Participation of Women Leaders in Local Decision-Making Structures in Tanzania: A Case of Dodoma Urban and Bahi Districts

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Abstract

Women participation in politics has captured the attention of many scholars and women rights activists world-wide. However, the question whether women political leaders make impact in local governance decision making structures or not remains under explored one in gender and political research. This paper examines the extent to which women leaders participate in local governance structures in Tanzania. Drawing from liberal feminism, and by utilizing interviews, focus group discussion, a household survey and observation methods to study women leaders in Dodoma Urban and Bahi Districts; the findings reveal mixed perspectives regarding the influence of women leaders in local governance decision-making structures. That is to say; while it is possible to increase the number of women representatives in local governance decision making structures such as local committees through quotas and other affirmative actions, their involvement in decision-making processes proves to be complex. The paper recommends targeted interventions to empower women leaders at the grassroots and dismantle systemic barriers within the local governance structures.

1. Introduction

Debates on women participation in politics have emerged globally over the last three decades (Apap *et al.,* 2019; United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific (ESCAP), 2019). Similarly, there has been greater attention, from researchers, development practitioners, administrators, and academics, on women participation in politics (Braun, 2022). Various national governments and global organizations, like the United Nations (UN), the World Bank (WB), and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have equally stressed the empowerment of women and their participation in political leadership (UNDP, 2020; UN-Women, 2022).

In many societies worldwide, the voices and perspectives of women in decision-making processes have historically been marginalized, thus hindering inclusive development and gender equitable communities (Makulilo and Lihiru, 2021). In local governance context, most of the decisions that affect the welfare of communities at the grassroots level have tended to be taken mainly by men (Lihiru, 2022). This is primarily linked to the dominant power dynamics and gender disparities within communities and households often confining women to the private domain rather than the public arena of politics (Masanyiwa *et al.,* 2014). Over the past few decades, there has been an increasing awareness of the transformative potential

unleashed when women take up opportunities in local politics (Meleisea *et al.*, 2015; Tsuji, 2017: Maguire, 2018). Consequently, there is a remarkable shift among women across the nations stepping forward, challenging conventions and social norms, and spearheading efforts to build resilient and flourishing societies from and within their communities (Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), 2020).

In Tanzania for instance, the government has committed itself to various international and regional agreements and treaties that advocate for the elimination of barriers and the advancement of gender parity in political spheres. Key instruments ratified include the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BDPA) of 1995, the African Union (AU) Protocols to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, and the Sustainable Development Goals (particularly Goal 5, which focuses on gender equality and empowering all women and girls.

In line with these commitments, Tanzania has also adapted and amended various policies and laws in recent decades to enhance the participation of women in politics. For example, the eighth amendment to the Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania, Act No. 4 of 1992, led to significant changes in the system of local government structures, particularly in electoral laws. Between 1992 and 1999, the Local Government Laws[1] were amended to institute gender quota system for women to constitute a minimum of one third of the total members in *Mtaa* committees and one fourth of the members in village councils (United Republic of Tanzania (URT), 2006; URT, 2007). The local government laws provide for one third representation of women in districts, municipal, town or city councils through a women's special seats system. Additionally, the implementation of affirmative action, inspired by Article 66(1)(b) of the Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania, which mandates at least 30% women's representation in the National Assembly (parliament), has been extended through the amendment of Local Government (District Authorities) Act and Local Government (Urban Authorities) Act of 1982 to significantly increase women's representation in local government structures from 19.7% in 1999 to 36.7% in 2019 (Lihiru, 2021; Mutasingwa, 2022).

The numerical increase in the number of women, particularly in local politics can be traced back to Tanzania's independence, which was characterized by male dominance in politics (Killian, 1996; Lihiru, 2021). Based on the Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania, Act No. 15 of 1984 and Act No. 34 of 1994, both men and women have the right to engage in leadership roles, including at the local political level (Makulilo & Lihiru, 2021). However, before the 2000s, few women occupied roles within local government structures in many places in Tanzania including Dodoma Region. In fact, starting from 1999/2000, their representation has grown considerably (Table 1). In local government structures, the proportion of women in Dodoma Urban District has increased from 25% in 2009/2010 to 37.1% in 2019/2020 and from 22% in 2009/2010 to 44% in 2019/2020 in Bahi District. As such, the participation of women in the local structures has reached the 30% threshold, but has not met the 50% threshold set by the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the African Union Protocols, and the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action. By local government structures, we refer to district councils, township authorities, village councils (in rural areas) and city councils, municipal councils, town councils, *Mtaa* committees (in urban areas) and ward development committees (WDCs). These governance structures operate below the national level and are designed to bring governance closer to the people and facilitate local development.

