

African Journal of Gender, Society and Development

Published consistently since 2012

ISSN: 2634-3614 E-ISSN: 2634-3622

Accredited by DHET (the South African regulator of Higher Education) and Indexed by IBSS, EBSCO, COPERNICUS, ProQuest, ERIH PLUS, SABINET and J-Gate.

Volume 15 Number 1, March, 2026

Pp 161-181

Symbolic or Substantive? Women's Representation in the Parliaments of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Tanzania

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31920/2634-3622/2026/v15n1a7>

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Abstract

This paper examines women's representation in the parliaments of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the United Republic of Tanzania (URT). The emphasis is on the distinction between symbolic representation (the numerical presence of women in legislative bodies) and substantive representation (their capacity to influence policy in ways that advance gender equality). While this relationship has been extensively explored in Western democracies, it remains underexplored in the context of developing countries, particularly in Central and East Africa. Addressing this gap, the paper employs a comparative case study and a qualitative literature review within a descriptive framework to assess whether increased female parliamentary representation, often facilitated through gender quotas and constitutional mechanisms, translates into meaningful legislative influence. The paper indicates a persistent gap between descriptive inclusion and substantive impact, noting that women's increased visibility in Parliament has not consistently translated into genuine policy authority or transformative engagement. Tanzania,

through its institutionalised gender quota system, has surpassed the 30% threshold outlined in the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action and SADC targets. However, systemic patriarchy and institutional marginalisation continue to constrain women's substantive participation. In contrast, the DRC lacks a binding gender quota law, resulting in one of the region's lowest rates of female representation and a largely symbolic role for women in legislative processes. Furthermore, the analysis also highlights a significant internal impediment: a deficit in political cohesion and strategic synergy among women in Parliament. This lack of a unified front dilutes their collective influence, preventing the translation of individual visibility into a powerful, coordinated legislative force. Ultimately, the paper unpacks these multidimensional factors and offers nuanced insights into the conditions under which women's parliamentary presence can evolve into genuine policy influence in fragile and transitioning democracies like the DRC and Tanzania.

Keywords: *Symbolic Representation, Substantive Representation, Gender Quotas, Women in Politics, Policy Advocacy.*

Introduction

In recent decades, there has been a notable increase in the number of women occupying positions as political leaders and parliamentarians worldwide. This growth in women's political representation is driven by multiple factors, including the rise of feminist leadership and the adoption of strategic governmental interventions such as gender quotas and constitutional provisions (Mahajan, 2021). The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Tanzania, examined as case studies in this paper, are illustrative of the broader trend of increased female representation in national legislatures, following the adoption of gender quotas and constitutional provisions aimed at promoting women's political participation. Despite differences in quota architecture and distinct political trajectories, both nations have demonstrated notable progress in gender inclusion, reflecting a shared—though differently implemented—commitment to representative parity.

In Tanzania, gender quotas were introduced to address the persistent underrepresentation of women in elected office, including the allocation of special seats for women in both Parliament and local government

structures. As a result, women currently account for 37.8% of parliamentary representation, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) Reports (2022, 2023, 2024) (Mutasingwa, 2022). This marked improvement in female legislative representation is further exemplified by the election of the country's first female president, Samia Suluhu Hassan, whose leadership represents a significant milestone in advancing gender equality (Charles, 2024). Nevertheless, the translation of increased numerical representation into substantive policy influence remains constrained by various factors, as discussed in the following sections.

Similarly, in the DRC, within a fragile political and security context, women currently constitute 13% of the national parliament, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) 2024 report. The recent appointment of the first female prime minister represents a landmark moment in the symbolic inclusion of women in national leadership. However, significant challenges persist in ensuring meaningful access to decision-making spaces and in overcoming the deeply rooted structural impediments that continue to limit women's political agency. Although these interventions have effectively increased the number of women in legislative bodies, this paper interrogates whether this presence is purely descriptive or if it possesses the substantive power required to dismantle and reform male-dominated political architectures. Furthermore, it examines whether such interventions not only amplify women's voices alongside their male counterparts but also enable female parliamentarians to influence and champion policies that prioritise women's needs and interests. Using a qualitative literature review within a descriptive framework, this paper contributes to the existing body of scholarship by offering a comparative and contextual synthesis of how gender quotas and constitutional provisions have shaped women's parliamentary representation in Tanzania, characterised by higher numerical gains and visible symbolic leadership progress, versus the DRC, where women's representation remains limited within a fragile political and security environment marked by deeply rooted structural constraints. The paper highlights the distinct challenges and prospects that determine whether women's increased parliamentary presence translates into substantive political influence or remains largely symbolic. To achieve this objective, the paper is structured into four key sections: (i) Historical and political contexts of gender representation in the DRC and Tanzania; (ii) Gender quotas and constitutional provisions in the DRC and Tanzania; (iii) The status of

women legislators in the DRC and Tanzania: symbolic or substantive? and (iv) Conclusion and recommendations.

