

## **THE LEVEL OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION AND REPRESENTATION IN THE PARLIAMENT: THE GAMBIAN EXPERIENCE**

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### **Abstract**

This study uses a survey design to facilitate the aim of understanding the low political representation of women in the Gambia. The study adopts a mixed approach to discuss the issues of women's participation and representation in parliament. Structured questionnaires were used to collect data. Findings from the study suggest that a majority of participants share a sense of doubt or pessimism regarding the prospect of achieving gender parity in parliamentary representation. The findings underscore the need for continued efforts to

address the barriers and challenges faced by women in politics and promote gender equality in representation in The Gambia. Affirmative Action such as party quotas seems far away. The study herewith, recommends thus: Political parties should provide enabling fair play environment for women to participate in the democratisation process in The Gambia, thus, the concept of politics among women should be corrected through proper awareness campaigns to educate women on the need to understand that the negative concept of politics must be corrected and negative stereotype of women dampens their morale thereby impacting on their zeal to participate in politics.

**Key Words:** *Women, Parliamentary, Politics, Gambia*

## **1. Introduction**

A profound statement from the former United Nations Secretary-General -Kofi Annan (1998) states that “*Gender equality is more than a goal in itself. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development, and building good governance.*” In Africa sometimes cultures, customs, and traditions serve as barriers to women’s political participation (Africa Barometer, 2021). Politics in the Gambia has been largely thought of as a man’s world. Men have traditionally

outnumbered women in the field of political representation. Generally, women play latent roles in politics as supporters of men.

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

The lack of female participation in politics is much more apparent at the level of parliament where only 3 of the 58 parliamentarians are females (UNFPA, 2023). If the voices of women must be felt, it should be at the highest decision-making body i.e., the parliament.

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

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

Gambia was able to have only 9.4% of its parliamentarians being females (MDG Status Report, 2015).

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

## **2. Methodology**

This study uses a survey design to facilitate the aim of understanding the low political representation of women in The Gambia. This involves the engagement of women and parties of interest in the study through the administration of close-ended interview questionnaires. The population of the study is 200 people. It comprises National Assembly members, political party representatives, gender experts, and representatives of

NGOs. The study adopts Slovin's statistical formula for the study. The sample size is 99.59 percent of the population of 200 participants in the study. The choice for the population was purposive and to provide an overall representation of the sample for the study.

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

### **3. Qualitative Survey Questionnaire**

The survey questionnaires will be the core tool used to collect material for this study. The survey will represent the main actors that are considered relevant and important influences in the question of women's political participation. Political parties are represented with both male and female members and women MPs are chosen since it is their perception of their possibilities that are interesting for the study. Representatives from NGOs working with gender issues are seen as both representatives from their organisation and as gender equality experts. From these questionnaires, the aim is to find answers to the research questions about women's experienced role in politics and what obstacles hinder the more extensive political participation of women in decision-making. The questions asked were Likert scale for all respondents. Among the first steps in the research was to identify which parties should be included. The selection was made by looking at the results of the latest national parliamentary elections of

2022 and establishing which parties now are represented in the Parliament. These are the National People's Party (NPP), The United Democratic Party (UDP), the People's Democratic Organisation for Independence and Socialism (PDOIS), Alliance for

Patriotic Reorientation and Construction (APRC) of the Republic of The Gambia. The opposition was able to participate in interviews.

#### **4. Qualitative Textual Analysis**

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

## 5. Test of Assumptions

**Table 1 Validity of the Questionnaire**

| <b>Statement</b>   | <b>Pairwise</b> | <b>P-Value (sig)</b> |
|--|-----------------|----------------------|
| <b>Since the First Republic to date women's representation and participation in parliament has been steadily improving.</b>            | 0.44            | 0.000*               |
| <b>There is an unjustifiably disproportionate Women representation and participation in parliament</b>                                 | 0.67            | 0.000*               |
| <b>Political parties are doing adequately enough to enhance and advocate women's representation and participation in parliament.</b>   | 0.471           | 0.000*               |
| <b>Women's participation is not as adequately felt as their representation in the parliament</b>                                       | 0.399           | 0.000*               |
| <b>There is a centrality of structural explanations to the problem of women's electoral under-representation</b>                       | 0.615           | 0.000*               |
| <b>There is a dashing of the idealistic hope that women will soon or even ever achieve parity in representation in the parliament.</b> | 0.607           | 0.000*               |
| <b>Religious influences have strongly hindered women's participation in parliament.</b>  | 0.508           | 0.000*               |