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[1] Local Government (District Authorities) Act, 1982; Local Government (Urban Authorities) Act, 1982 and the Local Government Elections Act, 1979 as amended from time to time.

Table 1: Proportion of women in the local government structures studied

Year	Dodoma Urban				Bahi District			
	Category	Men	Women	% of Women	Category	Men	Women	% of Women
2009/2010	Ward	9	3	25	Ward	7	2	22
	Mtaa	16	9	36	Village	11	3	21
2014/2015	Ward	17	7	29	Ward	7	2	22
	Mtaa	16	7	30.4	Village	10	4	28.5
2019/2020	Ward	5	3	37.5	Ward	9	4	44
	Mtaa	13	12	48	Village			

Source: Dodoma Urban and Bahi District Council' Elections Records (2009/2010 to 2019/2020)

Despite the numerical increase in the number of women in local councils and committees in Tanzania, research on the extent to which women participate in local government structures remains limited. This paper, therefore, examines the substantive participation of women in local decision-making processes. Previous studies on gender and politics have primarily focused on numerical representation of women participation in general than the extent to which women leaders represent citizen concerns at the grassroots and district level politics. The available evidence shows that there has been a strong emphasis on promoting women participation in politics (Timilsina, 2024) and/or advocating for equal representation in decision-making organs (Ingelaere *et al.,* 2022). However, the extent to which the elected or appointed local female leaders participate and impact the decision-making process particularly in local government structures is largely overlooked.

Indeed, women's role in the political sphere, particularly in local government structures, cannot be overstated. Researchers argue that female leaders at the grassroots level, who are often also caretakers of family members, could play a crucial role in ensuring that the immediate and long-term gender needs and concerns of women are taken into account (Mandara *et al.,* 2013; Fauconnier *et al.,* 2018; Susanti, 2019; Simmons *et al.,* 2020). This is because they contribute to articulating women's needs and interests in community plans and budgeting.

Moreover, research indicates that having women in local governance decision-making bodies can bring about significant changes in community services, particularly in services such as water, health, and education for girls (Hassan & Silong, 2007). This is influenced by the distinct leadership styles exhibited by women in comparison to men, presumably because women leaders are more transformational than male leaders (Eagly, 2013; Alzougool *et al.,* 2021). For instance, research conducted in India has demonstrated that women serving on local councils actively promote the allocation of higher budgets to community development and sensitize the community to reducing domestic violence incidents (Markham, 2013). In Ghana, studies show that female leaders promote girls' attendance in school, prioritize social issues in decision-making processes, and emphasize poverty reduction among community members (Hassan & Silong, 2007; Mensah *et al.,* 2014). In Tanzania, while female leaders at the national level facilitate policy processes (Mihyo *et al.,* n.d.; Makulilo & Lihiru, 2021), their counterparts at the local level have influenced improvements in social services in their areas (Mandara *et al.,* 2013, 2017; Lyon *et al.,* 2017).

This paper examines three issues to understand participation of women leaders in local governance decision-making structures. First, it analyses women attendance in local governance decision-making structures. Secondly it examines their engagement and thirdly, it

explores the issues that women voice for decision making. The paper is organized into five sections. The first part is the introduction. This sets the background of the problem and states the objectives of the study. The second section is the theoretical framework. This sets a foundation for understanding the concepts and theories relevant to the present paper. The third section is the methodology section, which outlines the research design, data collection methods, and analytical techniques used. Section four discusses the findings and their implications. Finally, the paper concludes with a summary of the research and its contributions.

