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### Breaking Barriers: The Struggles and Prospects of Women Leadership in the Gusii Region

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Women in the Gusii region of Kenya have struggled to access leadership positions, particularly in politics, where no woman has been elected as a Member of Parliament for over 50 years. This article examines the historical reasons for the exclusion of women from leadership, including cultural practices, the impact of colonialism, and entrenched patriarchal systems. It also explores the challenges women face today, such as cultural norms, financial constraints, and stereotypes that limit their opportunities for success. The study employed both primary and secondary research methodologies. Primary data was gathered through oral interviews with key informants, including women leaders, political aspirants, and personal assistants to female politicians. Secondary data was sourced from books, academic journals, and other relevant literature. The data was analyzed qualitatively, using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes. The results highlight recent progress in gender equality movements and Kenyan laws that support women in leadership. It also discusses the experiences of a few women who have broken barriers and achieved leadership roles. Finally, the article suggests strategies for increasing women's participation in leadership, focusing on education, policy reforms, and shifting cultural attitudes.

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## INTRODUCTION

Globally, women continue to face numerous barriers to achieving leadership positions despite progress in education and labour force participation. For example, women represent almost half of the U.S. labour force and outnumber men in attaining higher education degrees. Yet, they are significantly underrepresented in leadership roles across various sectors, including corporate boardrooms, academia, and politics (American Association of University Women, 2020). This gender gap persists even in high-income countries, where women hold only 28.2% of managerial positions globally (Hanna et al., 2023).

In developed countries, women continue to face significant barriers to leadership despite progress in education and labour force participation. For example, in the U.S., women held only 28.5% of seats in the House of Representatives and 25% in the Senate as of 2023 (Pew Research Center, 2023). Even though women make up about half of the U.S. population, their political representation remains far below parity. Similarly, while the share of women CEOs in Fortune 500 companies reached an all-time high of 10.6% in 2023, it is still notably low compared to male representation (Pew Research Center, 2023).

The underrepresentation of women in leadership roles is evident, with women making up only 26.9% of parliamentarians in single or lower houses worldwide as of 2024 (U.N. Women, 2024). In some developed countries like the U.S., cultural and structural barriers continue to hinder women's political participation despite advancements in business and education. For example, women in the U.S. Congress occupied only 19.4% of seats in 2015, a lower rate than state legislatures, where they held 24.6% of seats (Ahn et al., 2019). The gender gap in leadership persists even in countries with advanced economies and democratic institutions, indicating the need for ongoing efforts to address these challenges.

In Africa, women have made significant strides in leadership roles; however, barriers to achieving full gender equality remain widespread. For

example, women hold only about 24% of African parliamentary seats, with significant regional disparities. Southern Africa and East Africa lead with around 31%- and 32 %-women's representation, respectively, while other regions fall behind (Brookings, 2022). Although Rwanda sets a global example with women holding 61% of parliamentary seats, most African countries still fall short of achieving the African Union's Agenda 2063 goal of 50% women's representation in leadership (U.N. Women, 2022).

The challenges African women face in leadership, stem from entrenched patriarchal structures and sociocultural norms that limit their participation. Despite these challenges, women in countries like Rwanda, Senegal, and South Africa have made notable progress, with women holding over 45% of cabinet positions in these nations (Brookings, 2022). African women leaders have demonstrated resilience and commitment to pushing for gender equality, not only at the national level but also in global organizations like the United Nations and the World Trade Organization, where they continue to play crucial roles in addressing Africa's most pressing issues, such as peace, security, and climate change (ECA, 2021).

In Kenya, women face challenges similar to those of their counterparts across the globe. Since independence in 1963, Kenyan women have experienced marginalization in leadership and decision-making roles. Despite legal frameworks such as the 2010 Constitution, which introduced the two-thirds gender rule to ensure that no more than two-thirds of elective or appointive bodies are of the same gender, women continue to face barriers to achieving significant representation. Cultural norms, financial limitations, and patriarchal systems remain major obstacles that hinder women's participation in leadership positions (ECA, 2021).