|  |       |        |
|--|-------|--------|
| <b>Cultural stereotypes and ethnocentrism are a great hindrance to women's participation in the Gambia.</b>  | 0.405 | 0.000* |
| <b>The biological role ascribed to women is a contributing hindrance to women's participation in parliament</b>  | 0.568 | 0.000* |
| <b>The lack of radical and affirmative actions by the state is a major contributing factor to women's representation and participation in parliament</b>                         | 0.428 | 0.000* |
| <b>Lack of financial resources to be considered meaningful members of political parties</b>  | 0.658 | 0.000* |
| <b>Lack of access to appropriate information serves as a barrier to women's participation in politics</b>  | 0.577 | 0.000* |
| <b>The male-dominated model of politics that tends to undermine the value of women's contributions and their participation is a hindrance to women's political participation</b> | 0.554 | 0.000* |
| <b>Lack of formal or political education and self-confidence</b>   | 0.484 | 0.000* |
| <b>Lack of political experience is hindering women from participating</b>  | 0.416 | 0.000* |
| <b>Women do not support fellow women participating in politics</b>   | 0.425 | 0.000* |
| <b>Lack of party support and exclusion from decision-making party structures</b>   | 0.401 | 0.000* |

|  |       |        |
|--|-------|--------|
| <b>The dual burden and a disproportionate share of domestic work is a contributing</b>   | 0.437 | 0.000* |
| <b>Lack of campaign funds</b>  | 0.485 | 0.000* |
| <b>The perception of politics as “dirty” by women in The Gambia</b>  | 0.462 | 0.000* |
| <b>Lack of media coverage and gender- based stereotypes and bias in the media</b>  | 0.493 | 0.000* |
| <b>Training and leadership programmes for women will enhance Women’s Political Participation at the Subnational level project provides for the development and holding of offline and online training events</b> | 0.684 | 0.000* |
| <b>Mentoring which may include Special mentoring (tutorship) Political (party) mentoring</b>   | 0.604 | 0.000* |
| <b>Inter-factional associations and groups that aim to ensure gender equality help women champion</b>  | 0.557 | 0.000* |
| <b>The gender policy of political parties provides the basis for developing programmes and policies that enable and help women move up the career ladder and become more publicly visible and recognizable</b>   | 0.809 | 0.000* |
| <b>Quotas are necessary if legally imposed a certain percent mandatory quota on nominating candidates and drawing up political party lists.</b>  | 0.704 | 0.000* |

Source: Field Survey, 2023

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

**Table 2 Reliability of the Questionnaire**

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

**Source: Field Survey, 2023**

To check the reliability of the questionnaire below, Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient was used. This

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

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

Finally, the findings indicate that there is a sense of doubt or pessimism among participants regarding the

prospect of achieving gender parity in parliamentary representation. This underscores the need for continued efforts to address the barriers and challenges faced by women in politics and promote gender equality in representation. The findings of this objective highlight both progress and challenges in women's participation and representation in The Gambia's parliamentary system, emphasizing the need for continued efforts to promote gender equality in politics.