2. Theoretical Framework

The current debate on women participation in political processes expresses two contrasting views. One view is that women have the capacity to influence decisions and drive changes in the community (Makalanga, 2023). The other view is that women lack the confidence to express their feelings and effectively represent community interests in decision-making bodies (Kalumanga *et al.*, 2023). Drawing from Liberal Feminism, this paper argues that equality of opportunities in politics empowers women leaders to effectively represent communities in local governance decision making structures. Introduced by thinkers such as Wollstonecraft (1996) and Mansbridge (1999), liberal feminism aims to empower women to claim their rightful place in society, in this case, the involvement in local governance decision-making bodies. This perspective serves as a lens to explore how women leaders can overcome barriers to effectively participate in political processes.

While liberal feminist theory has been influential in enhancing the rights of women and their participation in politics, it has notable limitations, particularly its focus on individual rights and equality within existing political structures (Arat, 2015). This approach often overlooks systemic and structural inequalities that perpetuate gender discrimination, failing to address the broader social, economic, and cultural factors that hinder women's engagement. Moreover, it assumes equal access to opportunities will automatically empower women while overlooking the possibilities of policies that inadequately support marginalized groups even among women themselves (Paxton *et al.,* 2007).

Despite these limitations, liberal feminist theory is still relevant as it emphasizes equality in the political sphere, contributing to significant advancements in women's rights (Tong 2012, Bimer & Alemeneh, 2018). It provides a framework for identifying specific barriers such as the social norms, resource access, and gender bias that women face in political structures. Previous research has applied liberal feminism to study women empowerment in various domains (Bimer & Alemeneh, 2018; Samkange, 2015.; United Nations (UN), 2008). In the Tanzanian context, applying liberal feminist theory facilitates a nuanced examination of the participation of women in local government structures, underscoring the need for both legal reforms and practical measures that empower women, ensuring that their voices are heard and their interests represented.

Women participation refers to the involvement and representation of women in various spheres of the community (Araujo & Tejedo-Romero, 2016). This involves political participation, such as women participation in electoral processes, their involvement in decision-making organs, and their holding of leadership roles (Meena *et al.*, 2017). It also includes economic participation in the work force, entrepreneurship, and representation in different sectors and industries (International Labour Organaization (ILO), 2014). Additionally, women participation extends to the social and cultural spheres, where they are included in community organizations, civil society, and cultural institutions. Women also contribute through civic and community engagement with their involvement in voluntary activities, advocacy, and

grassroots initiatives (Morgan & Zaremba, 2023). Moreover, the participation of women is evident in public bodies and leadership roles, both at the household level and in administrative and executive positions in different sectors (Jalal, 2014; Désilets *et al.,* 2019; Silvano & Kweka, 2020; United States Agency for International Development (USAID), 2023). This paper views women participation in terms of women leaders' engagement in local decision-making processes. This includes their attendance at meetings, speaking up and influencing decisions at such meetings, and representing community opinions and interests in the meetings.

3. Methodology

This paper benefits from both quantitative and qualitative field data collected from three *mitaa*[2] of Dodoma Urban District—Kikuyu, Chinyoya, and Samora—as well as three villages of Bahi District—Ibugule, Kigwe, and Kisima cha Ndege. Dodoma Urban is among the urban authorities which have achieved one-third female representation in the *mitaa,* while Bahi represents rural authorities which have one-fourth women representation in village council members. The two councils provide a comparative lens for analyzing women's participation under the Local Government (District Authorities) Act of 1982 and the Local Government (Urban Authorities) Act of 1982. The two district councils differ in certain aspects, particularly in the structure of local authorities. Bahi District Council operates as a rural authority that encompasses *vitongoji,*[3] villages, wards, and small towns (township authorities), whereas Dodoma Urban (currently known as the City Council of Dodoma) functions as an urban authority composed of *mitaa* and wards. Hence, the two councils reflect the structure of urban and rural local government authorities (LGAs) in Tanzania.

   A simple random sampling technique was employed to select three wards from each council, ensuring representation across the study districts. Within each ward, the same procedure was applied to select three villages/*mitaa* from a list of villages/*mitaa*. Then, from each village/mtaa, systematic sampling technique was utilised to obtain a sample of households that participated in the study. Similarly, a simple random sampling technique was employed to choose 32 Ward Development Committee members while purposive sampling was utilized to select four male and four female councillors from the study wards, 20 key informants, and 16 village council and *mitaa* committee members, as shown in Table 2.

