

PATRIARCHISM AND WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN WEST POKOT COUNTY, KENYA, 1963–2017

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ABSTRACT

Between independence in 1963 and the 2017 general election, no woman from West Pokot County was elected as a constituency member of the National Assembly, as Senator or as Governor, the only national seat held by a woman being the uncontested Woman Representative seat. Studies of Pokot women have addressed peace-building, socio-cultural life and economic activity, while patriarchy has been examined as a barrier to political participation only at family level and in national aggregates. The impact of patriarchy on women's political participation in the county was examined through a qualitative historical design. Twenty respondents six women politicians, six village elders and eight of the general population were interviewed in Pokot and English, three focus group discussions were held, and oral evidence was triangulated with Kenya National Archives Local Native Council minutes and government reports within a liberal feminist framework. Patriarchy was found to operate through the exclusion of women from the *kokwo* and the male age-grade structures that governed the community; a household order in which the husband's word was final; violence used to stamp male authority, which elders named the foremost obstacle facing women candidates; dismissive speech about women's capacity; men's direction of how wives and dependants vote; exclusion from party office; and control of girls' schooling and of household resources. Public responsibility, where conferred, was confined to matters classified as women's concerns. Patriarchy, rather than any deficit in women's capacity, is the decisive determinant of this marginalisation, operating as an institutional structure rather than a set of private attitudes.

Keywords: Patriarchy; women's political participation; West Pokot County; Pokot; *kokwo*; council of elders; liberal feminist theory; Kenya

1. INTRODUCTION

Women's engagement in political leadership is a global concern, because in virtually all societies leadership is gendered masculine. Kenya has ratified most of the major human rights conventions, the most prominent being the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and hosted the Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985 (Yoon, 2004; CEDAW Report, 2006). Yet women's participation in West Pokot County has remained minimal despite those resolutions and the Abuja Declaration, and the gap between formal commitment and political outcome is the problem from which this article proceeds.

That gap is unusually stark in West Pokot. Women from the county did not feature anywhere in national

politics during the period under review, even as women elsewhere began to contest a space overwhelmingly occupied by men. No woman from any of the county's constituencies — Sigor, Pokot South, Kapenguria and Kacheliba — was elected as a constituency member of the National Assembly, as Senator or as Governor between 1963 and 2017, the single exception at national level being the county Woman Member of Parliament, a post for which no male candidate contests and which therefore remains automatically a women's seat (County Assembly of West Pokot, 2017; IEBC, 2013).

Explanations for such outcomes are commonly assembled as lists of discrete impediments — poverty, illiteracy, violence, party gatekeeping. This article asks instead whether these apparently separate obstacles are

the working parts of a single social structure. Patriarchism, for present purposes, denotes a state in which male figures, especially fathers and elderly males, are dominant in society, giving the patriarchs an upper hand in every decision, whether in the family, the church or the community.

The article is drawn from a larger historical study of women's participation in politics in West Pokot County between 1963 and 2017, and pursues one of that study's objectives only: to examine the impact of patriarchy on women's participation in politics in West Pokot County. The corresponding research question is: what is the impact of patriarchy on women's participation in politics in West Pokot County? Questions concerning the wider array of challenges facing women's participation since 1963, and the effect of the Constitution of Kenya 2010, were addressed by separate objectives of the parent study and are not treated here; where they appear, they appear only as evidence of how patriarchal authority operates or of what it has produced. The year 1963 marks Kenya's independence, and by 2017 two general elections had been held under the dispensation promulgated in 2010. The article contributes the first county-level historical account of how patriarchy has shaped women's political participation among the Pokot, identifies the institutional sites through which that authority is transmitted, and tests the reach of liberal feminist theory against a case in which the barriers are not primarily legal.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Patriarchism as a structure rather than an attitude

The most useful conceptual advance in this literature is the treatment of patriarchy as a set of structures rather than a set of opinions. Khelghat and Sibly (2020) identify three structural categories through which patriarchy obstructs women's entry into politics: a patriarchal socio-economic structure, in which education is expected to raise women's employment and hence their political roles but itself favours men; a patriarchal cultural structure, in which culture contributes significantly to women's marginalisation, there being countries whose cultures do not permit women to take part in decision-making at all; and a patriarchal structure of politics, in which women are seldom seen as political actors and are treated instead

as pawns to be used. This framing dissolves the false separation between "cultural", "economic" and "political" barriers, but it does not show how the three interlock in a particular community. Bari (2005) locates the origin of patriarchal exclusion in the family, arguing of Ethiopia that the family is the main institution of patriarchy and that women are portrayed as weak and incapable of intelligent decision, a portrayal reinforced by male-dominated institutions until women internalised the idea of their own inferiority. His analysis is pitched at the family; the present study extends the enquiry to a county, asking how the authority formed in the household is reproduced in community governance and in electoral politics. Idrus et al. (2023) report marginalisation, stereotyping, subordination and violence as the manifestations of patriarchal culture in Indonesian politics, and show that it persisted even after a State Ministry for Women's Affairs was established in 1978 — legal remedies did not dissolve the underlying structure. Arwolo and Aluko (2010) locate the mechanism in the party: Nigeria is a patriarchal society in which women are expected to conform to male dominance and female subservience, men form the parties and women are invited to join at a much later stage, after the structures are in place, and because men are typically the party executives this contributes to women's marginalisation during nomination, women never holding more than 8.3 per cent of National Assembly seats between 1980 and 2007. Nomination, party office and the treatment of women once in office are therefore the questions to put to West Pokot below. A second strand undercuts any suggestion that the political silence of African women is an unbroken inheritance: Chuku (2009) and Nolte (2008) describe pre-colonial dual-sex arrangements in which women held political power in areas considered women's, through age-grade systems, women's courts and chieftaincy titles such as the Yoruba *Iyalode*. Two points follow. The council of elders is not a neutral institution but the historical site at which male monopoly over community decision-making was consolidated, which makes the Pokot *kokwo* a necessary object of analysis rather than ethnographic background; and this literature is drawn from communities in which a parallel female structure existed to be dismantled, which raises the question of what the sequence looks like where the evidence

records no such structure.