Historical and Political Contexts of Gender Representation in the DRC and Tanzania

Although the DRC and Tanzania possess distinct colonial legacies—having been under Belgian (DRC) and British (Tanzania) rule, respectively—both nations are rooted in shared African socio-cultural traditions that have shaped comparable trajectories in their socio-political development. This cultural commonality, reinforced by geographical proximity and a shared border, has fostered intertwined national experiences, particularly within the spheres of governance and regional integration. Furthermore, both countries are integral members of three significant regional blocs—the Great Lakes Region, the East African Community (EAC), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC)—underscoring their strategic and historical interconnectedness. These factors have contributed to a longstanding and robust diplomatic relationship between the two states. Within this context, a comparative analysis of women parliamentarians in the DRC and Tanzania is both relevant and instructive, as female legislators in both nations navigate analogous structural and institutional hurdles—from entrenched patriarchal gatekeeping to the complexities of quota implementation.

For instance, in the DRC, the persistent challenges to women's representation are deeply embedded in the country's historical trajectory—originating during the Congo Free State (1885–1908), solidifying under Belgian colonial rule (1908–1960), and perpetuated through the post-independence First and Second Republics (1960–1997) (Vyas-Doorgapersad & Lukamba, 2011). During the Congo Free State era, under the brutal personal rule of King Leopold II of Belgium, a gendered division of labour was established. Although women were not typically subjected to the physically demanding forced labour imposed on men, they were relegated to domestic and reproductive roles. This early gendered stratification laid the foundation for systemic inequality and discrimination against women in economic and public life. With the transformation of the Congo into a formal Belgian colony in 1908, these gender disparities were further institutionalised. Congolese women were largely excluded from formal employment and were predominantly trained to serve as maids, wives, and nannies. This narrow perception of women's roles

reinforced their marginalisation, limiting their access to education and excluding them from political and economic participation (Lauro, 2020).

The colonial administration made no significant efforts to promote girls' education, reflecting and reinforcing the deeply entrenched belief that women's primary function was confined to the domestic sphere. Compounding these colonial barriers were prevailing local cultural norms that emphasised traditional marriage and discouraged female education. Many parents were reluctant to enrol their daughters in formal schooling, fearing exposure to modern ideas that might undermine traditional gender roles and marital expectations (Vyas-Doorgapersad & Lukamba, 2011). As a result of intersecting colonial legacies and deeply entrenched patriarchal cultural norms, women's representation in education and public life in the DRC was virtually non-existent at the time of independence in 1960. The prospect of female political participation was not only unimaginable but also structurally foreclosed. This profound gender disparity is starkly illustrated by the fact that only one Congolese woman had completed high school education at the time of independence—Sophie Kanza, the daughter of the mayor of Leopoldville (now Kinshasa). Her exceptional educational attainment underscored the vast chasm in gender equity and highlighted the systemic exclusion of women, deeply embedded in the colonial socio-political order instituted by Belgian rule in Congo (Lauro, 2020).

During the First Republic (1960–1965), under the leadership of Patrice Lumumba and Joseph Kasavubu, women's political participation remained virtually absent. The post-colonial state did little to dismantle the colonial structures that had marginalised women, and no women were appointed or elected to positions of leadership or public influence. Therefore, this era marked a persistent trend of gender-based marginalisation, reinforcing the systemic silencing of women in the foundational political consciousness of the newly independent state (Otemikongo, 2021). The situation did not improve under the Second Republic (1965–1997), led by Mobutu Sese Seko. Despite rhetorical commitments to modernisation, the regime perpetuated and institutionalized patriarchal control through the promulgation of the 1987 Family Code, a legal framework that subordinated women to their husbands in both private and public spheres (Otemikongo, 2021; Mantuba-Ngoma, 2015). Under this code, women were legally incapacitated in critical domains of civic life: they could not engage in any legally binding activities, including opening bank accounts, securing

employment, or making political decisions without the explicit consent of their husbands. This legislation codified female dependency and effectively nullified women's autonomy in matters of political engagement. The formal recognition of women's political rights in the DRC was only realised through Ordonnance-Loi No. 67-223 of 3 May 1967; this decree established a legal framework for the constitutional referendum that enfranchised all Congolese citizens irrespective of gender. This marked a pivotal legal shift, recognising, for the first time, the right of women to engage in national political processes.