   A cross-sectional descriptive design was employed, utilizing a mixed research approach that allowed for the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data from various sources, including interviews, surveys, observations, focus group discussions, and documentary reviews. This mixed approach enabled the researcher to triangulate findings and gain a comprehensive insight into women's involvement in local decision-making structures.

   Quantitative data were collected using household surveys, which aimed to gather community opinions and perspectives regarding women leaders' participation in village and *mtaa* assemblies. The household surveys involved community members, and they were obtained through systematic random sampling of 390 household heads (195 from each council), comprising 97 men and 98 women household heads from each district.

   Qualitative data were collected from a varied group of participants including 20 key informants, 32 ward development committee members, 16 village councillors and *Mtaa* committee members, and 8 ward councillors, through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Ward councillors also serve as chairpersons of the WDCs. As such, they were

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2 *Mitaa* is a Swahili word used in Tanzania's urban local government authority to represent the lowest unit in local government structures in urban settings
3 *Vitongoji* is a Swahili word used in Tanzania to mean neighborhoods or 'sub-villages'. It refers to smaller administrative areas within a village.

involved in the key informant interviews as well as in the focus group discussions (FGDs). Other key informants from each district were the Mayors/the Council Chairpersons, one council clerk, a community development officer, a member of parliament, a district commissioner, a chairperson of council standing committees, three district/city officials, and a council director. The interviews took place in the respondents' offices, creating a comfortable and safe setting allowing for more natural dialogue. To efficiently conduct the interviews within a short time, the researcher utilized a structured approach with a focused interview guide that targeted the key themes related to women participation in local governance. Additionally, six FGDs were held—four involving village and *mtaa* committee members and two involving members of the WDC. Each FGD consisted of six participants from the *mtaa* and between 10 to 12 participants from the village and WDC members, ensuring gender representation. Although the primary focus of the studywas on women political leaders, men were included to prevent bias in the information collected. Ultimately, 466 participants were involved, comprising 390 household heads, selected local leaders, and key informants, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Category of Respondents from Dodoma Urban and Bahi Districts

Category & Method	Dodoma Urban	Bahi District	Total	Sampling Method
Household heads (Survey)	195 (97 men and 98 women)	195 (97 men and 98 women)	390	Systematic random sampling
Ward Development Committee members) (FGDs)	6 women, 6 men (from 3 *Mitaa*)	10 women, 10 men (from 3 villages)	32	Purposive and simple random sampling
Village council/*Mtaa* committee members (FGDs)	8 (4 men and 4 women	8 (4 men and 4 women)	16	Purposive and simple random sampling
Key informants (Interviews)	10	10	20	Purposive sampling
Ward Councilors (Interviews)	4 (2 men, 2 women)	4 (2 men, 2 women)	8	Purposive sampling
Total			466	

Source: Field records (2017)

To enhance the understanding of women engagement in local governance, the researcher also employed non-participant observation by attending three full council meetings: two in Bahi District and one in Dodoma Urban District. This observation aimed to assess the proportion of women in attendance, their level of engagement in discussions, and the type of issues they raised. In addition to interviews and observations, the researcher reviewed documents such as minutes from previous meetings to analyse the proportion of women compared to men in the councils and their standing committees, as well as trends in attendance in meetings and participation in discussions and decision-making processes. However, since these documents are typically not public records, but free to public access upon request, the researcher sought permission to access them in order to obtain the necessary information. This request was made alongside the collection of attendance data from the full council meetings in the district.

Findings obtained from questionnaires were processed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and analyzed for descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages. Field notes and transcripts from key informant interviews and FGDs were analyzed thematically by identifying patterns or themes in the findings, which were then used to develop meaningful interpretations.

4. Results and Discussion

Women participation in local government structures was measured through their attendance in local government meetings, and their participation in airing out their opinions and influencing decisions in such meetings. Local government meetings in the context of this paper mean any formal meeting or forum legally recognized at the local government authorities' level. The paper analyzed women's attendance in meetings of village councils, *Mtaa* committees, ward development committees, and district full councils.