For instance, as of 2021, women held only 23% of seats in Kenya's National Assembly, falling short of the constitutional requirement (U.N. Women, 2022). Although efforts have been made to promote gender equality in political and public offices, women are still underrepresented in key

areas such as the judiciary, cabinet, and regional governments. The barriers Kenyan women face reflect the broader challenges in Africa, where deep-seated cultural practices and economic disparities limit their access to leadership opportunities. According to the 2009 census, Kisii County has a population of 1,152,282, with 550,464 males (48%) and 601,818 females (52%), while Nyamira County has 598,252 people, with 287,048 males (48%) and 311,204 females (52%) (Some et al., 2021). Despite women forming more than half of the population, no woman has ever been elected to the National Assembly from the Gusii region since independence.

### Objective of the Study

Overall, the primary objective of this paper was to analyze the barriers and challenges that have hindered women from attaining leadership positions, particularly in politics, within the Gusii region of Kenya.

Specifically, this study aimed:

- a. To assess the historical impact of pre-colonial and colonial-era governance structures on the exclusion of women from leadership roles in the Gusii region
- b. To examine the socio-economic and political barriers that hinder women's participation in leadership in post-colonial Gusii, with a focus on financial constraints and cultural norms.
- c. To evaluate the influence of global and local women empowerment movements on enhancing women's leadership participation in the Gusii region.

### Statement of the Problem

Despite making up more than half of the population in the Gusii region, women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership positions, particularly in elective political roles. Since Kenya's independence in 1963, no woman from the Gusii region has been elected to the National Assembly, despite legal frameworks such as the 2010 Constitution, which introduced the two-thirds gender rule to promote gender

equality in governance. This persistent exclusion of women from leadership reflects the profound cultural, social, and economic barriers that continue to marginalize women and limit their participation in leadership, politics, and decision-making processes. In the Gusii region, patriarchal norms, financial constraints, gender stereotypes, and lack of support for female candidates are significant obstacles preventing women from accessing leadership positions. This problem not only undermines efforts to promote gender equality but also deprives the region of diverse leadership perspectives essential for inclusive governance. Therefore, exploring the primary reasons for this persistent marginalization is crucial, and identifying potential solutions to enhance women's participation in political leadership in the Gusii region.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Empirical Review

According to Some et al. (2021), the marginalization of women in political leadership among the Abagusii can be attributed to cultural factors, stereotypes, economic limitations, and political barriers. Despite forming more than half of the population, women in Gusii have consistently been underrepresented in leadership roles since independence. This study underscores the need to address these challenges by recommending changes in cultural perceptions toward women and amendments to political party policies. The relevance of this research lies in its focus on the Abagusii community and the unique cultural barriers that have impeded women's progress in politics (Some et al., 2021). However, while the study provides significant insight into the general cultural and economic obstacles, it does not delve into the strategies or interventions that could be employed at the grassroots level to increase women's political participation in Gusii.

In their study, Matoke et al. (2022) examine the experiences of women in Kisii County and their political participation, highlighting the significant patriarchal obstacles that persist despite the adoption of gender equity policies such as the 2010 Kenyan Constitution, which mandates that

no more than two-thirds of members of elective bodies should be of the same gender. The study emphasizes that while traditional gender roles still hinder women's political participation, women in Kisii have actively negotiated within these patriarchal structures to engage in politics. However, women are mostly relegated to supportive roles, such as mobilizers, rather than being the primary contenders in elections. This study is crucial as it provides a focused exploration of the Kisii context and how deeply rooted cultural beliefs continue to obstruct women's direct participation in leadership (Matoke et al., 2022).