2.2 Patriarchal politics in Kenya, and the West Pokot gap

Mwangi, S. (2008) documents the numerical picture: women in parliament remained a mere 3.18 per cent against 96.82 per cent for men up to 1983, and in 1993 there were only two elected women against 198 men — hard to reconcile with women's 51 per cent share of the population. His most important analytical point is that the domination of parliamentary seats by men implies that the major political views and decisions shaping policy emanate from men; he adds that the pattern confirms an existing mistrust of women contestants, particularly striking because women are the majority of voters, and that few women present themselves for election owing to a feeling of inadequacy deeply rooted in socialization. FIDA Kenya (2013) states that Kenya is largely a patriarchal society, which has contributed to the subjugation of women in both private and public spheres, and that despite constitutional provisions outlawing discrimination women continue to suffer setbacks whenever they seek elective positions; although women have voted since 1963, the women's voting bloc does not reflect its power at the polls because women have always been significantly under-registered. The Kriegler report (2007) observed the use of "sexist tactics and violence to keep women out of the race" and concluded that "owing to many reasons, including violence during party nominations, there were few women candidates". Nzomo (2011) captures the structural relation between women's activism and the state: "...women in Kenya were circumscribed in advancing a gender agenda, as they operated primarily within civil society, with no political space and with minimal connection or support from the largely patriarchal State".

Bouka et al. (2019) add the discursive dimension, arguing that the gendered and dismissive language used towards women candidates reveals how deeply patriarchal attitudes are entrenched, that women are expected to demonstrate that they are good spouses and housekeepers before selection for elective seats — a standard not applied to male candidates — and that communities with institutions such as the council of elders are usually unwilling to back women; while Ohman and Lintari (2016) note that most women do

not obtain party office because they lack the financial capacity to finance party activities that men possess. These two findings are the most directly testable in West Pokot, and both are tested below.

Literature on women in politics from a historical perspective is limited, and studies on Pokot women do not deal with political involvement; the documented work concerns peace, socio-cultural and economic issues. The closest study is Cherotich (2019), who examined women's role in peace-building in West Pokot County between 2000 and 2018 and argues that patriarchal structures have hindered women in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial times: the women who took that initiative still felt left out and discriminated against as a result of a patriarchal society, patriarchal lenses not considering their roles important. Her study is nonetheless confined to peace-building, whose leadership is not politically pronounced in the way that leadership in elective political posts is. Bettina et al. (2017) add that since before independence West Pokot has been associated with female genital mutilation, early marriage, and the holding of male children as superior to their female counterparts.

The gap is therefore specific. That patriarchy exists in West Pokot is not in doubt; what has not been examined is how it operates upon women's participation in *politics* there, through which institutions it works, what it produced between independence and 2017, and what the community's own custodians of patriarchal authority say about women's political leadership. Existing accounts of patriarchal political obstruction sit at the level of the family (Bari, 2005), at national level (Arwolo and Aluko, 2010; Idrus et al., 2023), or in national aggregates for Kenya (Mwangi, S., 2008; FIDA Kenya, 2013; Wanjiru, 2018), and none is grounded in the institutions of a Kenyan pastoral community.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study adopted the liberal feminist theory, whose proponents include Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Tyler and John Stuart Mill. Goldstein (2001) notes its starting observation that women are half the world's population and a third of the paid labour force and can therefore do equally what men have done. The theory sees women as a disadvantaged class, unjustly dominated and exploited by men, and holds that both

sexes have equal potential for individual development; it focuses on women's legal rights and gender equality, concluding that women have the same rights as men and that their integration into the public sphere is as important as men's integration into society. Gender roles, on this account, are socially constructed, and liberal feminists argue that women equal men in ability and that the gendering of politics reflects male discrimination. O'Neil and Domingo (2016) argue that women have the right to participate in all social and political roles without discrimination, and that liberal feminists seek to remove the socio-economic, ideological and psychological, and political barriers preventing equal participation.

Three features do specific work here. First, the premise of equal potential converts the West Pokot electoral record into a question rather than an explanation: the absence of any woman from the county elected to nationally contested office cannot be evidence about women's capacity, and differences in the realisation of that potential must result from externally imposed constraints and from the influence of social institutions and values, which directs attention away from the aspirant and towards the structures that receive her. Second, the account of gender roles as constructed rather than natural gives purchase on the Pokot material: if the expectation that a woman will herd, milk and remain silent before men is made rather than given, it is alterable, and the question becomes which institutions sustain it — the question the findings pursue through the *sapana*, the *kokwo*, the age-grade and the household. Third, O'Neil and Domingo's threefold classification, which corresponds closely to Khelghat and Sibly's (2020) three structures, organises evidence that would otherwise read as an unstructured list: the withholding of campaign funds is a socio-economic barrier, the declaration that women lack leadership skills an ideological one, the absence of women from party office a political one.

