

REPOA Brief



Increasing the Number of Elected Women Representatives in Tanzania's Parliament: Challenges and Strategies

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Key Messages

While the reserved seats have increased women's representation in Tanzania, only 6% of female MPs were elected from the constituencies in 2020, highlighting a remaining gender gap in the competitive political leadership.

Structural, legal, financial, and cultural barriers continue to prevent women from running and winning in constituency-based elections.

Tanzania needs to continue strengthening female representation by reforming party nomination systems, amending electoral laws, investing in women's leadership, and streamlining campaign financing.

Introduction

Globally, the number of women in parliaments has more than doubled between 1995 and 2020, rising from 11.3% to 24.9% (IPU, 2022). Africa has seen standout cases like Rwanda (61.3%), South Africa (46.4%), and Senegal (43%), largely due to reserved seat systems and voluntary party quotas. Tanzania, despite achieving a relatively high 36.6% female representation in 2020, remains reliant on special seats, with few women winning constituency races. Out of the 393 members of the 12th Parliament, 113 were nominated for women's seats by their political parties (28.75%). Only 25 of them (6.36%) were directly elected from constituencies and out of these, 22 were from Chama Cha Mapinduzi, two from the Civic United Front (CUF) and one from Chama Cha Demokrasia Na Maendeleo (CHADEMA).

Tanzania has a long history of policy commitment to gender equality, dating back to Mwalimu Julius Nyerere's early advocacy in the 1940s. Today, the Constitution, Vision 2025, and ratified international frameworks like the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the SDGs affirm the country's commitment to women's rights. However, the persistent underrepresentation of women in the constituency elected parliamentary seats reveals a structural gap between policy intent and political practice. In March 2025, Tanzania's ruling party, Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM), announced a two-term limit for its special seat legislators, a decision praised across party lines for promoting generational renewal and amplifying women's voices in parliament. This reform follows longstanding debates within the party and recommendations by its women's wing to prioritise younger women in leadership roles (*The Citizen*, March 1, 2025; *The Daily News*, March 13, 2025). While commendable, this decision does not address the deeper issue of limited direct electoral representation of women in Tanzania's legislature.

Methodology

This brief draws on data from the National Electoral Commission, parliamentary records (1985–2020), media reports, and selected secondary studies on women in politics in Tanzania and other African countries, and data compiled from selected local government authority websites (2025) for the number of councillors. This research was conducted in early 2025, immediately after the local government elections in November 2024. It does not cover the period after the 2025 general elections.

Key Findings

Barriers contributing to women's low representation in Tanzania's Parliament

Women's political participation in Tanzania remains constrained by intertwined legal, cultural, and structural barriers that limit their ability to compete on an equal footing. From prohibitive electoral laws and patriarchal norms to media bias and election-related insecurity, these factors collectively reinforce women's low representation in Parliament as explained hereunder.

Structural Barriers within Electoral Law

The Election Act of 2010 imposes prohibitive financial requirements: TZS 5 million for presidential aspirants and TZS 1 million for parliamentary candidates and TZS 50,000 for councillor candidates. In addition, no legal provisions require proportional gender representation on candidate selection committees. These disadvantages affect women, especially young and first-time aspirants, who face higher financial, social, and political entry costs.

Cultural and Social Norms

Patriarchal beliefs continue to frame politics as a male domain. Research across regions such as Arusha, Coast, and Dodoma shows widespread scepticism even among women about women's leadership capabilities. Cultural norms rooted in historical religious roles and inheritance traditions persist and subtly influence candidate selection and voter preferences.

Media Bias and Campaign Hostility

Women candidates often face gendered media narratives, with undue focus on their marital status, appearance, or personal lives. Media outlets, frequently aligned with party interests, amplify stereotypes and marginalise independent or opposition female candidates.

Securitisation of Elections

Increased use of security forces during elections, coupled with the risk of harassments, deters many women from standing for office. Lack of personal security and financial limitations in hiring protection add to the burden.