Subsequently, the Electoral Law of 17 April 1970, which regulated legislative and presidential elections, reinforced this advancement by affirming the principle of universal suffrage as outlined in the Constitution, thereby formally granting both men and women the right to vote. This legislative development represented a historical milestone during Mobutu's regime: it was the first occasion on which Congolese women were legally permitted to participate in public affairs and to stand alongside men at the ballot box, symbolising a foundational step toward inclusive political citizenship (IPU, 2019). However, despite this development, during Mobutu's regime women's participation in politics was largely performative and restricted to tokenistic roles, primarily during electoral processes, in a context where political power remained heavily centralized in the hands of a male-dominated authoritarian regime (Vyas-Doorgapersad & Lukamba, 2011).

In essence, the Mobutu regime went beyond a simple neglect of gender equality; it systematically fortified patriarchal architectures that significantly restricted women's liberty, individual autonomy, and their capacity for meaningful engagement in the public sphere. These enduring institutional constraints laid the groundwork for the contemporary challenges facing women's political representation in the DRC. Similar to the DRC, Tanzania in the pre-colonial era, around the 1880s, witnessed the systemic subordination of women within patriarchal socio-political structures that limited their access to the public sphere and decision-making authority (Ocran, 2014; Mkilanya, 2011). Women's roles were largely confined to domestic and reproductive spheres, while men monopolised leadership, economic control, and public engagement, with societal norms strictly delineating gender roles and prohibiting women from engaging in activities deemed masculine. During the colonial period (1880–1919 under German rule and 1919–1961 under British administration), the marginalisation of women was further

institutionalized. Colonial authorities entrenched patriarchal governance by introducing a cash-based economy, codified land ownership rights favouring men, and hierarchical leadership structures that excluded women from formal power (Mahajan, 2021). These developments reinforced male dominance, stripping women of influence even in areas where they had previously held communal or spiritual authority. Consequently, colonial rule institutionalised a gendered hierarchy; by positioning men as the primary political and economic gatekeepers, it relegated women to a state of systemic legal, economic, and sociocultural marginalisation. During the struggle for independence, women were mobilised into the political and public sphere primarily as a form of human capital to support nationalist goals, rather than as a recognition of their right to political equality. Their participation was utilitarian, serving the movement's broader agenda rather than addressing gender-based inequalities (Mahajan, 2021). Following independence on December 1, 1961, the political marginalisation of women persisted. Despite President Julius Nyerere's advocacy for national unity and social equity, the first republic continued to reflect deeply rooted patriarchal structures inherited from colonial rule (Lihiru, 2019). Political leadership remained overwhelmingly male-dominated, and women were largely excluded from meaningful participation in governance.

Gender Quotas and Constitutional Provisions in the DRC and Tanzania

In alignment with international and regional normative frameworks, both the DRC and Tanzania have adopted gender quotas and constitutional provisions aimed at increasing women's representation in parliaments and other branches of government (Guyguy, 2020; Lihiru, 2019). Such initiatives serve a dual purpose: they seek to dismantle entrenched gender-based discrimination while simultaneously engineering a supportive institutional landscape that secures and maintains women's influence in national legislative affairs. Key among these normative instruments are the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, both of which underscore the imperative of women's full and equal participation in political and public life (Lihiru, 2024). At the regional level, Africa has advanced this agenda through instruments such as the 2003 Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on

the Rights of Women in Africa (commonly known as the Maputo Protocol), the 2008 Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Gender and Development, and the 1999 Treaty for the Establishment of the East African Community (EAC), to which both the DRC and Tanzania are signatories (Geng, 2019; Some et Al., 2016). Of particular relevance is Article 9 of the Maputo Protocol, which mandates state parties to enact legislative and policy measures ensuring that women participate without discrimination in electoral processes and are equally represented at all levels of decision-making. Similarly, the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development explicitly calls for gender parity (50/50 representation) in decision-making structures and political institutions (Lihiru, 2024). Furthermore, the EAC Treaty and its Gender Policy mandate that member states dismantle the prejudices and structural obstacles impeding women's political engagement, thereby promote gender equality across all spheres of governance. These international and regional frameworks collectively establish binding obligations for member states to uphold principles of gender equality and non-discrimination, particularly in the realm of political and civic rights. The ratification of these conventions binds the DRC and Tanzania to a process of legislative and institutional reform; both nations are now formally obligated to enact affirmative measures that harmonise domestic policy with global gender equality benchmarks.