One line of criticism is directly pertinent. Malamuti (1996) notes that it is the power structure which maintains a hierarchical arrangement wherein violence towards women is justified, while allowing that liberal feminist theory remains important in sensitising society on matters of gender. Its weakness, for a study of this kind, is that it does not fully address the fundamental patriarchal ideologies that underpin women's oppression — a limitation the West Pokot

evidence brings into view and which the discussion takes up.

4. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative research design in order to achieve an in-depth analysis of historical data, whereby accounts of past events were systematically examined and interpreted together with the way they have influenced present findings; the historical method was applied, and interpretive analysis was used to relate one event to another within a broader context. The study was carried out in West Pokot County, selected because it has been in the limelight for gender-based violence (KNBS Report, 2022). The county has six sub-counties subdivided into twenty electoral wards, and its constituencies are Sigor, Pokot South, Kapenguria and Kacheliba (IEBC, 2013). The period covered is 1963 to 2017.

The study targeted residents of various wards knowledgeable about women's political participation, village elders being targeted because they are the custodians of the community's political and social aspects and therefore possess vital information regarding politics. The target population comprised six women politicians, six village elders and eight members of the general population aged above eighteen, giving a sample of twenty respondents, selected by purposive sampling capitalising on snowballing. Primary sources were oral interviews, Kenya National Archives materials and government reports; secondary sources were books, journal articles, theses and conference papers.

The interview guide was semi-structured, involving pre-determined questions and a highly standardised recording technique (Kothari, 2005), administered in person so that misleading questions could be clarified and further information probed. Three focus group discussions were conducted, at Alale on 18 July 2024, at Lengorok on 19 July 2024 and at Kapenguria on 20 July 2024; the instrument allowed the views of five respondents to be obtained at once and allowed them to self-correct where information was incomplete (Oso and Onen, 2011). A document analysis guide was used for written sources in the major libraries and the national archives. Interviews were conducted in Pokot and English, nine of them in Pokot and translated by Moses SikamoiPkemei, who also translated the focus group discussions; some were tape-recorded with

respondents' consent.

For reliability the researcher used triangulation, comparing data from different instruments; for validity the supervisors were consulted on content validity and accuracy, the instruments being modified on their comments and subjected to test and retest. A research permit was obtained from the university and from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation before fieldwork. Analysis began in the field to avoid the loss of important information: tape-recorded material was transcribed and arranged according to themes, objectives and periods, a coding system tailored to the objectives was developed, major themes were classified, and key quotations and interpretations were highlighted and grouped under those themes. All data were classified according to content and to the specific historical timeframe within which events took place, and are presented qualitatively through description and narration.

Participation was voluntary throughout; respondents were informed of the purpose of the study, consent was sought before the exercise began, identities were not disclosed without consent, and respondents' names were not written on the question guides. Respondents are identified below by number, sex, age, place and date of interview, save where the parent study itself cites an informant by name. The study was limited by the finances required for travel and by the problem of insincerity, that is, the giving of wrong or conflicting information, particularly on rights and on the sharing of responsibilities with men — itself revealing of the sensitivity of the relations under investigation.

5. FINDINGS

5.1 Male authority in Pokot governance: *sapana*, *kokwo* and the age-grade

The exclusion of women from political decision-making in West Pokot begins not with the ballot but with the ritual constitution of adulthood. Pokot men are traditionally divided into three groups: *karachona*, boys; *muren*, circumcised men; and *poi*, old men, and governance involves an age-set that is cyclical over a period of eight years (Lotorongole, O.I., 2024). Entry into the governing tier is achieved through *sapana*, a rite by which a young man gains the status of an elder; one who has undergone it is called *Kasapanakian*, and it is conducted by elders who have themselves passed through it. Undergone at about the age of twenty,

sapana confers full social status: through it a man becomes eligible to attend the elders' council, the *kokwo*, and to take part in offering sacrifices and rituals such as the *krket* (Gichobi, 2026).

The significance for women's political participation lies in what the rite does *not* provide: there is no equivalent passage by which a woman becomes eligible for the *kokwo*. Pokot elders, who are male, were the ones expected to officiate or lead in communal gatherings and to make decisions on behalf of women and children (Campbell, 2010); at feasts and dances they offered prayers and offerings to the supreme deity, *Tororot*, and diviners and medicine men — all male — also played a significant role (Atlas of Humanity, 2019). The elders thereby exhibited a crude political orientation that did not allow women to be part of the process, giving rise to a form of government in which age-grades were entrusted with community affairs, males being initiated between fifteen and twenty and women at around twelve, and the responsibilities of elders including presiding over important community decisions, festivals and religious ceremonies. Both sexes were thus initiated and both aged into respect, but only one sex was routed into the institution that decided; it is this exclusionary orientation of the elders, with the age-grade form of government it produced, which perpetuated patriarchy and sidelined women towards the periphery of the circles of decision-making.

The gendered division of labour reinforced the lesson from childhood. Males were trained to kill fierce animals such as leopards and lions to prove their maturity into manhood (Lotorongole, O.I., 2024), while the most common role expected of girls was the tending of livestock and shepherding in the fields (Trop, 1988), any mature girl being expected to know how to milk cows and goats and to play the midwifery role for livestock at the time of their giving birth. Up to these duties, it could be a guarantee that every girl grew up expecting to fulfil these roles in adulthood and nothing more, and this culture conditioned their minds into believing that they could not take part in any leadership role within the family, let alone that of the community (Trop, 1988). Cattle, meanwhile, were the sign of wealth and the ticket by which a man could marry as many wives as possible (Atlas of Humanity, 2019) — the key entry point to patriarchy, since the accumulation that conferred standing was of a resource

controlled by men and expended in acquiring wives.

