSOs. CSOs should try and develop strategic partnerships with government departments and agencies, political parties, and media houses, among others, to multiply their voices and pool more resources together. Additionally, these partnerships create chances to bestow effective best practices and share know-how.

5. **Women's Empowerment in Leadership and Building Their Capacity:** Women's capability is one of the front-line areas that CSOs need to treat with considerable attention. Capacity building, therefore, will get the required qualification of women through training, mentorship programs, and networking, resulting in stronger women who are further exploring the political world and, in general, breaking societal and cultural barriers.

6. **Promote Gender-Sensitive Media Representation:** Civil society organizations must ensure close collaboration with media organizations to bring in better and balanced representations of women in politics. This would exert change in gender stereotypes, bring to the limelight the achievements of women, and invite perceptions and voices from women. Since a media environment becomes gender-sensitive, it might likely influence societal perception and beliefs towards women's political participation.

7. **Prioritising Research and Data Collection:** A priority area for CSOs should include research and data gathering towards situational difficulties that women face in various contexts. This consists of both disaggregated data studies and trends and pattern research. Indeed, prosperous and sustainable interventions in addressing the challenges faced by women would effectively involve evidence-based studies. With these best practices and recommendations, CSOs can almost contribute to breaking down many of the barriers that disallow women from political participation and change the political landscape of our societies into one that is more inclusive and equal.

## **8. Conclusion**

### **8.1. Summary of Key Findings**

The current research tried to look into the experience of CSOs in addressing barriers to women's political participation. Literature review and case studies analysis bring out several key findings, which are tested in this study:

1. According to the words of Ballington and Karam, back in 2005, CSOs are very instrumental in advancing women's political empowerment through addressing the multifaceted dimensions of barriers to their effective participation in the political process.
2. The socio-cultural barriers for women's political participation range from general socio-cultural norms and gender stereotypes to legal and institutional barriers and economic and educational factors (Norris & Inglehart, 2001).
3. CSOs have used a number of strategies to deal with these barriers, which range from information campaigns to capacity-building, legal, and promoting gender-sensitive policy initiatives (Karam & Lovenduski, 2005).
4. In many cases, a good CSO would take a multidimensional approach to address various barriers simultaneously and engage in community-level mobilization and outreach to the communities (Kittilson & Schwindt-Bayer, 2012).
5. Strategic partnerships and collaborations between CSOs, government agencies, political parties, and others have been very instrumental in amplifying the effect of CSOs' efforts.

The CSOs have been at the forefront in the advocacy for legal and policy reforms influential to change, like gender quotas and electoral reforms instrumental in the increase of women's political representations.. . reported by Krook, 2017.

7. Capacity-building initiatives, which include training in leadership skills, mentorship, and networking opportunities, have greatly empowered women to overcome societal barriers in their navigation of the political landscape effectively (Norris & Inglehart, 2001).

### **8.2. Implications for Theory and Practice**

These results have several very significant implications for theory and practice in the areas of women's political participation and civil society activism:

#### **Theoretical Implications:**

It is pointed out that an intersectional approach to understanding barriers in women's participation in politics has to be adopted, as these are shaped by the intersections of factors such as gender, race, class, and socio-economic status (Crenshaw, 1989).

2. The findings contribute to the greater discourse on CSOs and their contribution to democratic governance and gender equality, highlighting how they uniquely address the structural and systemic barriers within society (Putnam, 2000).

3. The authors add empirical evidence to the theoretical frameworks about women's political participation being a prerequisite to substantive representation, inclusive decision-making, and sustainable development.

**Practical Implications:**

1. The research work is instrumental in providing best practices and lessons learned for CSOs and other actors struggling to promote effective women's participation in political life, calling for an all-rounding and context-suitable approach.
2. Results emphasize capacity-building activities, strategic partnerships for investment, the execution of gender-sensitive reforms at the level of legal and policy frameworks, and, in general, a facilitative environment through the promotion of women's political participation.
3. This fact underscores the grassroots level of mobilization and community engagement in ensuring CSO activities that stay close to local realities yet remain responsive to women's specific needs across different contexts.
4. Suggestions from this research can, therefore, provide inputs into designing evidence-based interventions, advocacy strategies, and policy frameworks addressing the more entrenched barriers to women's political participation.

The contribution of the study toward both theoretical understanding and practical application advances the discourse around women's political participation and serves as a guide for how civil society organizations and other actors increase efforts in promoting gender equality and inclusive governance.

### **8.3 Future Research Directions**

Although this study has contributed to our understanding of the many efforts that civil society makes in addressing barriers to women's political participation, several areas remain that would require further research and give an avenue for exploration.

1. **Intersectional Analysis:** Future research about the issue should be conducted by gaining a pool of insight from how, in this day and age, women from different walks of life move through life within the intersectionality of barriers that includes race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, disability, sexual orientation, among others. This simply means that the intersectional perspective would be instrumental in explaining even more complex ways whereby different types of challenges are created for various groups or categories of women and how to devise specifically tailored interventions for them.
2. **Comparative Studies:** Comparison across countries and regions will highlight the nature of the barriers and the effectiveness of civil-society-led interventions resulting from different sociocultural, political, and legal contexts that emerge in these other countries and localities. Researchers can facilitate an exchange of best practices between countries or cities and identify strategies that might be moved or transferred to another context for a common challenge (Krook, 2017).
3. **Longitudinal Studies:** Longitudinal research studies that have follow-ups after a sufficiently long period, in a bid to gauge the stamina of civil societies and the implemented policy reforms, will similarly be crucial in establishing whether such interventions are indeed sustained over time or if there are setbacks, as well as the factors promoting or hindering women's political participation as put forward by Norris & Inglehart, 2001.
4. **Capacity-Building Initiatives Evaluation:** More in-depth studies are required to evaluate the different capacity-building initiatives, for example, the efficiency and effectiveness of leadership training programs, mentorship initiatives, and networking opportunities. This could throw up-tested models and strategies through which women can be empowered and equipped with the requisite skills and resources to navigate the political terrain (Ballington & Karam, 2005).
5. **Role of digital technologies:** The role that could be played by digital Technologies, Social Media, and Online Platforms toward increasing women's political participation and civil society activism is an area under discovery. It would offer research in that area possibilities for showcasing the problems of involvement and lay open the potentials provided by digital tools to mobilize support, disseminate information, or voice women.
6. **remaining is the impact of COVID-19 and global crises on the political participation of women and the activities of CSOs.** While there are general implications of these events, the crisis of COVID-19 and other international crises call for specific consideration regarding the activities of civil society, including women in political processes; this would need further research into changes brought about, adaptation strategies that were adopted by CSOs, long-term effects, and barriers to gender equality in the political sphere (Fuhr et al., 2020).
7. **Funding and resource mobilization:** Detailed research into the challenges and opportunities relating to the funding and resource mobilization of CSOs involved in women's political participation may look into models of sustainable funding, donor priorities, and how resource constraints impact CSO effectiveness or reach in these areas. In these future research directions, scholars and practitioners can undertake severe contributions to a full understanding of the

complex dynamics surrounding women's political participation and evidence-based strategies for all actors involved toward shaping more inclusive and equitable political landscapes—particularly for civil society organizations and policymakers.

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