

Opportunities and Challenges of Women Participation in Somalia Politics: Case Study of Puntland State

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Abstract

Throughout Somalia, women's status in politics is considered a very hot issue to talk about openly on debates because Somalia experienced political dynamics rapidly over the past three decades, and adopted federalism system. However, Puntland, a semi-autonomous state, was established on August 1998 and exercise de facto authority in its jurisdictions and organize elections unilaterally. The study explores the opportunities and challenges of women participation in Somalia politics. This study employed a descriptive research method of primary and secondary data collection using Likert scale structured questionnaire. Findings show that this study represented the overall findings of the interviewees intertwined with the most relevant and proponent literatures including up-to-date reports, papers, articles and the constitutions of both federal government of Somalia and Puntland State and of which stipulate the fundamental rights of the citizenries such saying citizens have the right to vote, the right to public office, the right to reside and travel freely in any part of the territory of the state, and the right to political association. However, the study found that all these principals appear only as de jure principles written on paper because, the pattern of Puntland female parliamentarians has been deteriorating over the last two decades due to many factors including the educational level of the women, the women's recognition, the patriarchal-oriented behavior, and preference of male over female by the clan leaders who are entry point for the politics and have a crucial role in determining who get selected for political positions. Contrariwise, the women's appointed positions of power were quite scaling up with the will of the president (s), and number of women standing for having an interest in political positions has been heightened. Conversely, the study also explores the potential opportunities available for women's participation in Puntland state of

Somalia and concluded establishing rigid political campaign strategy such as extending service to the vulnerable people and/or advocating for their interest at the decision tables and so forth.

Keywords

Women Participation, Clan-Based-Politics, Patriarchy, Parliamentarian, Challenge and Opportunity

1. Introduction

Since 20th century, women have been struggling to find political positions, whether a city council, state legislatives, national parliamentarians and/or in the executive to secure their political rights.

Globally, as of November 2021, the average percentages of women parliamentarians in each region: Americas 32.8%; Europe 31%; sub-Saharan Africa 25.8%; Asia 20.5%; Middle East and North Africa (Arab States) 16.8%; and the Pacific 21% (*Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2021*).

Africa in general, as of May 2022, the Rwanda's national parliament seats, 61.25%; South Africa 46.5%; Namibia 44.23%; Senegal 42.68%; Mozambique 42.4% and Ethiopia 41.49%; Burundi 38.21%; Tanzania 36.86%; Cameroon 33.89%; Uganda 33.81%; and South Sudan 32.36% of women holding seats in the country's House of Representatives (*Kamer, 2022*).

In Somalia, according to *Affi & Zainab (2022)*, notes that the 2021/2022 election of House of the People of the Federal Republic of Somalia, the women's representation in parliament secured 54 out of 275 seats equivalent to 20%: [Somaliland, 13 female MPs out of 46 PMs (28%); Southwest state, 13 women parliamentarians out of 66 (20%); Galmudug State, 9 female MPs out of 37 MPs (24%); Jubbaland State, 8 female MPs out of 46, (17%); Puntland, 6 women parliamentarians out of 37 meaning (16%); Hirshabelle state, only 5 female MPs out of 38 (13%) and Banadir region of Somalia, only 1 female MP out of 5 MPs (20%)].

As the number of female MPs might increase from election/selection period to another, yet it moved anticlockwise until all advocators for inclusive politics including CSOs representatives, intellectuals and women with political ambition got afraid that no women were visible at the House of Representatives. For instance, in Puntland, a semi-autonomous state of Somalia established in 1998, the female parliamentarians counted from five down to two and sometimes up to one female only: at the onset of the parliamentarian selection of 2019, there was only one female MP in the parliament and now there are two out of 66 parliamentarianism because of the dismissal of 8 male MPs in the mid of 2020 after a political turmoil erupted and of their substitutive, the female parliamentarians became two. This is because there is a traditional system of governance that has always been biased towards men. The prevailing clan-based political system dis-

counts women's role and prevents them from holding positions of power since they belong neither to their paternal clans nor to their matrimonial clans. Due to the perceived lack of clan identity, women waver between the two camps, belonging to neither and the clan elders in collusion with male politicians did their best to circumvent the gender quota (Affi, 2020).