5.2 The patriarchal household as the site of political socialisation

The pattern established in communal governance was replicated in the homestead. Husbands were revered, their words being the final law in the home; sons were treated as second in command and held sway in any discussion whenever the father was absent (Campbell, 2010). During meals, women were expected to eat together with the children while seated on the ground, and were not expected to sit on any available seat even if that seat was unoccupied; alongside this stood the rule of silence, girls not being expected to contribute to any discussion in which their male counterparts were talking. Such subjugation served only to instil fear and to inculcate a spirit of insubordination in women, perpetuated by subjecting them to perpetual submission to the male gender, and the findings show that women thus lacked voice in any public forum and, by humiliating extension, had no authority within the homestead either (Lotorongole, O.I., 2024).

The household order was underwritten by an appeal to hierarchy as such: patriarchy, as an aspect of culture, was in part initiated to contribute to stability and predictability, and that hierarchy placed the man at the top of the decision-making chain, the frequency with which disputes were referred to him and settled by him emboldening men until they felt a law unto themselves, the authority then being used to load it over women rather than to resolve the disputes (Khelghat and Sibly, 2020; Ponge, 2012). Culture served, further, as a ticket to credibility and recognition whose custodians in West Pokot were the community leaders, all men, and it has clumped women as fit only for secondary duties, patriarchy capitalising on it to patronise leadership at women's expense (Campbell, 2010). These practices drove West Pokot County to become so patriarchal that the voice of women was hushed to the point of being equated with nonsense in public places, and they still have great impact on political leadership in the area (Lotorongole, O.I., 2024).

5.3 Violence as the enforcement mechanism of patriarchal authority

Men, especially husbands, were expected to stamp authority over their spouses, and the means used was

physical assault, which instilled fear rather than entrenching discipline and thereby entrenched the voice of men over women, women giving in to any demand of the men (Lotorongole, O.I., 2024; Ponge, 2012). The resulting gender-based violence subjected women to fear and to submissiveness without question and drained whatever confidence they might have had, so that they shied away from taking up any leadership responsibility. West Pokot County leads in cases of gender-based violence against women aged between fifteen and forty-nine (KNBS Report, 2022) — the prime age bracket within which vital decisions of leadership are normally made — so that violence emerges as a major impediment preventing women from taking up political positions in the county (Ponge, 2012).

The primary data corroborate this from an unexpected direction. On the challenges besetting women politicians during campaigns, the focus group discussion at Alale on 18 July 2024 reported: *"kmwakokwoo poi lo rumot, ngoringinchopotukwin, nko chopat po wewotoskul, nkoosilkleekompolelutchonyorukooruatoyereichepkura"*, naming violence as the most rampant challenge, followed by women's financial ability or income, then education, and lastly culture — an ordering that affirms the findings of the KNBS Report (2022). The village elders gave the same ordering. If village elders — the emblems of patriarchy in the community — themselves name violence as the major challenge confronting women politicians, then patriarchy is a live and acknowledged issue in West Pokot, because many men would readily turn violent to express their patriarchal position when they feel emotionally threatened.

The ordering is not uniform. Probed on the same four attributions, respondent 3 (male, aged 65, at Lengorok, O.I., 4 July 2024) placed cultural issues first, then income, education and violence, and it is this ordering that the parent study carried into its summary of the challenges facing women's participation. The divergence matters less than it appears, since on either ranking the top two items are patriarchally constituted: violence is the means by which male authority is stamped, and the cultural issues named are the norms that place men above women and reserve leadership to them.

5.4 Patriarchal attitudes and gendered speech about women candidates

Patriarchal exclusion in West Pokot is stated openly rather than concealed. Asked whether the time was ripe for women to take on political leadership, two elders replied unanimously: "*Kmolyengupichodeny lo mokchemechanyepaitagh po koor, molukunyekoorupoitoghi, mchinikoorkumpurkestonakchopoikoorutnganatnyopo paitagh*" — ".....they do not want women 'Koor' leadership, women will never be leaders; women should stay at home; and women lack leadership skills" (respondent 1, male, aged 80, at Alale, and respondent 2, male, aged 71, at Alale, O.I., 3 July 2024). The statement makes exclusion at once a preference, an absolute prophecy and a diagnosis of capacity, so that no evidence of women's competence could disturb it. Bouka et al. (2019) argue that precisely such gendered and dismissive language reveals how entrenched patriarchal attitudes towards women's leadership are, and that communities with institutions such as the council of elders are usually unwilling to back women.

Village elders stated that men do not support women candidates, the most prominent reason given being that culture does not allow women to be in leadership; asked whether women were nominated for senatorial and parliamentary seats, the majority said that women had no place in leadership and that this was why they were being ignored in nominations to those positions. The same pattern emerged from the focus groups: only a few of the participants at Alale on 18 July 2024, "*Kchomweichisopuchnyo kiting keret lo poi knemeiyeukoorukwaa, woloktaghsopuchnyo wow*", agreed that men support women candidates, while the majority were of the contrary opinion — whose reason carries its own logic, since had the support been authentic the county would by now have produced a woman member of the National Assembly. Respondents were unanimous that women's candidacy has attracted prejudice owing to unfriendly cultural issues that women candidates must outmanoeuvre, as also emerged from the Kapenguria discussion of 20 July 2024; asked about the environment of political campaigns towards women, many agreed that it is full of prejudice, violence and corruption.