4.1. Attendance in meetings

The findings revealed that, in Dodoma Urban Council, there was a total of 59 councilors, including 41 elected male councilors, 14 special seat councilors[4], and four elected female councilors, along with one elected Member of Parliament and one special seat Member of Parliament. In Bahi District Council, there were 22 elected councilors, from whom six held special seats and one elected female councilor. It was observed that out of 41 men, 38 attended the meeting in Dodoma Urban, while 16 out of 18 women were present. Similarly, in Bahi District Council meeting, 21 out of 22 men and 8 out of 9 women attended. At the second meeting in Bahi District Council, 22 men and 8 women were present. Even though district full council meetings were accessible to the citizens, only a few women were observed to have attended the council meetings compared to men. Furthermore, the researcher attended a village council meeting in Kigwe Village, Bahi District, and a *Mtaa* committee meeting in Chinyoya, Dodoma Urban. Out of the 16 overall members who attended the meeting in Kigwe, four out of six women attended. In Chinyoya, all three women members of the *Mtaa* committee were present. These findings indicate that both male and female local leaders attend the meetings, and they are, therefore, likely to represent the community concerns at the grassroots and district governance structures

The findings from the key informant interviews showed that local women leaders participated in local government meetings in both districts. However, the findings revealed some variations in meeting attendance among women political leaders in urban versus rural local governance, as well as differences between male and female leaders. In urban areas, women representatives exhibited higher attendance rates at *Mtaa* general meetings and *Mtaa* committee meetings compared to their rural counterparts in village assemblies and village councils. These findings indicated that attendance at the village general assembly, which is the highest authority at the village level, was notably lower among women. Additionally, the findings revealed that female leaders attended meetings more frequently than their male counterparts in the urban authority. One reason for this difference is the voluntary nature of many *Mtaa* responsibilities, which often lack incentives for local leaders. On the other hand, male leaders are more likely to be engaged in income- generating activities than female leaders, and thus, they may prioritize income generation over attending *Mtaa* meetings. Women are more likely to be unemployed in urban areas compared to men (Idris, 2018). Thus, they are more likely to be available for *Mtaa* meetings.

In contrast, the focus group discussions (FGDs) in Bahi District revealed both male and female leaders attend village council meetings equally.   Women are able to incorporate their participation in these meetings into their daily lives, balancing their gender roles and fulfilling domestic responsibilities such as water and firewood collection, as well as engaging in agricultural activities. Furthermore, the FGD findings revealed that in Bahi, local leaders in the

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4 A special seat councilor is an appointed female member of a local government council in a ward, primarily designated to ensure the representation women in governance and gender equity in decision-making bodies

study villages-imposed fines for the members who fail to attend meetings regularly or arrive late, thus emphasizing the importance of consistent attendance and punctuality. These findings echo previous observations by Shivji and Peter (2003) who noted that in certain regions of Tanzania, women make up the majority of local government meetings' attendees, whereas in other areas, their presence is minimal, with few even serving as members of the village council. However, these findings are contrary to the observations by Ashebir *et al.* (2020) in Ethiopia who argued that the participation of women in decisions that affect the community is very minimal.

Liberal feminists advocate for equality in politics, particularly in decision-making bodies, to address biases in interests. The fact that female leaders attend in a good number despite being comparatively fewer than their male counterparts in local governance structures is a positive sign for gender representation. Attendance of male and female representatives in council/committee meetings is crucial for addressing governance and development in their constituents. Due to the differences in gender roles between men and women in society, it is important for women to participate in decisions that affect them and the community at large. Their participation allows them to effectively represent the needs of the community, particularly those of women and girls (Beard, 2005; Lyon *et al.,* 2017). Consequently, local women leaders in their respective localities bear the responsibility for discussing the community members' viewpoints in their meetings before conveying them to higher-level authorities or providing feedback. To facilitate meaningful and fair decision-making processes and to offer feedback to community members, involvement of both male and female members is paramount.

4.2. Engagement in decision making

The findings from the interviews with district officials in both districts indicate that, despite the presence of women in local government committees, only a small number of them actively participate by sharing their opinions and views during the meetings. This observation was further supported by the researcher's attendance at the meetings. For instance, during the Dodoma full council meeting, only six out of the 16 women who attended spoke up, indicating a higher participation rate among women. In the Bahi District Council, three and four out of eight women leaders, in the two attended council meetings respectively, spoke up. In contrast, of the 38 male leaders who attended the Dodoma Urban council meeting, seven spoke up, while in Bahi district council meetings, five and six out of 22 male leaders spoke up in the two respective meetings. These figures show that women leaders, despite being fewer, demonstrated higher or comparable engagement in discussions, through their lower representation may limit their overall impact on council decisions; increasing their representation could enhance their influence. Participation of female leaders in grassroots committees was also reportedly lower when compared to their male counterparts. The FGD participants in Chinyoya expressed that:

> Not all women speak up in meetings, and when they do, they usually address issues that directly affect them and their children (FGD, Chinyoya (*mtaa*), November, 2017).