The African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights has underscored this obligation, affirming the responsibility of states to domesticate and give full effect to international commitments on gender equality (Guyguy, 2020). For the DRC, a pivotal moment in advancing women's political participation came with the promulgation of the 2006 Constitution, which marked a significant step toward aligning national legislation with international conventions by explicitly affirming the state's commitment to promoting gender equality and ensuring the full participation of women in political, economic, and social life, particularly Article 14, which stipulates: The state has the obligation to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women, ensuring the protection and promotion of their rights across every sphere of national life—civil, political, economic, social, and cultural. It mandates the adoption of comprehensive measures aimed at fostering women's full empowerment and active participation in national development processes.

The Constitution further enshrines the principle of equitable representation, affirming women's right to fair and proportional inclusion

in national, provincial, and local governance structures. In doing so, the State is constitutionally bound to implement gender representation within public institutions. The legal framework is tasked with defining the mechanisms through which these rights are to be operationalised. Additionally, the State is required to enact and enforce measures to prevent and address all forms of violence against women, whether occurring in the public or private spheres—thus reinforcing its commitment to advancing gender justice and substantive equality (DRC's 2006 Constitution). This constitutional provision signalled a normative and institutional shift from decades of entrenched gender exclusion. It formally recognised the historical marginalisation of women rooted in the colonial, First Republic (1960–1965), and Second Republic (1965–1997) eras—periods during which women were systematically excluded from public and political life and legally subordinated to male authority, particularly through patriarchal legal instruments such as the 1987 Family Code (Guyguy, 2020). Building on this constitutional mandate enshrined in Article 14, and as part of a broader effort to advance women's political rights and representation in legislative institutions, the Parity Law was promulgated on the 1st of August 2015. This legal instrument was intended to operationalise the principle of gender parity by addressing structural inequalities and enhancing women's participation across various spheres of national life. The law emphasises several key objectives:

- The equitable advancement of the social status of women and men within both the family unit and the wider community, with the aim of dismantling gender hierarchies that historically confined women to subordinate roles.
- The fair promotion of women's and men's contributions in both the household economy and the broader market economy, recognising women not only as domestic actors but also as key participants in national economic development.
- The equitable exercise of civic rights and responsibilities by both sexes, alongside the deliberate strengthening of women's access to decision-making spaces, particularly within political and governance structures, where female representation has traditionally been minimal.
- The enhancement of gender equality outcomes through targeted interventions designed to ensure equal access to opportunities,

resources, and leadership roles for both men and women, thereby fostering a more balanced and inclusive political system.

As a direct outcome of these constitutional provisions and the introduction of regular multiparty elections, the DRC has experienced a gradual—albeit limited—opening of the legislative space to women. Across four successive general elections (2006, 2011, 2018, and 2023), the country has recorded a modest yet steady increase in the number of women elected to the National Assembly, signalling a slow shift away from the historically exclusionary political structures of previous regimes. In the 2006 parliamentary elections, 42 women were elected out of 500 seats, representing 8.4% of the legislature (IPU, 2019). This figure rose slightly in the 2011 elections, with 44 women elected, constituting 8.8%. The 2018 elections saw a further increase, with 50 women securing seats—10% representation - while the most recent 2023 elections recorded the highest figure to date, with 61 women elected, constituting 12.2% of the National Assembly (IPU, 2019; 2022; and 2024). While these figures remain significantly below the 30% minimum threshold set by the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action and SADC targets, they do reflect a slow but positive trajectory in the inclusion of women in national political processes since the inception of democratic elections in 2006. This upward trend is further reinforced by notable symbolic milestones, such as the historic appointment of Jeannine Mabunda Lioko as the first female Speaker of the National Assembly in 2019, though she was impeached in December 2020, and more recently, the appointment of Judith Suminwa as the first female Prime Minister (Kasongo, 2024; The African Women's Development and Communication Network, 2021). Both appointments represent significant political breakthroughs in a historically male-dominated system and offer encouraging signs of increasing gender inclusivity at the highest levels of governance in the DRC.