However, there are some other factors hindering women to actively being visible in the politics and therefore, in this paper, the study explores the potential opportunities available for women to participate in politics and existing hindrances women face in the politics in the State of Puntland from local government to State legislatures and the long way to federal parliament. So, the study employed a mixed method of qualitative and quantitative research of the primary and secondary data collection using Likert scale structured questionnaire. The aim is to identify the major political opportunities and challenges of women's participation in political leadership in Puntland State, Somalia.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Women's Participation in Political Leadership

In the light of the three types of representation: formal, descriptive, and substantive representations (Paxton & Hughes, 2014), 'Participation' is clearly a term that can encompass a broad range of phenomena: it may be distinguished according to the sphere in which it is expressed (political, social, economic, etc.) or according to the forms it can take. Those who put their faith in expanded participation assume that the desire to participate is widely distributed; thus, opening government doors will lead to a more representative democracy (Fiorina, 2001). Because, a full and an equal participation of both women and men in political decision making can provide a balance that more accurately reflects the composition of society, and may as such enhance the legitimacy of political processes by making them more democratic and responsive to the concerns and perspectives of all segments of society (Kassa, 2015). Women's inclusion in political institutions has taken place through the adoption of gender quotas. There are three types of gender quotas: legislative quotas; political party quotas; and reserved seats. But it is not enough to adopt a gender quota. It is critical that quotas also be included in the legal framework of a country such as the constitution, the Electoral Law and the Political Party Law (Affi & Zainab, 2022).

2.2. Empirical Discussion of Current Situation

The system of government that Somalia adopted in 2004 is a multiparty political system with more layers of government, each with distinct semi-autonomous institutional structure: the federal government, the state and the local government levels, and each of this entity is entitled to respond the demand of the citizenries in its jurisdiction as the constitution stipulates. On the contrary, the Somalia political system is based on a power sharing formula known as 4.5 (four main clans and a clan perceived as minority) and guided by the clan elders who has the

power to nominate MPs through selection process from their respective inner-circle of the clan in cyclic model of power-sharing and the chief the elders namely—Isin ratifies in a signature and the submitted a vetting committee for that election to classifies the candidates on certain basis but the influence of the elders remain powerful by preferring the male candidates than women. As Affi (2020) states in her ‘Excluding women: the clanization of Somali political institutions’ article by citing a poem of Hawa Jibril, a poetess and a long-time activist for Somali women’s rights, identified male elders as a barrier to women’s inclusion in the politics and governance of their society. In her 1962 poem, “*don’t you see these old men; who hold us back, let them not prevail over us*” (Jibril, 2008: p. 151). The traditional clan leaders have a big say in the politics, women’s political success is undermined by clan leaders, clan leaders decide the clan to take up leadership that leaves behind women, because women are not allowed to participate in politics as established by clan leaders (Ali & Noah, 2022). To overcoming this socio-culturally rooted phenomenon, the first ever ratified **Puntland Constitution (2009)** in referendum lucidly states that “*equal rights for all; women and men*”, yet, *this need to be translated into action*”. Likewise, Article 3 of ‘**Founding Principles**’ of the Somalia **Provisional Constitution (2012)** stipulates “the Women must be included, in an effective way, in all national institutions, in particular all elected and appointed positions across the three branches of government and in national independent commissions”. Ensuring women’s political participation, in 2012, Somalia transitioned into a federal system. In that first indirect election where clan elders selected/appointed members of the parliament for their respected clans. Pressure from women’s groups and the international community, Somali leaders signed the Garowe Principles, initially promising women a 20% gender quota across all government positions at the federal, regional, and local levels. This was later increased to 30% (Affi & Zainab, 2022).

3. Methodology

Trochim (2005) notes that a research design provides the glue that holds the research project together. Because, research design is defined as the scheme, outline or plan that is used to generate answers to research problems Orodho (2003). Hence, the study employed a descriptive survey of a research design, and then carefully administered a semi-structured questionnaire with a Likert scale starting from five points of Strongly Agree (SA) to Strongly Disagree (SD) of which distributed to the 87 respondents after translated into Somali language to capture the correct information with its utmost precision, accuracy and minimal error. Subsequently, the data was analyzed with SPSS software package. Similarly, other supportive information, as a secondary data, was gathered from an up-to-date reports, papers, and existing legal documents. Finally, in conformity with the University of Bosaso research policy, the researcher adhered to the ethical considerations in full-fledged by granting the consent of the respondents

and ethical factors.

4. Major Findings of the Study

The findings of this study present the qualitative and quantitative data collected, shown in tables and figures with captions, and enriched with the most relevant and proponent literature on the subject to validate whether the research objectives have been met.