A significant number of male participants in the focus group discussions acknowledged the challenges women face during meetings. Women's voices[5] were often not strong enough to

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[5] Women's voices refer to the active participation, opinions, and contributions of women leaders in discussions and decision-making processes

make a significant impact, resulting in their absence from the discussions. Women leaders are often overshadowed by their male colleagues who take up more space and wield more power in the conversations. Women leaders expressed feelings of oppression, marginalization, negligence, and exclusion. These limit their ability to engage in local decision-making processes. While liberal feminists advocate for equality in political participation, women still do not enjoy equal status with men when it comes to speaking up in meetings. Men generally hold higher social status, which further contributes to the disparity. Consequently, even though many women attend public meetings, a significant number of them are not actively involved in the decision-making processes as they do not speak up.

Similarly, Masanyiwa et al. (2014) had reported fewer numbers of women who attend and actively express their views at public meetings. Other scholars, such as Agarwal (2010) and Mshana *et al.* (2022), contend that participating in discussions during meetings is a nuanced issue that involves more than just being present. Agarwal (2010) suggests that women feel free to express their opinions and ideas when they are in the company of other women, implying that a larger proportion of women in a meeting increases the likelihood of their voices. One possible explanation for this pattern could be the differences in confidence levels and educational attainment among women in the study districts. Majority of women leaders surveyed had completed primary education in the rural areas or secondary education in the urban areas as their highest level of education, and only a few had attained post-secondary education (Table 3). Consequently, men tend to dominate the decision-making processes, placing women at a disadvantage in terms of speaking up and influencing decisions during meetings.

**Table 3: Education Attainment of Women leaders in Bahi and
Dodoma Urban Districts (n = 81)**

Education Level	Dodoma Urban		Bahi District	
	% of female	% of male	% of female	% of male
Primary education	3(16.7)	5(12.1)	4 (57.1)	4(26.7)
Secondary education	10(55.6)	13(31.7)	3 (42.9)	7(46.6)
Vocational education	0(0.0)	6(14.6)	0(0)	3(20)
Tertiary education	5(27.7)	17(41.4)	0(0)	1(6.7)
Total	18(100)	41(100)	7(100)	15(100)

Source: Field data (2017)

Additionally, gender norms and stereotypes were identified as major barriers discouraging women's public engagement and lack of confidence in voicing opinions (Key Informant Interview (KII), Bahi, 2017). The findings from FGDs and KIIs further highlight issues such as fear of harassment, which creates an unwelcoming environment for women to speak up in meetings, as was reported by one female participant, who said:

> Sometimes I feel to share my opinions, but I worry that if I make a mistake, I might embarrass myself in front of others. It is better to remain silent because being embarrassed in front of children is not good[6]. (FGD, Ibugule, November 2017)

Moreover, another male participant reported that:

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[6] By children she did not mean the little ones but those whom she was older enough to be their mother.

> Sometimes when women speak up, they struggle to make their points in order to support their arguments and be accepted in the meeting. You find that they say something, but they fail to elaborate it sufficiently to give it weight. (KII, Dodoma Urban District, 2017)

These findings align with previous studies on barriers to women's participation in the political sphere, which reported gender norms as a factor limiting women's participation in parliamentary positions (Idris, 2018; Maguire, 2018). The findings suggest that while it is possible to increase the number of women representatives in the local governance decision making structures particularly committees through quotas and other affirmative actions, their involvement in decision-making processes proves to be complex. This complexity arises from the cultural influences and gender relations that shape women's behavior in the presence of men (Kassa, 2015). Consequently, the stereotypes and perceptions surrounding women within the community persist in these spaces and impact their level of participation. This suggests that the power dynamics that create boundaries between men and women limit women's capacity to engage effectively in their leadership roles as agents of change within the community. Evidently, gender-based power dynamics have not changed enough to guarantee equal opportunities for both men and women to engage actively and interactively in politics (Fischer, 2016).