## 6. Results

**Table 3: The Level of Women Participation and Representation in Parliament in The Gambia**

|   | Strongly Disagree |      | Disagree |       | Undecided |       | Agree |       | Strongly Agree |       |
|---|-------------------|------|----------|-------|-----------|-------|-------|-------|----------------|-------|
|   | Freq.             | %    | Freq.    | %     | Freq.     | %     | Freq. | %     | Freq.          | %     |
| Since the first Republic to date women's representation and participation in parliament has been steadily improving.          | 5                 | 5.1% | 9        | 9.1%  | 15        | 15.2% | 42    | 42.4% | 28             | 28.3% |
| There is an unjustifiably disproportionate Women representation and participation in parliament                               | 2                 | 2.0% | 14       | 14.1% | 11        | 11.1% | 37    | 37.4% | 35             | 35.4% |
| Political parties are doing adequately enough to enhance and advocate women's representation and participation in parliament. | 8                 | 8.1% | 18       | 18.2% | 19        | 19.2% | 37    | 37.4% | 17             | 17.2% |
| Women's participation is not as adequately felt as their representation in the parliament                                     | 9                 | 9.1% | 18       | 18.2% | 21        | 21.2% | 35    | 35.4% | 16             | 16.2% |

|  |   |      |    |       |    |       |    |       |    |       |
|--|---|------|----|-------|----|-------|----|-------|----|-------|
| <b>There is a centrality of structural explanations to the problem of women's electoral under-representation</b>                   | 6 | 6.1% | 12 | 12.1% | 20 | 20.2% | 42 | 42.4% | 19 | 19.2% |
| <b>There is a dashing of idealistic hope that women will soon or even ever achieve parity in representation in the parliament.</b> | 5 | 5.1% | 18 | 18.2% | 16 | 16.2% | 44 | 44.4% | 16 | 16.2% |
| <b>The male-dominated model of politics tends to undermine the value of women'</b>   | 5 | 5.1% | 12 | 12.1% | 10 | 10.1% | 50 | 50.5% | 22 | 22.2% |
| <b>Lack of formal or political education and self-confidence</b>   | 3 | 3.0% | 17 | 17.2% | 11 | 11.1% | 44 | 44.4% | 24 | 24.2% |
| <b>Lack of political experience is hindering women from participating</b>  | 5 | 5.1% | 15 | 15.2% | 13 | 13.1% | 39 | 39.4% | 27 | 27.3% |
| <b>Women do not support fellow women participating in politics</b>   | 6 | 6.1% | 11 | 11.1% | 24 | 24.2% | 38 | 38.4% | 20 | 20.2% |
| <b>Lack of party support and exclusion from decision-making party structures</b>   | 8 | 8.1% | 8  | 8.1%  | 17 | 17.2% | 38 | 38.4% | 28 | 28.3% |
| <b>The dual burden and a disproportionate share of domestic work is a contributing</b>   | 4 | 4.0% | 10 | 10.1% | 24 | 24.2% | 46 | 46.5% | 15 | 15.2% |
| <b>Lack of campaign funds</b>  | 6 | 6.1% | 17 | 17.2% | 16 | 16.2% | 45 | 45.5% | 15 | 15.2% |
| <b>The perception of politics as "dirty" by women in The Gambia</b>  | 4 | 4.0% | 18 | 18.2% | 17 | 17.2% | 43 | 43.4% | 17 | 17.2% |
| <b>Lack of media coverage and gender-based stereotypes and bias in the media</b>   | 6 | 6.1% | 15 | 15.2% | 11 | 11.1% | 51 | 51.5% | 16 | 16.2% |

**Source:** Field Survey, 2023

Table 3 presents responses to a statement related to women's representation and participation in The

Gambia's parliamentary system from the first republic to the present day. The table is based on the responses of 99 participants and is divided into five response categories: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Undecided, Agree, and Strongly Agree, using the Likert scale. The table shows that the largest response category among participants was Agree, with 71 participants (71.72%) indicating that they agreed with the statement that women's representation and participation in The Gambia's parliamentary system have been steadily improving since the first republic. The second-largest group was those who Strongly Agree, with 21 participants (21.21%). Only a small number of participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, with 2 and 3 participants respectively. The cumulative percentages indicate that 78.79% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, while only 5.05% disagreed or strongly disagreed. These findings suggest that a majority of participants in the study believed that women's representation and participation in The Gambia's parliamentary system have been steadily improving since the first Republic.