4.1. Demographics

Of the 87 respondents, 23% were male and 67% were female. As they were asked ‘Which best describes your highest level of education attained and occupation?’ As **Figure 1** shows, the respondents are varying in education level: 12% were primary level, 11% were secondary level, 16% were college diploma, 56% were Bachelor holders, and only 5% were master degree holders—which makes that almost 61% were in tertiary education with a different occupation, but unfortunately, 49% of the respondents unveiled that they do not work which means that there is higher an unemployment rate in Puntland. In addition to that, since the most of the respondents were female (76%), this study explicitly discloses that unemployment rate is higher in women than male group. Of 21% do for their own family business, 12 for NGOs, 9% work for the government and 9% serves as politicians which again marks that number of people in politics is very small as **Figure 2** of pie chart depicts.

4.2. Opportunities

In this section, the researcher explored potential opportunities that may boost the women to be visible and respected, and get recognition in political sphere. Some of the citations of opportunities indicate that raising ‘voice for vulnerable families, funds for poor women to help in establishing their own business, and advocating mother to send their girls to schools’ would be a greater opportunity of which the female politician should be able to showcase their influence in the political sphere, reputation in the society, being champions and possessing the trustworthy of their fellows since contributing the women empowerment in

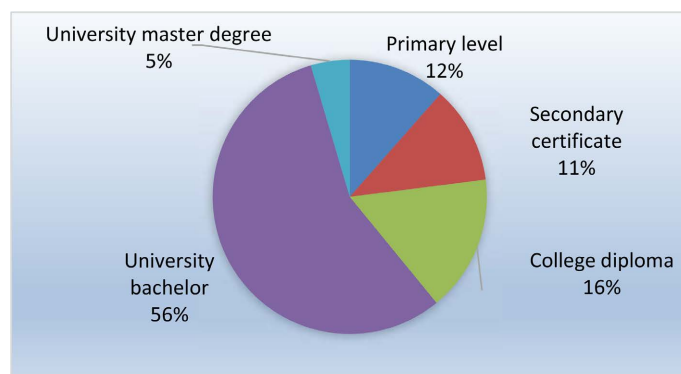


Figure 1. Level of education.

general and specifically improving the wellbeing of needy community and protecting women rights but seems that the current women in politics lost that brilliant opportunities. The interviewees were asked this question ‘women should rise voices for vulnerable families?’ As the below **Figure 3** shows, most of the responded (58%) believes that lobbying and advocacy efforts that female politicians pay for the vulnerable people would might have been a good locomotion and driving force for their political influence but works other way round as **Figure 3** extrapolated from chart on below shows. Whilst 34% of the respondents insisted on that nothing would have made difference and only 13% remained silence to this question.

Correspondingly, 57% of the respondents also beliefs if the Women in politics should raise funds for poor women to help in establishing their own business would have been a political campaign or agenda for them whereas 31% perceives nonsense and 12% remained neutral. the other fantastic question was asked the respondents is about ‘the women in politics should advocate mother to send their girls to schools’ and then the study found that the majority of the participants (68%) stressed that female politicians are expected to stand up for advocacy of children girls’ school enrollment. On contrary, 24% of them responded d while only 8% neither agreed or disagreed with the interviewer about this question. However, the aforementioned analysis interprets that upholding the low-cost

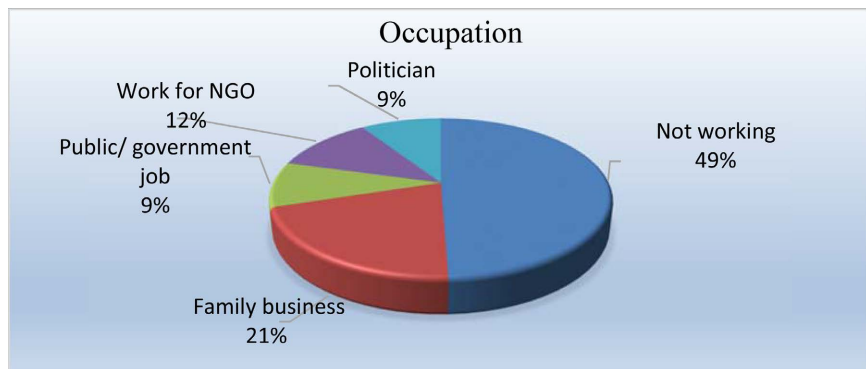


Figure 2. Respondents’ occupation.