Similarly, M'Arimi (2013) explores the factors influencing women's participation in leadership within the education sector, specifically in the Lower Yatta District. The study found that cultural attitudes remain a significant barrier despite policies promoting women's leadership. Women were grossly underrepresented in management roles in secondary schools, with only two women serving as principals out of 21 secondary schools. However, none of these studies provide in-depth strategies for dismantling these barriers at the community level. While they emphasize the need for policy enforcement and cultural change, they fail to offer concrete, localized solutions for empowering women to take on leadership roles in their communities. This gap is where the current study aims to contribute by exploring practical strategies that can be applied at the grassroots level to foster greater gender equality in leadership across various sectors in the Gusii region and beyond.

Kamau (2010) focuses on women's broader challenges in political leadership in Kenya, identifying cultural norms and traditional gender roles as crucial barriers. These perceptions often view leadership as a male domain, with women relegated to domestic responsibilities. Kamau argues that even though legal frameworks exist, they have not effectively dismantled the deep-rooted patriarchal structures that hinder women's political involvement. Similarly, Nyamweya et al. (2018) emphasize that cultural perceptions in the Abagusii community, particularly in the Kitutu

Masaba Constituency, significantly limit women's ability to take on leadership roles. Their study points out that women are viewed as inferior to men, and leadership is perceived as a man's responsibility. This cultural conditioning discourages women from pursuing leadership positions, echoing Kamau's findings about the nationwide challenges.

Maeri (2014), on the other hand, focuses on women's participation in elective parliamentary politics in Nyamira County between 1992 and 2013. He identifies similar cultural barriers, such as the perception that women are unfit for leadership roles due to traditional gender roles that emphasize their place in the home. Maeri also highlights other challenges, such as gender-based violence and a lack of financial resources, which further prevent women from engaging in the political process. Like Kamau (2010) and Nyamweya et al. (2018), Maeri (2014) highlights the critical role of cultural perceptions in limiting women's participation in leadership, noting that even when women attempt to break into the political sphere, they often face harassment and intimidation. These studies support the idea that while legal frameworks like Kenya's 2010 Constitution exist to promote gender equality, they have not been sufficient in breaking the cultural and societal barriers that prevent women from participating fully in leadership. The lack of implementation and the deep-rooted cultural norms impede women's progress in leadership roles. However, none of the studies delve deeply into community-based solutions that could foster cultural change at the grassroots level, leaving room for further research in this area. This study aims to build on these findings by exploring specific, practical strategies that can be applied in the Gusii region to increase women's participation in leadership.

Ochieng et al. (2022) examine the impact of Kenya's 2010 Constitution on women's political participation, highlighting that while the Constitution introduced significant legal reforms, including the two-thirds gender rule and special seats for women, these measures have not been fully implemented. The study emphasizes that



although there has been some progress, cultural norms and male-dominated political structures continue to limit the full participation of women in politics. This view is supported by Ndubi et al. (2015), who further explained that women face not only legal but also socio-economic and political barriers that stem from entrenched patriarchal structures. They argue that despite legal frameworks, political parties and electoral systems remain primarily male-dominated, presenting an additional layer of resistance to women's entry into leadership positions.

Nyakwaka and Mokua (2020) similarly analyze the historical and cultural marginalization of women in Kenyan politics, noting that the roots of this exclusion date back to the colonial era. Their study demonstrates how the colonial administrative system institutionalized male authority, relegating women to subordinate roles, which has persisted even in the post-colonial period. Although the 2010 Constitution provided a framework for gender equality, the cultural beliefs and socio-economic challenges identified in their study remain significant obstacles to achieving gender parity in political leadership (Nyakwaka & Mokua, 2020). All these studies highlight a critical gap in implementing the legal and institutional frameworks designed to support women in leadership. While legal reforms such as the two-thirds gender rule offer a formal pathway for women's participation, the studies agree that these reforms have not been fully operationalized, and their effectiveness is hampered by cultural resistance and institutional inertia. Furthermore, none of the studies provide in-depth strategies for overcoming these barriers.

### Theoretical Review

The study was guided by the Theory of Social Change proposed by Haferkamp and Neil (1991), which emphasizes that culture is dynamic and evolves in response to environmental, social, and ideological shifts. Social change refers to transforming cultural and social institutions within communities rather than at the individual level. The theory posits that no society remains

static; all societies undergo continuous change, including shifts in leadership structures and roles.

