



What limits Tanzanian women's participation in political leadership?

An investigation of discriminatory social norms

RESEARCH BRIEFING
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Context

This briefing examines social norms in Tanzania that hinder women's participation in political leadership. It summarises the findings and recommendations of a 2023 BBC Media Action research study into this issue.

Women's political participation in Tanzania, especially in leadership roles, remains low. This is despite efforts from the government, civil society organisations, non-governmental organisations and activists to increase the presence of women leaders in the political sphere.

Although Tanzania currently has a female president, and a few women hold senior government positions such as speaker, only 9 out of 26 ministers are women. And women hold only 37% of the country's 393 parliamentary seats, and most office holders are 40 years or older. Similarly, the proportion of street, ward and district level political positions in Tanzania held by women is still very low (31%).¹



A [baseline study](#) (2020) for BBC Media Action Tanzania's long running gender transformative project *Niambie* (Tell Me)² indicated that negative attitudes and social norms inhibit women's participation in political leadership in the country. These attitudes include perceptions that women are incapable of political leadership, a lack of trust towards female candidates during elections, and women themselves feeling unable to become leaders for various reasons. Building on those findings, this latest BBC Media Action study focused on analysing social norms in depth in Tanzania with a view to examining how to encourage women's participation in political leadership.

Research approach

BBC Media Action worked with Georgetown University to develop a qualitative study to investigate the social norms that inhibit women's participation in political leadership at all levels³. BBC Media Action's Research and Learning team used Social Norms Exploration Techniques ([SNET](#)) to assess key drivers and barriers relating to this issue, and how to amplify the former and overcome the latter.

¹ UN Women (no date). Where we are: Eastern and Southern Africa: Tanzania. Available from: <https://africa.unwomen.org/en/where-we-are/eastern-and-southern-africa/tanzania>

² This interactive radio show and social media platform supports young women and girls' social, political and economic empowerment by disseminating information about important issues affecting their lives.

³ Statista (2022) Proportion of seats held by women in the national parliament of Tanzania from 2008 to 2022. Available from: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1248349/proportion-of-seats-held-by-women-in-tanzania-national-parliament/>

Conducted in December 2022, the study involved in-depth interviews (IDIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with individual representatives from key groups in Tanzania (see **Table 1**).

Table 1: IDI participant groups

Type of participant	Description
Current leaders	Not formal political leaders, but people who are highly respected and powerful in terms of shaping community decisions
Influential individuals	Elders, former teachers or politicians, respected people who have lived in their community for a long time, charismatic people (individuals who are considered to have influence over others) or religious leaders
Women trailblazers	Women who have previously stood for election and may have lost
Focus group discussion participants	Male and Female listeners of Niambie radio programme aged 18-35 years old

FGDs and IDIs were conducted across all eight administrative zones of the country to reflect the perspectives of both female and male Tanzanian citizens aged 18–35.

The ‘problem tree’ method, and vignettes outlining key barriers and opportunities, informed the design of this research study. The vignettes covered scenarios such as young and older women standing for various political positions and asking research participants questions such as, ‘What will society think of them?’, ‘What will other women think of them?’, ‘Who will likely support them?’, and ‘Who will likely discourage them?’.

Findings from this study continue to inform BBC Media Action’s *Niambie* social media strategy and radio show content helping to address factors underpinning the low participation of women in Tanzanian political leadership.



1 Groups that influence women’s participation in political leadership

This study identified four ‘reference groups’ that play an important role in influencing women’s participation in political leadership in Tanzanian communities – influential individuals, women’s partners/husbands, women in their communities, and peers. These groups guide attitudes and reinforce behavior that is acceptable or dominant in their communities. Consequently, these groups can encourage or discourage women from entering the political arena.

Influential individuals are seen by others as leaders in their communities, and their judgment is trusted. They have considerable influence in recommending potential political candidates, and in instilling positive or negative attitudes towards including women in political leadership.

“ When a political party wants to choose someone to represent them in an election, especially at the street or district level, they usually involve me in identifying someone likely to get support from the majority. I am usually right with my selection because those that I suggest, including women, usually do well. ”

Male IDI participant, influential individual (former political leader), Arusha

“ If someone is married her husband is very likely to stop her from contesting [standing for political office] because... there are a lot of men in politics. Nobody will want [their] woman to spend a long time with men while she is married. ”

Female IDI participant, former political candidate, Mbeya

Women's partners or husbands play a great role in encouraging or discouraging women and girls to take part in politics. IDI and FGD participants expressed that the partner's approval and support is needed for a woman to stand for political leadership.