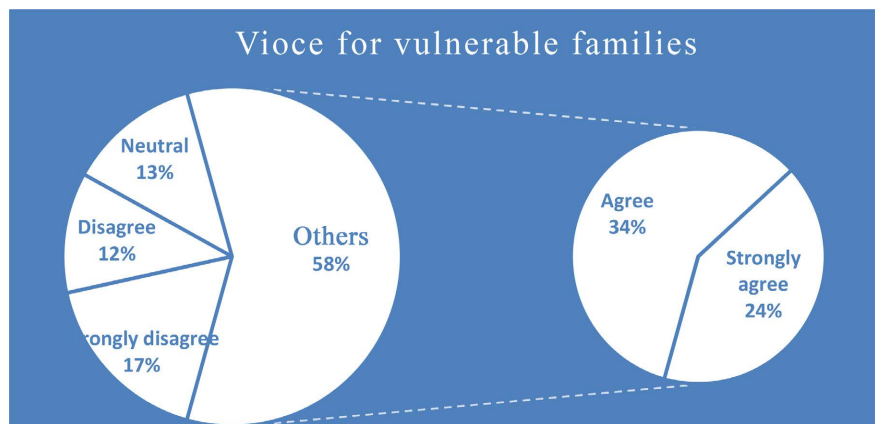


Figure 3. Voice for vulnerable families.

families living in the tribulation and misery conditions would have open a new horizon for the women with political ambition.

4.3. Obstacles to Women's Political Participation

Women in every part of the world continue to be largely marginalized from the political sphere, often as a result of discriminatory laws, practices, attitudes and gender stereotypes, low levels of education, lack of access to health care and the disproportionate effect of poverty on women (UNGA, 2009). Whereas, half of the world's population are women, but today women only hold 23% of all seats in parliaments and senates globally (Chalaby, 2017; Radu, 2018). However, women are striving to assert an influential role in determining the course of their states but, they have been faced with many challenges that have actually strengthened their resolve. Moreover, the political environment and conditions are often unfriendly or even hostile to women (Shvedova, 2005). "Freedom cannot be achieved unless the women have been emancipated from all forms of oppression" (Mandela, 2004).

4.3.1. Influence of Political Orientations

In the case of Somalia as Elmi (2016) states that "the late 1970s, the many Somalis who did not have the opportunity to participate in politics through peaceful means organized themselves along clan lines, crossed to Ethiopia and openly challenged the Siyad Barre government. After a long and destructive civil war, Somalia's faction leaders decided to embrace clan identity as the basis of political representation. In Sodere, Ethiopia in 1997, they adopted the 4.5 clan formula—that is each of the four main clans would get equal numbers of seats (61 members) while a number of unarmed clans would get 31 seats (half of one so-called major clan)". The Four-Point Five (4.5) clan share political formula undermines the role of women in participating political positions. Therefore, clan-based politics negatively affected women's participation in Politics (Abdi, Hellen, & Willy, 2016).

Likewise in Puntland, the traditional leaders are considered as the biggest impediment to women's political participation. Because, the traditional leaders perceive themselves as the determinants and lords of the politics because they dictate who gets selected for political positions. The traditional leaders are more conservative and are unwilling to support the idea of women being leaders as they believe women are not allowed to address men culturally. During the study, the researcher raised question of which 63.2% of the respondents underlined that the 'specific political orientations of Somalia influence female political participation in each state' whereby 12% disagreed while 9.2 strongly disagreed with the researcher and 13.8% remain neutral. In addition to, of 87 respondents, 55.1% beliefs that women are, most of the time, neither allotted any key positions in the political affairs at the local nor state government whereby 18.4% remained neutral and 26.4% shown disagreement with the interviewer on this statement.

Most astonishedly, the researcher found a similar result with **SIDRA & UNDP**

(2016) study that shows the perception of the respondents that women could not lead and therefore should not be selected to be clan representatives; and partly due to the small numbers of women who have made it into politics and positions of power, but also to a large extent on the structural and cultural constraints that prevent women from exercising political influence from inside or outside of the political system. In this respect, it obvious that a woman's opportunity being politician or obtain one of the apex positions of the government lies with the political attitude of the political leadership of the country. Because of 64.4% of the respondents stressed that 'individual political preference affects political participation' whereas 25.2% were opposition of it while only 10.4% indicates that they have no an idea.