According to the theory, change can result from population shifts, technological advancements, or evolving cultural values. It highlights that social change may bring either progress or setbacks for a society. In the context of this study, the theory helps explain why women in the Gusii region have historically been excluded from leadership and how changes in cultural norms and societal values may eventually lead to increased participation in leadership positions. The theory's focus on the inevitability of change supports the argument that gender and leadership roles are dynamic and can evolve.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed primary and secondary research methodologies to gather comprehensive data on the challenges and prospects of women in leadership within the Gusii region. Primary data was collected through oral interviews from 12 informants. These informants were selected based on purposive sampling criteria, which required them to be either women leaders from the Gusii region, women who had previously aspired for leadership positions, or individuals already holding leadership roles. Additionally, personal assistants to women leaders, aspirants, and politicians were included in the sample. The research utilized a descriptive research design which involved gathering data on women leadership, especially why Gusii women remain marginalized in their quest for political representation. This design was effective in answering the "what question" particularly in revealing the reasons why women remain marginalized despite the newly developed efforts and structures to enhance women representation. Secondary data was gathered from various sources, including books, academic journals, theses, dissertations, and print sources. The data collected was analyzed qualitatively and descriptively, with the researcher employing thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes related to women's leadership. Themes were developed based on the data,

allowing for an in-depth exploration of the factors influencing women's participation in leadership within the Gusii region.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Historical Context of Women Leadership in the Gusii Region

Mokua and Nyamwaka (2020), note that in the pre-colonial Gusii society, gender roles were rigidly defined by a patriarchal structure that placed women in subordinate positions compared to their male counterparts. The society was predominantly patrilineal, meaning lineage and inheritance were traced through the male line (Mokua et al., 2024). This structure inherently limited women's roles within the family and the broader community. From these observations, the researcher derived that while women played crucial roles in maintaining the household and engaging in agricultural labour, leadership, and decision-making powers were primarily reserved for men.

Furthermore, Mayer (1975) writes that women in Gusii society were primarily confined to domestic spheres, tasked with child-rearing, food production, and other home-centered responsibilities. From the oral sources, majority of the informants agreed that men continue to hold positions of authority within the family and community, making critical decisions and participating in governance. Leadership roles such as elders, warriors, and council members were exclusively male, further entrenching the gender disparity in political and social influence (Barasa et al., 2023). The patriarchal nature of this society relegated women to roles that, while essential for the survival and functioning of the community, did not afford them any formal leadership or decision-making powers.

This historical context created a long-standing tradition of male dominance in leadership, a legacy that continues to influence the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in the Gusii region today (Mokua & Nyamwaka, 2020). Thus, the researcher established that the marginalization of women in

leadership roles is deeply rooted in these pre-colonial structures, which positioned women as subordinates in both the social and political spheres. Understanding these historical dynamics is essential in addressing the challenges women face in accessing leadership roles in the region.

### The Impact of Colonialism on Reinforcing Patriarchal Systems

Colonialism played a significant role in reinforcing and institutionalizing patriarchal systems that further marginalized women from leadership positions in the Gusii region. In this regard, Maeri (2014) notes that before colonial rule, women in many Kenyan communities, including the Gusii, had roles within their societal structures, though still limited compared to men. However, colonial administrators introduced new governance structures that systematically excluded women from formal leadership roles, intensifying the already existing gender disparities.