Nor was support for women's leadership uniform among women themselves: only a few respondents

gave answers showing confidence in it, because some women too have not embraced the leadership of fellow women — an indication that patriarchal evaluation of women's capacity has been internalised across the community rather than merely imposed from one side, which is what Bari (2005) describes in observing that the portrayal of women as incapable was reinforced by male-dominated institutions until women internalised the idea that they were inferior. Many of the respondent village elders lacked basic education (Orodho, 2003), the majority being standard eight school leavers, which could also be helping to entrench some of the archaic cultural practices; and not one village elder was found to be female — itself a finding about the composition of the institution that adjudicates on women's fitness for leadership.

5.5 Patriarchal control over the vote and over access to party office

Two findings show patriarchy operating inside the electoral process. The first concerns the vote. The focus group discussion at Lengorok on 19 July 2024 reported: "*Kmwasopuchnyo kiting keret lo mrenchoporoyochkestonnikwaakmwonchinimonechila pai chi nyokitonichepkura*", that men, especially polygamous men, dictate to their wives and to young adults — sons and daughters still dependent on them — whom to vote for and how to vote. Men still have a great deal of influence on how women vote, and since pre-independence the holding of male children as superior to their female counterparts has continued to perpetuate patriarchy (Bettina et al., 2017). Women are numerically formidable as voters, 60,158 having been registered in the county for the 2013 general election (IEBC, 2013); yet where the direction of that vote is exercised by husbands and fathers, their electoral weight is transferred to the patriarchal household and cannot be converted into support for women candidates, so that women do not exercise the fundamental right to vote for a candidate of their own choice.

The second finding concerns the political party. Asked whether women had held high positions in political parties, respondents said: "*klumtechikeghpichaiaakmwa lo tomeye keto koorngocherchoecheonochompochepkura*" — women have not held high party positions in political parties. The village elders agreed that women have not held

any conspicuous position in any political party whatsoever, and the majority of respondents felt the same, two reasons emerging strongly: men do not want to give women a chance to serve, and culture still plays a big role even when it comes to political party positions. The consequence, respondents said, has been a lacklustre participation by women in party politics in the county; asked how holding party office would affect their participation, they said it would help women's voices to be included in party politics and in the county's wider developmental issues. Since national politics begins with party politics, where women's participation there is gagged their effect on national politics is minimal.

Nomination illustrates the same gatekeeping from the other side. All respondents agreed that quite a number of women have been nominated, mostly in the County Assembly, but that they most often do not make it through the general election. The Kapenguria discussion of 20 July 2024 — "*Kchomweichisopuchnyo kiting keret lo kikonukeghyotinoompochepkura*" — agreed that women offered themselves as contestants and were given equal chances for nomination in political parties, although the group felt that cultural prejudice still played a major role in their unsuccessful attempts. The evidence on whether women present themselves at all is mixed: at County Assembly and National Assembly level women have tried vying, albeit unsuccessfully in most instances, while for the senatorial and gubernatorial seats respondents returned a negative answer, women not having attempted those contests — which the parent study reads as showing that women in the county have not fully embraced political contests with men, the USAID Report (2023) likewise citing women's continuing hesitancy. Patriarchal prejudice therefore operates at two points: between candidacy and election where women come forward, and on the willingness to come forward at all where the seat would place a woman in direct competition with men. The Kenyan record supplies a documented instance at party level: in 1997 Sophia Abdi clinched the KANU ticket for Ijara constituency, defeating her male competitors, but the patriarchs lobbied KANU's highest decision-making organ and her nomination was revoked, the ticket going to a male competitor who won the seat (Maichuhie, 2025).

5.6 Patriarchal mediation of education and of household resources

Education and money enter here not as separate educational or economic barriers, but because in each case the study's material shows the resource being controlled or withheld by patriarchal authority: patriarchy is still rampant in West Pokot County to the extent that husbands and fathers withhold resources, as the culture dictates. The political consequence appears in respondents' account of what deters women otherwise interested in office: women were found to be interested in political positions, but the conditions that deterred them were described as "*.....lack of enough time to engage in politics due to overburden, lack of civil right awareness on the part of the women, cultural prejudice, and women still lack enough financial capability to campaign*" (respondent 15, male, aged 32, at Alale, O.I., 10 July 2024). Each of the four items connects to findings already reported: the overburden to the domestic and pastoral labour assigned by gendered role, the unawareness of rights to the schooling women did not receive, the cultural prejudice to the attitudes in section 5.4, and the financial incapacity to the withholding of resources. The focus groups enumerated the same deterrents, naming patriarchal influence and cultural prejudice among them, and women's campaigns were reported to be poorly coordinated for want of funds, alongside hostility towards women candidates.

Education is patriarchally mediated through practices that remove girls from school. West Pokot County had not achieved gender parity at secondary level, attaining a parity index of 0.9 in favour of male students where sixteen counties had achieved parity (Basic Education Statistical Booklet, 2020); enrolment ratios at pre-primary and primary levels favour boys (Ministry of Education Report, 2020; KNBS Report, 2024), and qualified female learners in basic education stand at a lower level than males (KNBS Report, 2019). This can be attributed to early pregnancies and early marriages, 29 per cent of young women aged fifteen to nineteen having begun childbearing (Kenya Demographic Survey, 2014). The link to patriarchal control is direct: girls were initiated at about twelve, and once initiated were required to leave home for marriage, cutting short their education (Mohammud et al., 2023); early marriage was rampant because initiation qualified girls to be wives and because, wealth being measured in

cattle, fathers hurried to marry off their daughters in order to acquire it (Trop, 1988). The decision was the father's, and the currency of the transaction was the same currency of male standing described in section 5.1.