On the second statement, table 3 indicates that the largest response category among participants was Agree, with 45 participants (45.45%) indicating that they agree with the statement that there is an unjustifiably disproportionate women representation and participation in legislation in The Gambia. The second-largest group

was those who were Undecided, with 17 participants (17.17%). An equal number of participants (16.16%) disagreed and strongly disagreed with the statement, with 4 and 16 participants, respectively. These findings suggest that a majority of participants in the study believed that women's representation and participation in legislation in The Gambia were unjustifiably disproportionate.

On the third statement, the largest response category among participants was Agree, with 51 participants (51.52%) indicating that they believe political parties are doing adequately enough to enhance and advocate for women's representation and participation in parliament. The second-largest group was those who Strongly Disagree, with 16 participants (16.16%). A significant number of participants (14.14%) were Undecided about the efforts of political parties, and an equal number (14.14%) strongly agreed with the statement. These findings suggest that a majority of participants in the study have positive perceptions regarding the efforts of political parties in promoting women's representation and participation in parliament. This table shows the responses of participants to the statement "Women's participation is not as adequately felt as their representation in the parliament." Out of the 99 participants, 2.02% strongly disagreed with the statement, while 12.12% disagreed. 18.18% of participants were

undecided, while 44.44% agreed with the statement.

Finally, 23.23% of participants strongly agreed that women's participation is not adequately felt as their representation in parliament. Overall, it seems that a significant proportion of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that women's participation is not adequately felt despite their representation in parliament. On the fifth statement, the largest response category among participants was Agree, with 40 participants (40.40%) indicating that they agree with the statement that there is a centrality of structural explanations to the problem of women's electoral under-representation. The second-largest group was those who Strongly Agree, with 19 participants (19.19%). A significant number of participants (27.27%) were Undecided about the centrality of structural explanations, while smaller proportions disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. These findings suggest that a majority of participants in the study recognized the importance of structural explanations for the problem of women's electoral under-representation.

In the table, the largest response category among participants was Agree, with 36 participants (36.36%) indicating that they agree with the statement that there is a dashing of the idealistic hope for women to achieve parity in representation in the parliament. The second-largest group was those who Strongly Agreed,

with 26 participants (26.26%). A significant number of participants (26.26%) were Undecided about the likelihood of achieving parity, while smaller proportions disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. These findings suggest that a majority of participants in the study shared a sense of doubt or pessimism regarding the prospect of achieving gender parity in parliamentary representation. The table highlights the participants' perceptions regarding the realistic prospects of achieving gender parity in parliament. These findings underscore the need for continued efforts to address the barriers and challenges faced by women in politics and promote gender equality in representation.

## **7. Conclusion**

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

prospect of achieving gender parity in parliamentary representation. These findings underscore the need for continued efforts to address the barriers and challenges faced by women in politics to promote gender equality in The Gambia.

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

## **8. Recommendations**

1. The participation of women in politics especially their representation in the parliament could improve if political parties take the lead. Political parties need to empower their female members to take important positions and participate in parliamentary and mayoral elections in the Gambia. Even though in this study, the majority of participants believe political parties are doing enough to enhance and advocate for women's representation and participation in parliament, this is not reflective of the

reality considering the number of women in the parliament; currently, only about 8.6% of the parliamentarians are women which is just 5 seats out of 58 seats. Among the 5 women, only 3 were elected and only one of them represented a political party (UN, 2022). indeed, shows the gap between women's political participation and party representation. There is a need for more research on this gap.

2. For a meaningful achievement to be made in women's political participation, there is a need to debunk the myth of women as being better supporters of men in politics instead of aspiring for positions themselves. Women should be seen as equally capable to handle critical positions and make decisions, especially regarding women. These structural barriers that limit women could be gradually eradicated with education and awareness campaigns.

3. According to the 1997 constitution of the Republic of the Gambia, the president could select/nominate 5 members of the parliament. As such, to boost female participation in politics, this executive power could be utilized to nominate more females. Most importantly there is a need to introduce a special quota allocated for female representation in the parliament as recommended by The Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDGs) on achieving Gender equality and empowering all women. Caution should be taken in doing so that we do not only have the

numbers but also the impact of those numbers.

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