These views are supported by Ogero (2022), who argues that introducing colonial-led governance systems in Kenya disrupted Indigenous social structures, including conflict resolution and leadership roles. As a result, women's traditional roles in communities like the Gusii were further marginalized. Besides, the colonial government's imposition of foreign legal and administrative frameworks reinforced patriarchal systems, sidelining women from crucial decision-making positions and intensifying the existing gender disparities. A key informant stated,

*"The coming of the colonial government took away many women's roles in traditional society. Before, women had a voice in certain community matters, but colonial leaders only engaged with male elders, leaving women out of decisions that affected the entire community. This further demonstrates how colonialism reinforced patriarchal structures that limited women's participation in leadership and governance in the Gusii region."*

From the above, the researcher thus highlights that excluding women from leadership roles during the colonial period was not merely incidental but a direct consequence of colonial governance strategies. By prioritizing male elders in decision-making processes and dismissing the traditional roles women played, the colonial authorities systematically erased women's influence in societal governance. The oral testimony above further emphasizes this shift, illustrating how women, who previously held some level of agency in community matters, were now marginalized under the new colonial structures.

Nyakwaka and Mokua (2020) highlight that during the colonial period (1920–1963), the traditional power bases of women were dismantled as colonial administrators, who were exclusively male, imposed Western governance systems that restricted women's involvement in public affairs. This led to a dramatic reduction in the authority and influence women had historically exercised as leadership became more formalized and exclusively male. The colonial state, characterized by patriarchal ideologies imported from Europe, viewed women as subordinate to men, relegating them to domestic roles and further entrenching gender inequality in leadership.

According to Ochieng, Muchoki and Moindi (2022), colonial policies, such as forced labor, land tenure systems, and formal education, were designed to benefit men, while women had limited access to education and economic resources. This disparity not only excluded women from political participation but also created economic dependence on men, further solidifying patriarchal control over leadership and decision-making. The imposition of these colonial policies institutionalized gender roles, making it even more difficult for women to break into leadership positions in both the political and economic arenas. In support, Momanyi (2020) asserts that gender disparities in recruitment and employment practices have been influenced by political, social, and cultural factors that favor male candidates over females. This is particularly evident in Kisii County, where women have historically been

underrepresented in executive roles. The highlights that the entrenched patriarchal norms, coupled with inadequate educational opportunities for women, have perpetuated gender imbalances in leadership and decision-making positions within the county government Momanyi (2020).

The colonial legacy of male-dominated leadership structures persisted even after independence, leaving women politically and socially disempowered. This exclusionary framework established by colonialism continues to affect women's participation in leadership in Gusii and other regions of Kenya today. The historical marginalization of women, reinforced by colonial rule, explains much of the gender disparities in leadership seen in contemporary Gusii society. In the above regard, Stiftung (2012), the colonial system not only marginalized entire regions but also entrenched gender disparities, which continue to affect women's participation in leadership roles today. The rigid governance structures established during the colonial era systematically favored men, further isolating women from economic and political empowerment in many Kenyan communities, including the Gusii. From the above views, the researchers posit that the colonial legacy of male-dominated leadership structures has had enduring effects on the political and social landscape of the Gusii region. This exclusionary framework, deeply rooted in colonial administration, has left women politically and socially disempowered, a situation that persists long after independence.

### **Post-Colonial Gender Dynamics and The Slow Progress in Women's Political Participation**

The post-colonial era in Kenya, including the Gusii region, saw a continuation of the marginalization of women in political leadership despite efforts to promote gender equality. After Kenya's independence in 1963, women's participation in politics remained minimal as the structures of governance adopted from the colonial administration perpetuated male dominance in leadership roles. While women played a significant role in the fight for

independence, they were largely excluded from formal leadership positions once Kenya gained self-governance (Some et al., 2021).

As Kamau (2010) points out, the early post-independence Kenyan state did little to address the systemic barriers that hindered women's political participation. Traditional patriarchal beliefs continued to dominate, limiting women's involvement in decision-making processes. This marginalization was particularly evident in the Gusii region, as no woman had ever been elected to the national assembly from the area since independence, despite women making up more than half of the population (Some et al., 2021). Besides, a key informant remarked, "It was almost unthinkable for a woman to stand for leadership here. The community expected women to remain in the background, and men and women often dismissed any attempt to run for political office." This testimony reflects the societal norms that have long excluded women from leadership roles in the region.