The two constraints compound each other: patriarchal control of schooling produces the unawareness of rights, and patriarchal control of cattle and cash the incapacity to campaign, women in West Pokot having long played second fiddle to men to the extent that they obey orders without question (Lotorongole, O.I., 2024). Asked about women's awareness of civil rights, the majority of respondents did not care whether women were cognisant of them, and the majority of women still do not care or are oblivious of their rights; where respondents did care, the reason given was that by knowing their rights women would ".....evade cultural issues, they would take political leadership positions, the rights would help the women to broaden their worldview" (respondent 5, male, aged 65, at Lengorok, O.I., 4 July 2024). Respondents proposed that proper civic education would enlighten people away from some discriminative cultures on women's leadership (respondent 10, female, aged 68, at Kapenguria, O.I., 3 July 2024; respondent 11, female, aged 64, at Lelan, O.I., 4 July 2024; respondent 12, female, aged 60, at Konyao, O.I., 5 July 2024), enlightenment through education and training being a great catalyst in women's empowerment (Ajuma et al., 2018).

5.7 Conditional inclusion: leadership licensed only on "women's matters"

The archival record shows that patriarchal authority in West Pokot did not refuse women's public responsibility absolutely; where it was conferred, it was conferred on terms. The Kongelai Division Local Native Council minutes of 3 May 1965 record that the then District Commissioner appointed some influential women who held sway over their women counterparts, so that they could begin sensitising the community of Kongelai on the importance of education for everyone regardless of gender; the appointees included ChemutaiSerogun, Chemosis Chelagat and TeglaLoroupe (KNA/LNC/22, 1965). Although not political appointments, they were politicised — by women jealous of their colleagues, and by men who felt threatened by the elevation of the appointed

women — and the opposition they received did not give them the peace of mind to work.

A second instance concerns the Chepareria natives of Chepareria Division, who in 1988 organised themselves to look into the rampant deaths of young women during initiations entailing genital mutilation; because this was seen as an issue affecting females, the elders gave a mandate to three women leaders, appointed by the council of elders, to oversee that undertaking (KNA/LNC/17, 1988). Although not appointments to political leadership, they connote the importance of patriarchs conferring leadership roles on women only on matters touching the women's agenda — the pattern Nzomo (2011) identifies in observing that women in Kenya were circumscribed in advancing a gender agenda, operating within civil society with no political space and minimal support from the largely patriarchal state. A third instance shows a further form of the same pattern, that of subordinate office: the Kacheliba Division Local Native Council minutes of 1991 record that ChemutaiSerogun was appointed by the area District Officer to a committee tasked with identifying whether locals were secretly taking part in the then rampant cattle rustling, and was made its secretary (KNA/LNC, 1991). The finding is thus not that women were never entrusted with public responsibility, but that it was granted where delegated by men and confined to women's concerns or to subordinate office.

5.8 Consequences: eroded aspiration, the electoral record, and its ruptures

The demoralisation of women brought about by patriarchy leads to the suppression of women's development (Mohammud et al., 2023). The unpalatable reference in which women were held seemed to form a permanent conviction in their minds that they could not offer leadership under any circumstances; respondents' account of the starting point is instructive, since under the archaic culture women were initially seen as children and were not allowed at any decision-making table.

The record shows what patriarchal exclusion has produced. There was gender imbalance in the political leadership of West Pokot County, and no woman has ever been elected as a constituency member of the National Assembly, or as Senator, Governor or President in the county (respondent 7, female, aged 58, at Alale, O.I., 2 July 2024; respondent 4, male, aged

59, at Alale, O.I., 4 July 2024). Respondents were unanimous that women were still being suppressed from senatorial, gubernatorial and National Assembly seats, and that this was harder to overcome because men, feeling threatened in the political space, invoked

the cultural issues that tend to suppress women; the few who have come forward have not been received with enthusiasm because of prejudice, and there is no significant women's political representation in the county (USAID Report, 2023).

Table 1: Elected and nominated women, County Assembly of West Pokot, 1963–2017

Election	Number of elected women	Number of nominated women
1963	0	0
1969	0	0
1974	0	0
1979	0	0
1983	0	0
1988	0	0
1992	0	0
1997	0	0
2002	0	0
2007	0	0
2013	0	7
2017	2	8

Source: County Assembly of West Pokot (2017)

Table 1 records five decades of zero, and then a change whose character is instructive: when women do appear, they appear first as nominees. The returns for 2013 show one elected female Member of the County Assembly and no elected female Member of Parliament, Governor or Senator (IEBC, 2013); the county's own return for that year records nominated rather than elected women, the two sources differing marginally at ward level. What neither disputes is that across the whole period no woman from West Pokot was elected as a constituency member of the National Assembly, as Senator or as Governor, the county's single seat held by a woman at national level being the Woman Member of Parliament — held by Hon. Regina Nyeris from 2013 to 2017 and Hon. Lilian CheptooTomitom from 2017 (Kenya Parliamentary Records, 2017) — for which no male candidate contests.