However, there are some women who have confidence, and they are able to influence decision-making through their opinions and views. In discussions with local female leaders and districts officials, it was evident that there were two elected women councilors in the study councils who brought significant changes in their respective wards after assuming these positions. This was also verified in an interview with a male official from Bahi District Council who said:

> This woman is highly capable and possesses significant influence. Since her election in 2010, she has faced no opponents and is widely respected for her accomplishments. Before she took office, many issues needed to be addressed both in the ward and within the council. Through her influence in every meeting, the council budgeted for the health center. (KII, Bahi District, 2017).

Furthermore, the interviews with district officials and council committee members in Dodoma Urban and Bahi Districts confirmed the significant contributions of two local female leaders since their elections in 2005 and 2010, respectively. The findings revealed that in one of the study wards in Bahi District Council, there was no maternity ward prior to the election of a female ward councilor. However, after she advocated for it in the community, a maternity ward was built. Additionally, an official from Dodoma Urban District highlighted the water shortage issue in Kikuyu Ward. After a female leader was elected in 2005, she effectively mobilized support and influenced key decisions, resulting in the installation of piped water in households. These findings echo the research of Svahn (2011), which underscore the capacity of women in Ghana to effectively influence decision-making processes related to water service improvements. Similarly, a study by Kamuzora (2024) emphasizes the contribution of women to ensuring sustainability of water projects within communities. These testimonies not only illustrate the dedication and effectiveness of these women, but they also provide evidence to support the success stories associated with women's greater participation in the local leadership.

4.3. Issues raised in meetings

The study probed on the issues that women leaders focus on. The findings revealed gender differences in the issues discussed by men and women during meetings. Women predominantly focused on issues that directly impacted them, such as the education of female children, maternal and child health services, and access to clean and safe water in their communities. For instance, during the full council meeting in Bahi, a woman councilor protested the location of a ward school:

> We are unhappy with the location of the secondary school in our ward. Our girl children have to walk long distances, and there is a lack of security along the routes to and from the schools (Full council meeting, Bahi District, March 2017).

Furthermore, another female councilor in the same meeting stated:

> We request that the council allocates funds to expand health services in the ward I oversee. Women encounter significant challenges during childbirth when traveling from the village to the district hospital. Enhancing all available services would greatly improve access to healthcare (Full council meeting, Bahi District, March 2017)

In contrast, men primarily focused on different issues, such as plot allocations in Chinyoya, road maintenance in Kikuyu, and sewage system maintenance in Samora. Referring to gender roles, women, particularly as mothers, wives, and homemakers, are significantly affected by the absence or scarcity of social services such as healthcare and education (Smith *et al.,* 2021; Sebbane *et al.,* 2022). The findings from the full council meetings revealed that women who stood up to speak, emphasized mainly on issues that directly impact gender well-being. Both men and women recognize these practical gender needs as falling within the domain of women (Moser, 1989). As leaders, women leverage their expertise to represent and influence decisions that fulfill their gender roles in terms of practical gender needs. Taking into account the division of labor within households, men typically undertake economic activities while women carry out the majority of domestic tasks (Sikod, 2007). Consequently, there are masculine and feminine concerns that motivate both men and women to speak up from their respective perspectives.