Furthermore, although the 2010 Kenyan Constitution introduced the two-thirds gender rule to promote women's participation in leadership, the implementation of this legal framework has been slow and inconsistent. As Ochieng, Muchoki, and Moindi (2022) highlight, cultural norms and institutional barriers continue to impede the effectiveness of these reforms, particularly in rural areas like Gusii. Even in instances where women have been elected, they often face challenges such as gender-based violence, stereotyping, and economic constraints, all of which limit their ability to participate in leadership roles fully.

The slow progress in women's political participation in post-colonial Kenya reflects both the enduring influence of colonial-era governance structures and the deeply entrenched cultural norms that continue to resist the inclusion of women in leadership. Addressing these challenges requires not only the enforcement of legal frameworks but also a shift in societal attitudes toward women in leadership roles. As Otieno (2015) illustrated, this slow progress in women's

political participation in post-colonial Kenya reflects the enduring influence of colonial-era governance structures and deeply entrenched patriarchal cultural norms. Despite legal frameworks promoting gender equality, these are often insufficient in overcoming societal attitudes that view leadership as a male domain (Otieno, 2015). Consequently, women continue to face significant barriers when attempting to break into political and leadership roles in Kenya, particularly in rural regions such as Gusii

### **Challenges Faced by Women in Leadership in The Gusii Region**

#### ***Patriarchal Structures and Cultural Norms***

In Gusii society, significantly rooted patriarchal structures continue to marginalize women, limiting their access to leadership positions. Traditional gender roles, which view women as subordinate to men, have been reinforced over generations, mainly through land ownership practices; Onyambu (2019) highlights that land ownership in the Gusii region is a crucial symbol of power and status, which men have historically controlled. Women have been excluded from owning land, reinforcing their subordinate status within the household and society. This exclusion extends to political and leadership spheres, where women are often seen as secondary to their male counterparts, with little to no say in decision-making processes.

In an oral interview, an informant claimed that certain cultural practices tend to prepare males and make them exercise dominance over their women counterparts. She stated,

*"From a young age, boys are taught to see themselves as future heads of households and leaders in the community. Rituals like circumcision reinforce this belief by celebrating their transition into adulthood, while girls are expected to remain in supportive roles. These practices deeply embed the idea that men should lead and women should follow, making it hard for us to break free from these expectations."*



In support, Haron et al. (2024) describe how male circumcision has historically been a significant rite of passage for Gusii men, marking their transition into adulthood. This practice, intensely rooted in cultural norms, reinforces traditional gender roles that marginalize women by positioning men as the central figures in both social and household structures.

Moakebo (2018) further explains that these cultural norms are entrenched in the political structures of Kisii County, where male-dominated political networks continue to marginalize women. The persistence of patriarchal ideologies, which paint men as the natural leaders, has led to a lack of representation for women in political leadership despite constitutional provisions aimed at promoting gender equality. This is evident in the limited number of women elected to county governance positions, as political leadership remains dominated by men (Moakebo, 2018). In support, a key informant noted that;

*"As a woman in Gusii society, leadership opportunities often feel out of reach because of cultural expectations. We are seen as caretakers of the home, but when it comes to decision-making, we are expected to take a back seat. It's time for women to challenge these norms and assert their place in our families and the broader community. Leadership shouldn't be defined by gender but by ability and vision".*

All these show the role of women in the Abagusii society and how men continue to dominate culturally and politically.

### **Political and Economic Barriers**

Financial constraints are another significant barrier for women seeking leadership positions in Gusii. Moakebo (2018) notes that women in Kisii County often face challenges in financing their campaigns, which puts them at a disadvantage compared to their male counterparts. Women have limited access to political networks and financial resources, often relying on personal funds or family support, which are insufficient to compete effectively in the political arena. This

financial limitation reinforces the gender gap, as political campaigns are capital-intensive, requiring resources that women may not have (Moakebo, 2018). Also, Simion (2018) emphasizes that women-owned micro-enterprises, particularly in Kisii County, face significant barriers to growth due to limited access to capital. Many women struggle to secure financing due to lacking collateral, credit records, and the necessary documentation, which formal financial institutions often require. One informant also alluded that;

*"even when women try to venture into leadership, they usually find themselves financially strained, unable to raise enough money to fund their campaigns or sustain a long-term political strategy. Conversely, men have access to wider networks and resources, giving them an upper hand in political races."*

The researcher thus observed the intersection of financial constraints and gender disparities, where the lack of economic resources further excludes women from political participation.