Patriarchal authority is not, however, total, and the

exceptions are significant precisely because of what they had to overcome. The clearest is the rise of Mrs Catherine Mukenyang to the office of first woman Speaker of the County Assembly of West Pokot in 2017; she is among the very few who have blazed that trail in the entire nation. That "Mrs. Catherine Mukenyang is not afraid to order members to observe decorum..." is a sign of the capability of women leaders in their due diligence, and in Pokot culture it is unacceptable for a woman to order a man to sit down (Kakai, 2017); the Speaker defied that odd to perform her duties beyond cultural barriers. Respondents also recorded that a few women have been elected as Members of the County Assembly, and at least one as Speaker (respondent 18, male, aged 39, at Sook, O.I., 12 July 2024; respondent 16, male, aged 32, at Kacheliba, O.I., 11 July 2024; respondent 19, female, aged 70, at Lelan, O.I., 15 July 2024; respondent 20, female, aged 74, at Kongelai, O.I., 17 July 2024), and

the Kapenguria group of 20 July 2024 named Mrs Rhoda Rotino, who has vied since 1992 though unsuccessfully — persistence across a quarter of a century being itself a measurement of the resistance encountered. Respondents were unanimous that education, formal and civic, would be the great remedy, and brought out the need to end discriminative cultures on women's leadership.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 Patriarchism operates as an institution, not as an opinion

Patriarchism in West Pokot is not usefully described as an attitude individuals hold and might be persuaded out of. It has membership rules, entry rites, jurisdictions and enforcement: membership of the governing body was determined by an initiation available to one sex only; jurisdiction over community decisions and ceremonies lay with male elders; the household reproduced the order daily; and enforcement was physical. This is a structure in the sense Khelghat and Sibly (2020) intend, and it explains the durability of patriarchal exclusion across fifty-four years of political change, since an attitude can be argued with but an institution must be entered, and the institution that decided had no door through which a woman might pass. The finding also clarifies the relation between obstacles usually listed separately: the financial incapacity of women candidates arises from a property order in which cattle and cash are controlled by men who withhold resources, the educational deficit from initiation at twelve and the father's interest in bridewealth, and the overburden of time from the gendered assignment of labour. Income, education and time are therefore not problems alongside patriarchy but among its outputs — which is where the study departs from Bari (2005), whose account of the family stops at the household door, whereas the findings trace the same authority outward from the homestead to the *kokwo*, from the *kokwo* to the party branch, and from there to the ballot.

6.2 The *kokwo* and the "council of elders effect"

Bouka et al. (2019) observe that communities with institutions such as the council of elders are usually unwilling to back women and discourage them from vying. The West Pokot evidence confirms this and specifies its mechanism. In the Kenyan literature the

council of elders appears as a source of conservative opinion; the *sapana* evidence shows the *kokwo* to be an *eligibility* institution — not a body that merely holds views about women's leadership, but the body whose composition rules made women ineligible for the deliberative role at all. The discouragement Bouka and colleagues describe is thus not incidental conservatism but the expression of a rule. The comparison with the West African material sharpens the point: Chuku (2009) and Nolte (2008) describe dual-sex arrangements in which women held political power in areas considered women's, whereas in the present evidence the route into Pokot community decision-making ran through *sapana* and the male age-grade alone, women's initiation at around twelve leading not towards deliberative office but towards marriage and the gendered economy of herding and milking. Whether a parallel female institution of the Igbo or Yoruba type once existed among the Pokot and was later lost is a question this study did not set out to answer and on which its evidence is silent; what it establishes is that no such institution appears in the recollection of those interviewed, nor in the archival record consulted. Where a community retains the memory of female office the argument for inclusion can appeal to precedent; the West Pokot evidence offers no such precedent, so the case must be made on the ground of equal potential — the ground liberal feminist theory occupies.

6.3 Violence, and the significance of patriarchal self-report

That the village elders named violence as the most rampant challenge facing women politicians is among the most telling items of evidence here, and its significance lies in who said it. The Kriegler report (2007) observed the use of sexist tactics and violence to keep women out of the race, and Idrus et al. (2023) list violence among the manifestations of patriarchal culture; the present study adds a corroboration external observation cannot supply, since the finding comes from the custodians of the order themselves. When the men who preside over community decisions identify violence as the principal obstacle confronting women who seek office, they are describing the enforcement mechanism of their own authority, and treat it as a normal feature of the political environment. The KNBS (2022) finding that the county leads nationally

in gender-based violence against women aged fifteen to forty-nine acquires a political meaning in this light, that band being the cohort from which women candidates, campaigners and voters would be drawn. Malamuti's (1996) criticism of liberal feminism — that it is the power structure which maintains a hierarchy wherein violence towards women is justified — is borne out here: a woman may hold the full complement of political rights and still be unable to exercise them if the household in which she lives enforces its authority physically.

6.4 The vote as patriarchal property, and the party as gate

The finding that men, especially polygamous men, dictate to wives and dependants whom to vote for extends the Kenyan literature in a specific way. Mwangi, S. (2008) observes gender voting biases and a mistrust of women contestants, striking because women are the majority of voters, and FIDA Kenya (2013) attributes the weakness of the women's voting bloc principally to under-registration. The West Pokot evidence indicates a mechanism beyond registration: the issue is not only whether women are on the register but whose choice the registered woman's vote expresses. With 60,158 women registered for 2013 (IEBC, 2013), the arithmetic of a women's bloc existed; the finding is that its direction did not belong to the women who cast it. That dissolves what would otherwise be a puzzle, for it is difficult to explain on a model of autonomous voting how a county with a female majority returned no woman to a contested national seat over fifty-four years, and not difficult once the vote is understood as an asset directed by the head of the household: the franchise was formally available throughout, and the barrier lay in the domestic authority through which it passed. The party evidence points the same way: Ohman and Lintari's (2016) argument that women fail to obtain party office partly for want of financial capacity is supported here, but the evidence supplies the prior fact that gives it force, namely that men withhold resources as the culture dictates, so that women's financial incapacity in the party arena is the outcome of a distribution rule within households rather than a general condition of poverty. Sophia Abdi's experience at Ijara (Maichuhie, 2025) shows the same authority in party decision-making, and matches Arwolo and Aluko's (2010)

account of parties formed by men who admit women only after the structures are set.