Other women in the community comprise the majority of voters, yet may feel that men are 'natural' political leaders. FGD and IDI participants highlighted the importance of convincing women to vote for other women, and to believe that women can deal with political issues. In turn, this would influence political parties' willingness to have more female candidates.

“ Men look powerful but when it comes to voting, women are very powerful since they are most voters. A female candidate who can attract women in her community stands a high chance of winning... since they know how to solve problems affecting women. ”

Male IDI participant, former political leader, Mbeya

Peers and friendship groups have an important role in giving potential women political candidates and leaders the confidence and support to stand for election.

“ When I was preparing to run for this position most people did not show faith in me at first except my close friends. This encouraged me, and I think they also voted for me, that is why you see me here today. ”

Female IDI participant, political leader, Mtwara

2 Social norms that hamper women's participation in political leadership

A combination of social norms, beliefs and sanctions hamper women's participation in political leadership in Tanzania.



'A woman's primary role is homemaker'

Despite study participants saying that they support women taking part in politics, male and female participants feel that a woman's primary role is to take care of her children, husband and extended family. Women in most of the study locations marry young (below 18 years) and have family responsibilities at a very young age. Associating being a woman with being a homemaker prevents many women from participating in political leadership, as they fear facing shame and guilt for not being 'good women'.

“ Women, especially the older ones, can make good leaders but if they do who will look after their families? Most of

them marry early too so they can opt for less demanding work and not political leadership. ”

Male FGD participant, Zanzibar

“ People will judge a woman [political leader] with a family. She will lose her title of being a good woman, a mother, and a wife if she is too busy leading. Younger women taking part in the political arena... may end up not marrying, or marrying very late, because possible suitors will fear being led by women... Most men here may say they are in support of women leading but they would not be ready to see their women leading. ”

Male FGD participant, influential individual, Dodoma

'Women will lose face if they run for political positions'

Women in Tanzania are expected to be reserved and assist men in their households and communities rather than hold leadership roles. The study found that women standing for political office results in community sanctions such as spreading gossip about their character and intentions, and negative labelling. Families also fear this, which can discourage young women and girls from participating in politics.

“ I think women like me also fear what people will say if she decides to run for a political position. You know in political leadership there are a lot of men, and a woman who shows that she is interested in working with men all day long may be seen as a prostitute. ”

Female IDI participant, influential individual, Dodoma

‘Younger women cannot be trusted to lead’

The study findings indicate that young women in Tanzania are not seen by their communities as trusted, potential leaders, in contrast to their male counterparts. Furthermore, communities sanction women who defy this perception.

Women are not confident to lead and the community does not build confidence.

“ I do not think that a young woman aged, let us say, 24 years can lead in my community and bring solutions to issues affecting her community. ”

Female FGD participant, Dodoma

“ Young women aged 20 years old like me cannot lead because we are seen as just girls. But my younger brother who is 19 years can be trusted... Even my parents cannot believe that I may bring change to this community, they won’t vote for me. ”

Female FGD participant, Arusha

‘Women can only lead in positions linked to feminine issues or household activities’

While few women in Tanzania participate in political leadership, the study found that communities believe that a woman can lead in non-political positions. Specifically, there is a belief that women can hold positions that require the individual to be humble, trustworthy or caring, and that women can take on responsibilities that echo women’s household roles, such as being a nurse, teacher or cleaner, or roles that involve waking up early or mobilising youths.



“ Women in my area lead in churches and mosques. A few women I know are either treasurers or leads in positions that focus on the upkeep of the church like cleaning and decoration. Men cannot be trusted with money, not even church money, but women can be trusted. ”

Female FGD participant, Dodoma

Other factors affecting women's participation in political leadership

“The party is supposed to support the candidate financially, but it usually covers expenses that are directly linked to the rallies. When I was [standing] for this position, I had to pay for my transport, buy party uniforms, pay for a team that was helping me in the campaigns, and so forth. Most women can't afford these additional expenses because they do not have strong sources of income.”

Female IDI participant, political leader, Arusha

Election expenses

Women in Tanzania are likely to be in an underprivileged economic position and most do not have reliable sources of income. As a result, the cost of campaigning for elected offices is a challenge for women aspiring to become political leaders. Most women lack the financial muscle to compete with men.