4.3.2. Patriarchy-Oriented Behavior Predominance

According to PDRC (2014), "though women constitute a majority of Puntland's population, they are socially marginalized and politically underrepresented. This is attributed to the traditional Somali patriarchal system, a lack of policies for women's empowerment, and the outward disinclination of traditional and political actors to effectively engage women in decision-making processes". In regard to that, the study prepositioned the PDRC's argument by divulging that the women in politics are subjugated due to the sociocultural male preference or patriarchal society setup as most of respondents (48.3%) agreed that women have limited or no say political decisions because traditionally, in Somalia women were considered to have a passive role in both domestic and public spheres. Of 18.4% strongly disagreed and 23% disagreed with the researcher and argued that women have active role in political decisions while only 10.3% kept quiet to answer.

Likewise, "Women in leadership face significant opposition from men, and especially the clan elders who consider them as weak and unsuitable for leadership" (AU/UN IST, 2016). Accordingly, of 49.9% (approximately half of the respondents) indicate affirmative response with the question of 'families generally discourage women from taking independent initiatives, even when they are best suited to lead' whereas 26.4% disagreed with the researcher and 24.1% stuck into neutrality. Because the study points out that the gender inequality instigates at household level as male dominance is deeply rooted in the society. This kind of restriction to child girl remains eternal even if goes to politics because of 57.4% believes that 'political meetings and discussions are male dominated and based on exclusively male perspectives' as 23% oppose and only 19.5% are neutral. even if the female politicians would have been given the space, they do not come together for discussion to address their own problems and have a common vision as the study reveals that 47.1% out of the 87 respondents perceives that the female politicians whether women within political settings and/or women parliamentarians do not hold separate meetings to discuss their issues and chalk out joint strategies while 36.8% disagreed with and 16.1% are neutral. As a result, men politicians perceived superior and influential political elites and left inferiority complexity among women. As the below **Figure 4** shows, of 58.6%

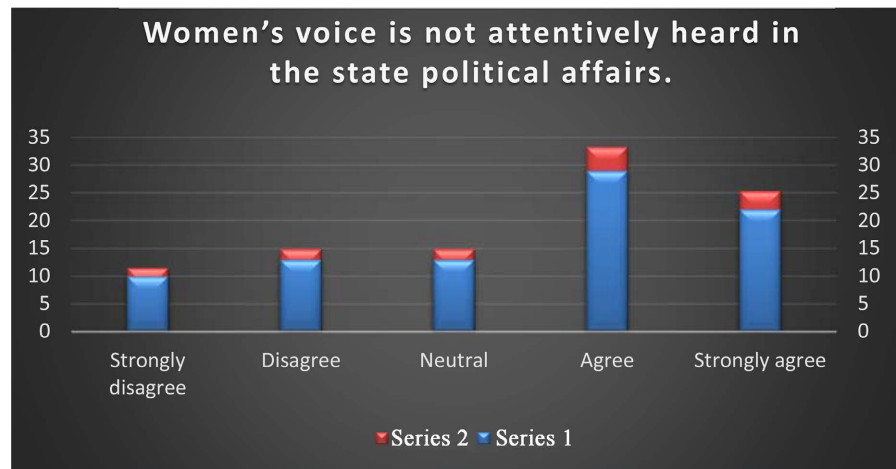


Figure 4. Women's voice in the state political affairs.

(A.33.3 and S.D. 25.3) believes that Women's voice is not attentively heard in the state political affairs whereas 26.4% were opposite of it and 14.9% remains neutral.

This intends that the patriarchy-oriented behavior predominates over the fundamental principles of the constitution including the civil and political rights provisions because this gender inequality shall not stop at the political sphere but affects other socio-cultural factors.

Of 87 respondents, 50.5% stressed that 'women don't appreciate women leaders; they prefer male leadership instead' while 36.8% were in disagreement and 12.2% were neither agreed or disagreed with. As a result, thus, this analysis reveals that the female parliamentarian, ministers and women in the civil service are antagonistic to one another's victory that undermining the efforts towards women empowerment, building trust among themselves, coalition for politics and being a women champion instead of becoming effective political actors to transform political spaces and be held accountable alongside men for gender equality and social justice. Furthermore, the researcher observed during the election of the deputy speaker for Somalia federal government on 28th April, 2022, that an outrageously statement raised since the position was more competitive and running by nine candidates in the first round, and therefore, the top four—namely Mr. Ahmed¹ with 59 votes, Mr. Omar²-58, Mrs. Samantar³-52, and Mrs. Dirie⁴-15 were become eligible to pass to the second round. In this junction, Mr. Ahmed and Mrs. Dirie renounced from the candidature; then Mrs. Khadija Dirie declared that she forsook for Omar saying in a loud voice with giggle "Where the votes go is goanna be decided by my maternal uncles, the bigger 'H' (literally meaning 'Hawiye' a clan of her bloodline from the mother side), of their prayer, I have reached to this stage; the votes are for Mr. Omar". This talk was a shockwave to everyone in the election venue: the Air Force Hunger and to whole Somalis, because it was unanticipated that a woman with such