### **Societal Perception and Stereotypes**

Societal perceptions and gender biases further hinder women's participation in leadership. The public often views women as less capable leaders, doubting their abilities to perform in political roles. These perceptions are fueled by traditional stereotypes that associate leadership with masculinity. Nyamweya, Ogwora, and Nyamwange (2018) observe that in Kitutu Masaba, women aspiring for leadership positions face resistance from their communities, where they are often relegated to roles of supporters rather than leaders. Women are expected to mobilize votes or support male candidates rather than contest for leadership roles themselves (Nyamweya et al., 2018). In an oral interview, a participant stated,

*"As a woman, stepping into leadership feels like walking against a strong current. Our communities still see us as supporters, not leaders. The expectation is that we help men succeed, not compete with them. Until these*

*stereotypes change, many women will continue to shy away from leadership roles."*

### **Religious and Social Influences**

Religious and social conventions also play a significant role in limiting women's leadership roles in Gusii. The Gusii community's conservative views, influenced by religious teachings, often reinforce traditional gender roles, further marginalizing women from leadership opportunities. Mokebo (2018) highlights that religious leaders in the region tend to promote traditional family structures, where women are expected to focus on domestic roles, further perpetuating gender inequality in leadership. This societal expectation makes it difficult for women to enter leadership positions in both the political and social spheres (Mokebo, 2018)

### **Progress and Recent Developments**

#### ***Influence of Global Movements and Policies***

The impact of international movements, such as the Beijing Platform for Action, has significantly promoted gender equality and leadership for women in Kenya, including in the Gusii region. This platform has pushed for legal and policy frameworks, like Kenya's two-thirds gender rule, which mandates that no more than two-thirds of elective bodies should consist of the same gender. This has been a crucial step in creating opportunities for women to engage in leadership roles in a political sphere historically dominated by men (Araka, 2008; Simion, 2018). Despite these efforts, the implementation of these policies has been slow, especially in regions like Gusii, where entrenched patriarchal structures continue to impede women's political involvement (Oino, 2023).

Furthermore, the introduction of Kenya's legal frameworks, specifically the 2010 Constitution, marked a turning point in women's leadership advancement. However, Araka (2008) notes that traditional beliefs and male-dominated political systems persist in slowing the progress of women's leadership in Gusii, as cultural perceptions still play a substantial role in

marginalizing women. As a result, while global and national policies exist to promote gender equality, the actual impact on Gusii women remains limited by local sociocultural barriers (Oino, 2023).

#### ***Women Empowerment Movements in Gusii***

In addition to global movements, local and national women empowerment movements have played a crucial role in supporting Gusii women. Organizations like the Kenya Women Parliamentarian Association (KEWOPA) and the Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) have advocated for women's rights and leadership roles nationwide. These organizations work to empower women by offering legal, social, and financial support. According to Simion (2018), these groups have successfully educated women on their rights and encouraged them to participate in leadership positions, though they still face substantial resistance at the community level.

Local women's movements in Gusii have particularly empowered women through grassroots initiatives. Araka (2008) highlights that such movements focus on economic empowerment as a foundation for women to assert leadership. These groups provide support networks that help women gain confidence and leadership skills. However, cultural norms and the traditional roles assigned to women continue to present significant obstacles to their full participation in leadership, particularly in political and public offices (Chepkorir & Oino, 2020).