For Tanzania, it was not until 1975, under the influence of global feminist movements, international pressure, particularly from the United Nations' Decade for Women, and the advocacy of local gender activists, that the Tanzanian government took an affirmative action and introduced a gender quota system aimed at enhancing women's political representation (Ocran, 2014). The introduction of reserved seats for women, known as *special seats* (*viti maalum* in Swahili), represented a transformative policy initiative aimed at redressing gender imbalances in political representation (Strachan, 2015). Institutionalised through Article

66 of the Tanzanian Constitution, this quota system mandates that a minimum of 30% of parliamentary seats be allocated to women. By distributing special seats proportionally among parties that meet the 5% national vote threshold, the electoral system guarantees a minimum level of female representation within the legislature (Mushi, 2011). Importantly, this mechanism operates alongside the conventional electoral pathway, wherein women continue to contest constituency seats on equal footing with male candidates under the auspices of their respective political parties.

Unlike the DRC, which lacks a formal quota system policy, Tanzania's gender quota enhances descriptive representation while coexisting with competitive electoral politics. This dual-track approach reflects a strategic blend of affirmative action and electoral competition, aimed at advancing women's political inclusion within the country's democratic framework. Since the ratification of the gender quota system in 1975, Tanzania has witnessed a progressive increase in the numerical representation of women in its National Assembly. Initially instituted to allocate 10% of parliamentary seats to women, the quota was expanded to fifteen seats in 1985 and subsequently scaled up to 30% of the total seats by 2010 (Yoon, 2011). This constitutional innovation was further reinforced by presidential authority to appoint women to special parliamentary positions, thereby institutionalising gender inclusion within the political architecture of the state. Empirical data from successive electoral cycles underscores the growing impact of this framework. In the 2005 general election, out of 323 parliamentary seats, women held 99 seats, constituting approximately 30.65% of the legislature. Of these, 17 women were directly elected by their constituencies, 75 secured seats through the special seats quota system, and two were appointed by the President. By the 2010 general election, the number of women parliamentarians rose to 126 out of 350 seats, representing roughly 36% of the total. This included 21 directly elected MPs and 102 occupying special seats (IPU, 2025).

The upward trajectory continued in the 2015 general election, where out of 377 seats, 136 were held by women (36.6%). Of these, 25 were elected through constituency-based contests, and 110 through the special seats mechanism. The 2020 general election further reinforced this trend: women secured 143 out of 377 seats, with 26 directly elected and 115 occupying special seats. While these data points validate the efficacy of the quota system in expanding descriptive representation, they further illuminate its function as a strategic driver for integrating gender-responsive governance within the Tanzanian parliament (IPU, 2025;

Mutasingwa, 2022). This analysis affirms that Tanzania has successfully surpassed the 30% benchmark for female representation in its National Assembly, thereby fulfilling the targets set by both the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action. However, the country continues to face challenges in achieving the more ambitious objectives of the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development and the African Union's 50/50 gender parity framework (Mutasingwa, 2022; Yoon, 2011).

In contrast, the DRC continues to lag significantly behind, with women accounting for less than 15% of parliamentary representation and no formal gender quota system in place. Notably, the fact that women in the DRC parliament are directly elected is significant; it implies that their standing is forged through the rigours of constituency-based competition, framing their legitimacy as a product of popular mandate rather than legislative quotas (Lipoko et al., 2021). This underscores a paradox in the Tanzanian context: while the overall number of women in parliament is higher due to the institutionalised quota system, the majority enter the legislature through special seats rather than direct constituency contests (Lihiru, 2024; Strachan, 2015). Lihiru argues that this disparity in Tanzania reflects deeper societal challenges, notably persistent gender bias and entrenched structural barriers that hinder women's electability at the grassroots level. Female candidates often face intimidation, including verbal harassment and threats from male opponents, which fosters a climate of fear and discourages women from contesting constituency-based elections. The reliance on special seats in Tanzania thus reveals a continuing lack of voter confidence or systemic support for female candidates in competitive electoral processes. Arguably, if the DRC were to adopt a quota system similar to Tanzania's, it could substantially increase the number of women in parliament. Nevertheless, the Tanzanian experience highlights the limitations of descriptive representation when not complemented by transformative shifts in societal attitudes and political culture. The above analysis shows that both countries have improved numerical representation; however, the question that arises is whether their presence is symbolic or substantive.