Strategies for Increasing the Number of Elected Women

Strengthening women's political representation in Tanzania requires targeted strategies that address legal, cultural, and institutional barriers to their participation.

Tackling Root Causes with Culturally Informed Interventions

A key limitation of past research and training has been the overreliance on surface-level, outsider (etic) perspectives. Gender inequality is rooted in deep cultural and religious norms. For instance, traditions that deny women inheritance rights are often based on outdated beliefs about ritual

purity. Researchers and advocacy groups must combine etic and emic (insider) approaches to challenge these beliefs. This includes myth-busting campaigns tailored to community-specific contexts, especially in rural areas where such narratives persist.

Strengthening Quota Frameworks Through Party Reforms

Voluntary and statutory quotas can be made more effective through political party reforms. Parties need to consider, firstly, embedding gender quotas into their constitutions, not just manifestos. Secondly, to commit to nominating women in winnable constituencies. Thirdly, establishing leadership pipelines through women's wings to identify and train future leaders. Lessons from liberation-era parties in Eastern and Southern Africa (e.g., African National Congress of South Africa, Rwanda Patriotic Front, South West African Peoples' Organisation of Namibia) show that when women's struggles are tied to national struggles, and when party structures institutionalise gender parity, outcomes are more transformative. Uganda's constituency-based quota system, however, has been criticised for reinforcing the perception that constituency seats are reserved for men (Wang & Yoon, 2018).

Institutional and Legal Innovations

To enhance women's participation in politics, election fees for first-time female candidates should be reduced or waived to ease financial barriers. Candidate vetting committees must be required to include gender representation, ensuring fairer and more inclusive selection processes. In addition, laws that indirectly hinder women's political involvement, particularly those regulating campaign financing and election monitoring, need to be repealed or amended to create a more enabling environment.

Building Women's Economic and Political Capacity

Running for the office is expensive. Tanzania could establish a public subsidy mechanism or campaign fund for women candidates, with transparent eligibility criteria. Long-term investments in women's education, economic empowerment, and leadership training are equally critical.

Voter education campaigns should be continuous, not limited to election periods and should include messaging that challenges gender stereotypes and emphasises democratic values. These efforts should target both voters and political actors.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Gender inclusion in political leadership is fundamental to democratic deepening. As Mwalimu Nyerere once stated, a country cannot walk forward on one leg alone. Women's political participation is not a luxury but a necessity. While Tanzania's reserved seats system has improved numerical representation, it cannot be a substitute for real parity in elected positions. The path forward requires bold, systemic change rooted in legal reform, cultural transformation, and political will. Thus, this brief recommends to the Government to:

Learning from international practices: Tanzania can draw on strategies used in other countries, such as advocacy coalitions seen in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu where women's organisations pool resources and lobby effectively and the "best loser" systems in Samoa and Mauritius, which allocate additional seats to high performing but unsuccessful female candidates.

Legislate for and enforce a 50% gender quota through laws requiring political parties to ensure women hold at least half of the directly elected seats and nominations and empower the

Independent National Electoral Commission (NEC) to monitor compliance and impose penalties for non-adherence. Lessons can also be drawn from Uganda and Fiji have integrated gender quotas into the leadership of parliamentary committees to deepen women's influence beyond numbers (Wang & Yoon, 2018).

Amend electoral laws to lower financial barriers to reduce nomination fees and other campaign costs and to allow the INEC to require political parties to include women in candidate selection committees to promote fairness.

Incentivise political parties by linking public funding to political parties' achievement of gender parity targets and giving powers to the Registrar of Political Parties to assess performance annually and adjust funding accordingly.

Invest in women's capacity-building and campaign financing by working with civil society, development partners and others to provide leadership training, mentorship, and dedicated campaign funds for women candidates. It is also recommended that political parties integrate such training into their internal programmes.

Sustain public education campaigns by enabling media and civil society to run continuous awareness campaigns to counter stereotypes and promote women's leadership. These campaigns could use community dialogues, mass media, and school curricula to shift public attitudes.

Bibliography

IPU (2022). Women in Parliament 1995-2022, Geneva, IPU.

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