### **The Future of Women Leadership in The Gusii Region**

#### ***Opportunities for Change***

According to Abuya (2020), education empowers young women and changes societal perceptions. Education is one of the most significant opportunities for increasing women's leadership in the Gusii region. Access to education has been identified as a critical driver in empowering young women and changing societal perceptions about their roles. Educated women are more likely to challenge traditional norms and assert

themselves in leadership positions. As Mokebo (2018) notes, the higher the education level, the more likely women are to participate in governance structures, including in traditionally male-dominated areas like politics and decision-making positions. The shift in gender roles through education will provide young women with the knowledge and skills they need to compete in leadership roles (Ogega, 2015). This change will require sustained efforts to encourage female enrollment at all levels of education and ensure that girls complete their studies without facing cultural or financial barriers.

Besides, the researchers established that the youth are crucial in pushing for gender equality in the region. Young men and women are more likely to embrace progressive ideas about gender roles and are critical actors in advocating for women's representation in leadership. Thus, the researchers suggest that youth-driven campaigns and movements have the potential to break down long-standing barriers and elect more women into leadership roles, especially at the grassroots level

### ***Strategies for Increasing Women's Representation***

Balafoutas and Sutter (2012) explain the policy reforms and affirmative action to ensure women have equal opportunities. Policy reforms and affirmative action are essential to create a more level playing field. The two-thirds gender rule, introduced in Kenya's 2010 Constitution, provides an opportunity to increase the number of women in leadership positions, but its full implementation has been lacking (Ochieng et al., 2022). By enforcing these policies and ensuring they are not just symbolic, women can have the same opportunities as men to run for office and participate in governance. Continuous advocacy and pressure from women's organizations, like the Kenya Women Parliamentarian Association (KEWOPA), will be vital in realizing these reforms at both national and regional levels.

Financial barriers remain among the most significant challenges for women in leadership positions. As Nyakwakwa and Mokua (2020)

highlight, women in Kisii and other regions often struggle to finance their campaigns due to limited resource access. Strengthening financial and social support systems, such as campaign funds designated for women candidates, mentorship programs, and networking opportunities, can help bridge this gap. Social support systems, including family and community backing, ensure that women can focus on their leadership roles without the added burden of societal pressures to conform to traditional roles.

There is a need for continued social efforts to dismantle patriarchal structures through advocacy and awareness campaigns. Patriarchal structures remain deep-rooted in the Gusii region, and dismantling them requires ongoing efforts. Advocacy and awareness campaigns that target both men and women can help shift cultural attitudes that view leadership as the domain of men. Educational programs that engage the community in discussions about the benefits of women's leadership can create a more supportive environment for female leaders. This advocacy should also extend to religious and cultural leaders who influence societal norms.

Need for a shift in cultural attitudes toward women in leadership roles. Cultural attitudes that view women as inferior to men in leadership need to change for real progress to be made. Simion (2018) highlighted that local women's movements and national advocacy groups have already made strides in challenging these cultural norms, but more work remains. Encouraging men to be allies in the push for gender equality and fostering an environment where women can lead without fear of discrimination will be crucial steps in securing the future of women's leadership in the region.

### **CONCLUSION**

The historical struggles of women in the Gusii region have been deeply rooted in cultural norms, patriarchal structures, and societal perceptions that have excluded them from leadership roles, particularly in politics. Despite these challenges, recent progress has been made, driven by global movements for gender equality and Kenya's legal

frameworks, such as the two-thirds gender rule. Women in Gusii have slowly begun to assert themselves in leadership positions, though much remains to be done.

To ensure further progress, a call to action is necessary for all stakeholders—including politicians, civil society, and the public—to actively support and advocate for women's inclusion in leadership. Through education, policy reforms, and the dismantling of patriarchal structures, women can continue to break through barriers that have historically hindered their participation.

There is great potential for transformative change in the Gusii region if the remaining barriers are effectively addressed. By fostering an environment that promotes equality and supports women's leadership, Gusii can move towards a more inclusive and progressive society where women play a significant role in shaping the future.

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