In Tanzania's local government structure, village and *Mtaa* general meetings serve as forums where community members at the grassroots level present their issues to be communicated to higher authorities, such as ward development committees. Feedback on these issues is subsequently provided during the same meetings (Shivji, 2003). The study probed household heads on whether they felt their local representatives represented their concerns adequately. The results presented in Figure 1 indicate that majority of household heads felt their views on health services (69%), water services (73.3%), and education services (77.7%) were indeed represented in the meetings, highlighting the importance of these services in fulfilling the gender roles of both men and women in the household.
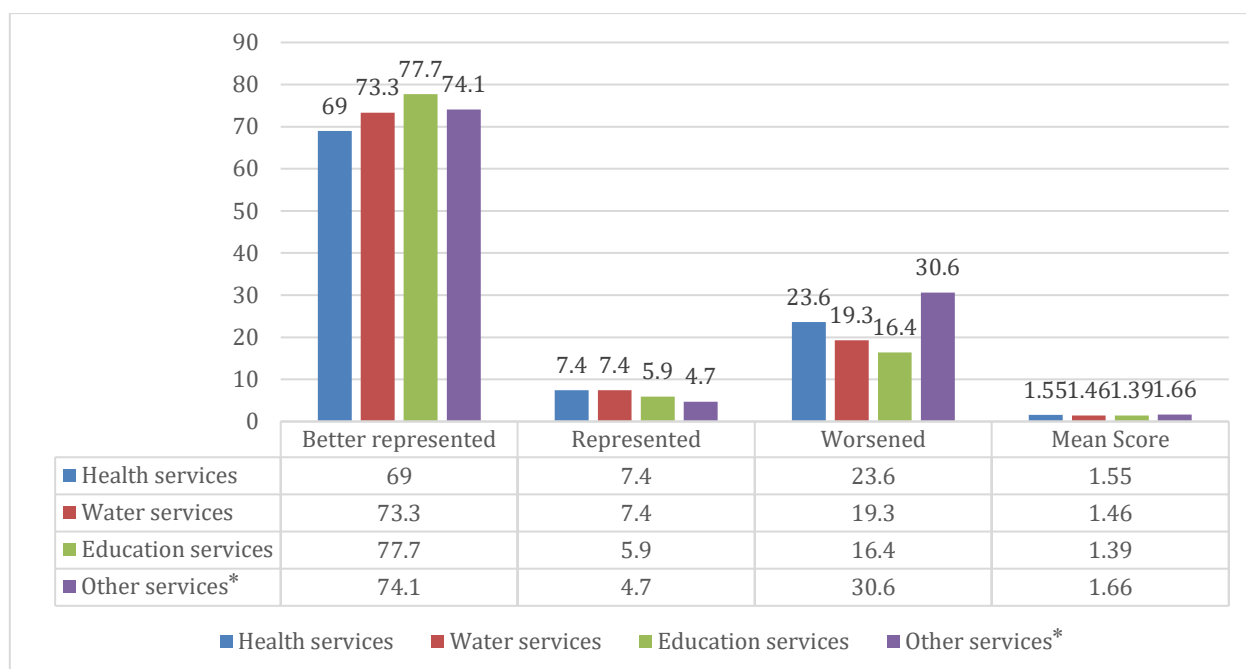
Figure 1: Perceptions of members on women's representation of community interests and needs in meetings
Source: Field data (2017)

Since it is the female representatives who speak most on these issues, these findings suggest that female leaders in the community serve as vital advocates, bringing diverse perspectives that reflect the specific challenges facing communities, particularly regarding community needs and interests. Their level of participation enhances communication, allowing them to effectively convey these issues to decision makers at the higher-level authorities and bring feedback to community members. Additionally, this level of participation empowers women, fosters their leadership skills, and enables them to influence policies that benefit the community as a whole. Other studies have also shown that women participation in local decision-making bodies is essential, as it ensures representation of diverse perspectives thus promoting more equitable community needs (Anunobi & Anunobi, 2002; Hassan & Silong, 2007).

5. Conclusion

This paper has shed light on the extent of women's participation in local governance decision-making structures in Tanzania. While women representation has improved in numerical terms, analysis of women attendance in local decision-making structures, their willingness to express their opinions, the issues they discuss, and their level of influence suggests their participation remains complex. The paper concludes that social-cultural barriers and gender-stereotypes continue to impend women involvement in local decision-making processes. Nevertheless, some women leaders make remarkable contributions to local governance decision making stuctures. The paper documents success stories that underscore the importance of creating an enabling environment that supports women's leadership and allows for their full involvement in local decision-making. To achieve this, it recommends targeted interventions, such as capacity-enhancement programmes for local women leaders for them to effectively overcome the systemic obstacles they encounter. By harnessing the talents and perspectives of female leaders at the grassroots, Tanzania can make significant strides towards more equitable and sustainable development outcomes in local communities. Policymakers, civil society organizations, and community leaders may work collaboratively towards this end.

Furthermore, a holistic approach that integrates policy measures and grassroots empowerment can help shift the perception that women's leadership roles may interfere with their traditional domestic responsibilities. By empowering women to participate in local governance, their voices and priorities can be fully represented, ultimately benefiting the entire community.

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