Educational 'requirements'

As per Tanzania's constitution, to be able to stand for various political positions in Tanzania, candidates need to know how to read and write in Swahili and or have a primary education (up to grade 7). However, study participants believe that a female candidate only stands a chance of doing well in an election if she has educated to at least university degree level.

There is a perception among study participants that primary level education does not equip female candidates (who are not considered 'natural leaders' anyway) with the capacity and confidence required to stand for various political positions. Male candidates do not necessarily require a college or university education since Tanzanian citizens implicitly trust their leadership abilities.

“I think educated female candidates can do well in the election. Men are naturally confident, and they know their areas well so they can easily win people's trust. Women need extra efforts I think. When they are more educated, let us say [to] the university level, they can be more confident and build strong arguments to win the voters' trust.”

Female FGD participant, Mwanza

How to enable women's participation in political leadership

This study's findings of patriarchal norms that act as barriers to women's participation in political leadership in Tanzania, such as perceptions that women should act as nurturers and caretakers but not decision makers, echo barriers that BBC Media Action's *Niambie* project seeks to overcome. As such, BBC Media Action has several recommendations to help enable and encourage Tanzanian women's entry into political leadership roles at local and national levels.

The fact that women have demonstrated effective leadership outside the political arena, such as in churches, mosques and social groups, is a good starting point to encourage communities to trust women as political leaders. Building on areas where women have shown strong leadership could be a way to encourage women and girls' participation in political leadership.

Recommendations for the sector

Keeping in mind the Sustainable Development Goal 5: "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls", BBC Media Action makes the following recommendations to encourage women to strive for leadership positions.

What media and communication can do

- **Challenge specific gender norms around women's role** through demonstrating why, and how, women can engage in public life. Look at the roles of (young) men in the household to challenge perceptions around masculinity.
- **Support skills development and confidence** by developing entertaining scenarios showing how different skills build women's confidence. For example, a radio show episode could show a woman negotiating with her family to participate in an aspect of public life, like vying for leadership positions.
- **Change the perceptions of the reference groups** especially other women, women's husbands or partners, and those who still do not support women's participation in political leadership, to become champions advocating for this issue. This will lead to shifting community's attitude at large
- **Demonstrate how women can negotiate leadership challenges**, through showcasing examples demonstrating how women have been able to navigate their circumstances to improve their opportunities, such as contesting for public facing leadership roles while balancing family responsibilities.
 - **Use stories of change, positive role models** and influential individuals to demonstrate that women can be successful leaders in their communities
 - **Use different formats and approaches**, such as drama and entertainment programmes, to talk about resolving issues that hinder political participation

- **Pushing for change and amendment of Tanzania Political Parties Act** which plays an important role in promoting intra party democracy. This act is silent on female participation in political parties and their rights in parties.
- **Provide information** and signpost available opportunities for leadership positions
- **Train media partners** to create content that tackles the root causes of gender inequality and actively examines, questions and shifts gender norms and imbalances of power that advantage boys and men over girls and women
- **Set the agenda in addressing the issue of underrepresentation of women** in media and current coverage through a gender stereotyping lens – actively promoting women in political participation and leadership
- **Focus on increasing and amplifying women's and communities' voices to demand constitutional change** at local and national levels to ensure that a larger share of political leadership seats are reserved for women – being mindful on how this system works in practise and not perpetuating further inequality and reinforcing perceptions that females are not selected on merit rather because there are reservations in place.

What donors, government bodies, civil society can do

- Provide **training and support** for women to increase their confidence.
- Provide education opportunities to women to encourage women to consider applying for leadership roles
- Consider **workplace flexibility** for women to help them manage caring and other household responsibilities.
- Support the development of **policies** which ensure fair recruitment practices and a safe and respectful work environment, including reporting mechanisms and grievance processes, to foster positive workplace behaviour and culture.
- Make access to political leadership positions and education **services more accessible to women**. This includes: providing better community outreach and communication; demonstrating how families can support women and girls to access these opportunities/services; tackling the stigma associated with women and girls accessing these opportunities/services; working with the community to investigate simple, innovative solutions to barriers, such as shared transport to overcome safety concerns.
- Create **more gender-inclusive institutions**. This includes: improving fair recruitment practices and tackling sexual harassment in the workplace, and providing young women with more (or more visible) financial options.

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