The Status of Women Legislators in the DRC and Tanzania: Symbolic or Substantive?

While the preceding analysis highlights a gradual improvement and a growing symbolic presence of women in the national parliaments of the DRC and Tanzania, the findings reveal that multiple systemic and institutional constraints continue to hinder the transformation of this presence into substantive political influence in both countries (Lihiru, 2024; WFD, 2022; Guyguy, 2020; Strachan, 2015). Although the numerical strength of women in parliament has grown, this shift remains largely descriptive; in both the DRC and Tanzania, female legislators continue to face systemic hurdles that restrict their substantive impact on policy-making and legislative agendas. For the DRC, among these constraints is the absence of a statutory gender quota law. Unlike many of its regional counterparts that have institutionalised legally binding mechanisms to ensure gender parity in governance, the DRC has yet to enact an enforceable legal framework that translates its constitutional commitment to gender equality into concrete political outcomes (The African Women's development and communication network, 2021).

Therefore, the provision for gender inclusion—though explicitly stated in Article 14 of the DRC 2006 Constitution - remains largely rhetorical, undermined by a lack of political will and the failure to adopt actionable legislative measures. Thus, in the DRC, there is a deliberate disconnect between female legislators and the broader political establishment, coupled with a lack of state willingness to integrate women's perspectives or institutionalize the capacity and commitment necessary to advance substantive gender equality in political governance (UN Women, 2024). This challenge is equally evident among Tanzanian female legislators and reflects a broader, shared reality across both countries, where the structural entrenchment of patriarchy within political systems continues to impede women's substantive influence in legislative decision-making. The dominance of a male-centred political culture, deeply embedded in traditional societal norms and perpetuated through institutional frameworks, systematically marginalises women's voices within policy discourse (Zhang, 2023; Ocran, 2014). Female parliamentarians are frequently sidelined from key legislative processes, with their contributions often undervalued or dismissed by male colleagues operating within a governance structure resistant to genuine gender inclusivity. While Tanzania has made notable strides, evidenced by the historic ascension of

a female President and an increased numerical presence of women in parliament, challenges to substantive representation persist. Nevertheless, Tanzanian women legislators are increasingly visible in parliamentary debates, and their voices are beginning to carry weight in policy deliberations.

In contrast, the DRC remains significantly constrained by deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes, both among political elites and within the wider society. This entrenched bias effectively silences women at the core of political life, ensuring that even those who secure seats in the DRC's parliament are frequently excluded from key decision-making processes and meaningful participation in the parliamentary debates. As a result, women in the DRC are still largely perceived as symbolic representatives rather than as authoritative actors in the political domain (Lipoko et al., 2021). Although women gain seats in parliament, their ability to influence legislation, challenge dominant narratives, or advance gender-sensitive policies remains severely constrained. Another critical factor undermining the substantive representation of Congolese and Tanzanian women parliamentarians is the lack of internal solidarity and coordinated political agency among women themselves (Tarimo and Dominico, 2024; Gunnarsson, 2023; The African Women's Development and Communication Network, 2021; Lihiru, 2019).

Despite occupying positions of influence, many women legislators have not effectively mobilised as a cohesive bloc to challenge the entrenched patriarchal structures that continue to dominate political life and marginalise women's voices. Instead of forming alliances to advocate for transformative gender-sensitive policies, a significant number of women in parliament appear to have internalised prevailing political norms, aligning themselves with the status quo and prioritising personal or partisan interests over collective gender advancement (UN Women, 2024; Zhang, 2023; Guyguy, 2020). This fragmentation is further exacerbated by a recurring phenomenon wherein women in public office refrain from advocating for broader gender equity, often citing institutional limitations or lack of authority as justification for inaction. Such justifications, while not entirely unfounded given the systemic resistance to gender reform, also reflect a deficit in political will and a reluctance to confront and disrupt the patriarchal order. In effect, many women parliamentarians adopt the same political behaviours as their male counterparts, engaging in patronage politics, corruption, and self-serving governance, which ultimately dilutes their potential role as agents of change in advancing women's rights and

interests (Geng, 2019; Strachan, 2015). This internal disunity and lack of strategic collaboration among female legislators serve to further weaken their policy influence and undermine the possibility of advancing substantive gender parity. For instance, in the DRC, instead of leveraging their positions to promote legislative frameworks that could institutionalise gender equality, such as pushing for the operationalisation of the Parity Law or proposing enforceable quota systems, many women leaders distance themselves from feminist agendas or gender-focused policymaking altogether.