¹Mohamed Abdiweli Ahmed.

²Mohamed Ali Omar.

³Sadia Yasin Hajji Samantar.

⁴Khadija Mohamed Dirie.

high caliber in politics, a political elite who has been serving as a MP since 2000 with six parliaments and being a champion for political inclusivity for all, to talk like this—words of strange to the struggle for fighting against the awkward patriarchal theory sabotaged the dream of the Somali women into politics sphere. Such action is empirical evidence for the argument about that the women do not support or speaking for each other in the politics. And, eventually, Mrs. Samantar won with 137 votes out of 244 MPs who were present, and she became the first woman to be elected for one of the top leaderships of the parliament in the history of Somalia. As usual, the women in politics and/or in public servants are expected to support each other for the common goal than being criticized, hatred, and looked down upon each other, but the above case shown differently. So, the question is, what shall be expected from the young female who have an ambition in politics, shall they work together, support each other and fight shoulder-to-shoulder against the marginalization, abuses, and other discriminatory actions? Most properly no, unless those who are in power right now change their attitude towards their behavior because an old adage says, ‘like father, like son’!

4.3.3. Other Factors Affecting Women’s Participation in Political Leadership

According to UN General Assembly resolution on women’s political participation in 2011 notes that “Women in every part of the world continue to be largely marginalized from the political sphere, often as a result of discriminatory laws, practices, attitudes and gender stereotypes, low levels of education, lack of access to health care and the disproportionate effect of poverty on women”. Justifying that argument, the researcher raised this question: what are possible promoting factors based on your own personal experience in relation to the factors affecting women’s participation in political leadership. Surprisingly, of 55.2% responded that ‘Education’ is the biggest factor determines woman’s political ambition and self-esteem and therefore, in this regard, the lower rate of women’s participation in politics in Somalia, and particularly Puntland can be attributed to the prevalence of poor education.

Of 23% stated that ‘Family background’ spurs the woman to run for a political position that means if the woman hails from the line of rulers, there is the high likelihood that the woman feels motivated to be a candidate for a political position whereas 9% argues that woman’s socio-economic status is another factor contributing while 8% is considered that the ‘marriage linkage’ pushes the woman to seek for a political seat that means that the family whose husband hails will be hand in glove for her candidacy and only 4.6% underlines that ‘children’ of the are also other positive factor that can bring the women on the political podium.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1. Conclusion

Obviously, the study elucidates that the likelihood a woman being an active in

political arena in Somalia is very narrow due to lacking a political spectrum of which rivalry on basis of political ideology but on basis of bigotry fueling by male dominance concept—inequality and social injustice because the society's perspective towards the women falls under an established paradigm of male preference over female at political affairs that prejudices women's capability to leadership role and represent their constituents at the decision tables whether at local, state and national levels. Besides, women in politics do not better the opportunity off in political agendas towards women empowerment in order to showcase their enthusiasm for vulnerable women and families.

5.2. Recommendation

Based on the findings from the study, the study recommends the following key points:

The Civil Society Organizations, women's political movements and the elite people should extend their efforts to the establishment of platforms for ideas exchange that spur gender equality and women's empowerment to break the walls of awkward and overshadowed patriarchal culture through publicly speaking it out and making counter narratives to eliminate any kind of prejudices against women.

The government is required to create female-friendly spaces that absorbs more women candidates into the politics, with the financial and technical assistance during their election candidacy on campaign management, and then provide capacity building trainings to the female in politics, those whose fate given, on leadership, governance, representation and so forth in order to enable to function more effectively in their new political roles.

The women in the politics are supposed to be a role model, whether at local, state and national levels, advocating for their fellow women, for the adoption of legal frameworks and the amalgamation of affirmative action into all the existing legislature of political parties and government for equal access and full participation in politics and decision making.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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