6.5 Conditional inclusion, and the reach of liberal feminist theory

The archival findings permit a conclusion oral evidence alone could not supply. Patriarchal authority in West Pokot has not operated by uniform refusal but by delegation on defined subjects: girls' education at Kongelai in 1965, deaths during female initiation at Chepareria in 1988, a subordinate secretaryship at Kacheliba in 1991. Two concern matters classified as women's concerns and the third is subordinate office; in none does a woman acquire jurisdiction over the community's general affairs. This is Nzomo's (2011) circumscription observed at county level and in the archive, and even this delegated authority was politicised and resisted. Delegated inclusion of that kind is not a step towards equality but a technique by which patriarchal authority accommodates the appearance of women's leadership while retaining the substance of decision — and a seat that arrives by nomination reproduces that relation in modern institutional form.

Liberal feminist theory earns its place at three points and reaches its limit at a fourth. It reframes the electoral record, since equal potential means that fifty-four years without a woman elected to a contested national seat cannot be evidence of incapacity, and the elders' claim that women lack leadership skills is thereby classified as an ideological barrier rather than reported as fact — a classification that Mrs Catherine Mukenyang's conduct in the Speaker's chair (Kakai, 2017) empirically vindicates. It establishes that the gender roles the Pokot evidence describes are made rather than given, and therefore alterable; and it organises the barriers into socio-economic, ideological and political categories the findings fill. Its limit is its focus on legal rights: women held the legal right to vote and to stand throughout the period, and neither produced a woman elected to contested national office, because the decisive obstacles were an eligibility rule embedded in ritual, a household authority enforced physically, a distribution of resources controlled by men, and an internalised conviction among women themselves.

7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Conclusion

Patriarchism has laid a stranglehold on women in West Pokot County, and its impact on their political participation has been decisive rather than contributory. It excluded women from the institutions in which community decisions were made, *sapana* conferring eligibility for the *kokwo* on men only; it constituted the household as a training ground for exclusion, the husband's word being final law and sons ranking above wives; it was enforced through violence, which the elders themselves named as the most rampant challenge confronting women politicians; it was expressed in open and dismissive speech about women's capacity; it captured the electoral process itself, men dictating to wives and dependants whom to vote for while women were kept from conspicuous party office; and it controlled the resources political competition requires, husbands and fathers withholding them while girls were withdrawn from school at initiation and given in early marriage for bridewealth. The consequences were an erosion of women's confidence and aspiration to the point of a conviction that they could not offer leadership at all, and an electoral record in which no woman from the county was elected as a constituency member of the National Assembly, as Senator or as Governor between 1963 and 2017. Patriarchal authority was nonetheless not absolute: it licensed women's leadership on terms, and it was defied by Mrs Rhoda Rotino's candidatures sustained from 1992 and decisively by Mrs Catherine Mukenyang, who in 2017 became the first woman Speaker of the County Assembly of West Pokot — exceptions that confirm rather than qualify the conclusion, since they show what patriarchal structures rather than female incapacity had been preventing. Read through liberal feminist theory, the gendering of politics in West Pokot reflects discrimination and not any difference in potential; the case also marks that theory's limit, since women's rights were legally secure throughout while the barriers that mattered were ritual, domestic, economic and psychological, so that any programme addressing only the legal position will leave the structure intact.

7.2 Recommendations

The following recommendations follow from the

findings above, and are adapted from those of the parent study.

First, the Ministry of Education, working through stakeholder engagements in West Pokot County, should sensitise the community on strengthening girl-child education. The study established that husbands and fathers withhold resources and that girls' schooling is interrupted by initiation at around twelve and by early marriage contracted in the interest of bridewealth; sensitisation directed at the household authority that decides to withdraw a girl from school is therefore the appropriate instrument, and offers a long-term solution to illiteracy among women while building their confidence in the political space.

Second, civic education on the democratic space of women in elective leadership is necessary, and the findings indicate that it should be addressed to the custodians of patriarchal authority and not to women alone. Respondents proposed civic education as the means of enlightening people away from discriminative cultures on women's leadership, and were unanimous that education, formal and civic, would be the great remedy. Since men do not support women candidates on the stated ground that culture does not permit women's leadership, and since village elders — all male, many without basic education — are the community's arbiters of women's fitness for office, civic education confined to women would address only half of the audience the findings identify.

Third, the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission should develop mechanisms of reaching women in marginalized areas with a view to educating them on their political rights. This follows from the finding that men dictate to wives and dependants whom to vote for, so that women do not exercise the right to vote for a candidate of their choice; voter education addresses the point at which patriarchal authority converts a majority of registered voters into an electorate that has never returned a woman to a contested seat.

7.3 Areas for further research

Two questions this study raises but cannot settle are what deters the women of West Pokot County from acting collectively against the patriarchal structure once its practices have been identified as the problem,

and whether the educational level of village elders — composed mostly of those with the most basic education, and among whom not one female elder was encountered — significantly affects women's participation in political leadership.

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