Like the DRC, in Tanzania, despite the historic rise of President Samia Suluhu Hassan, the country's first female head of state, there has been no significant policy shift toward institutionalising a 50% gender parity law—despite her authority to initiate such reforms. This exemplifies a broader regional trend in which women in positions of power do not necessarily act as champions of gender equality, either due to institutional constraints, political expediency, or a lack of trust and cohesion among women leaders (Mutasingwa, 2022). In the Congolese context, this dynamic reveals that the challenge to women's substantive representation is not solely external, rooted in patriarchal resistance, but also internal, stemming from the absence of political cohesion, mutual support, and visionary leadership among women in governance. The failure to form strategic alliances, prioritise women-centred legislation, and confront systemic gender biases has impeded the transformation of symbolic representation into tangible policy influence.

Thus, like their male counterparts, many women parliamentarians in the DRC and Tanzania demonstrate limited political commitment to promoting inclusive governance, opting instead for survival within a male-dominated political order rather than transforming it (Tarimo and Dominico, 2024; Mangwanda, 2025). Based on this analysis, it is evident that the status of women legislators in both the DRC and Tanzania, despite incremental gains in numerical representation, remains predominantly symbolic. In the DRC, the absence of a binding gender quota law, coupled with weak political will, entrenched patriarchal norms, and inadequate institutional support, continues to impede substantive progress. Similarly, in both countries, the effectiveness of female legislators is further constrained by internal fragmentation, the prevalence of self-serving political agendas, and a general reluctance to champion gender-sensitive legislation. Many women parliamentarians conform to prevailing male-

dominated political cultures, thereby limiting their potential to collectively advance transformative gender equity in governance.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The analysis of women's parliamentary representation in the DRC and Tanzania shows a persistent dichotomy between descriptive and substantive representation, whereby the numerical inclusion of women has not been matched by corresponding legislative influence or policymaking authority. While Tanzania has formally institutionalised a gender quota system that has increased the number of women in parliament, surpassing the 30% benchmark set by the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action and the SADC target, the influence of women parliamentarians remains constrained by patriarchal institutional cultures and systemic marginalisation. The DRC, in contrast, continues to operate without a binding quota law, resulting in one of the lowest rates of female parliamentary representation in the region. In both contexts, women's legislative presence, though increasingly visible, is largely symbolic rather than transformative.

Beyond structural and institutional limitations, a significant internal challenge undermining women's substantive participation lies in the lack of political solidarity and strategic cohesion among female legislators themselves. Rather than forming gender-conscious alliances or advocating for feminist policy agendas, many women in both parliaments align with dominant male-centred political norms, driven by personal ambition, party loyalty, or survival within patronage-driven systems. This alignment reinforces the status quo and weakens the potential for transformative leadership, revealing that the obstacles to gender parity are as much internal and relational as they are structural and systemic. To move beyond tokenism and advance genuine gender-inclusive governance, the following key propositions are advanced:

(i) *Legal Institutionalisation of Gender Quotas in the DRC:*

The DRC must urgently operationalise the 2015 Parity Law or enact new legislation mandating enforceable gender quotas with clear implementation mechanisms and accountability provisions to guarantee women's substantive representation in the legislation.

(ii) *Strengthening Substantive Representation in Tanzania:*

Tanzania should reform the special seats system to enhance women's political agency by providing targeted capacity-building, ensuring access to key parliamentary committees, and promoting their competitiveness in constituency-based elections.

(iii) *Fostering Political Cohesion and Leadership Among Women:*

Both countries should invest in initiatives that build solidarity and strategic collaboration among female legislators. By bolstering the capacity of women's parliamentary caucuses, legislatures can enhance collective advocacy efforts and ensure that gender-responsive considerations are integrated into the core of policy development.

(iv) *Institutional Reform and Gender Mainstreaming:*

Deep structural reforms are required to dismantle patriarchal institutional cultures. This includes implementing gender-sensitive legislative frameworks, conducting regular gender audits, and ensuring women's equitable participation in decision-making and leadership roles.

(v) *Accountability of Women in Leadership:*

Female leaders, particularly in executive roles, such as President Samia Suluhu Hassan, must be held accountable for advancing gender-responsive governance. Their leadership should be evaluated not only by symbolic achievements but also by tangible policy reforms that promote structural gender equity across all sectors.

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