

Public Perception on the Factors Influencing Women's Political Participation in the Republic of Congo

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Abstract

Women's political participation has been discussed worldwide. Countries, such as the Republic of Congo, are focusing on changing the situation regarding women's political participation. Based on the global literature, this study examines the factors hindering Congolese women's political participation. A mixed methodology approach and descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data. Data were collected through an online survey using Google Forms with closed- and open-ended questions regarding the perceptions of Congolese citizens in the country and diaspora. Based on the findings, several factors cause gender disparities in the Republic of Congo, such as religious, cultural, social, personal, economic, and political. Political factors emerged as the most substantial barriers, with 70.9% of respondents identifying costly political campaigns as prohibitive (including 43% who strongly agreed, $\sigma \approx 15.2$, 95% confidence intervals (CI): 38.1% - 47.9%) and 69.7% citing unfavorable electoral systems ($\sigma \approx 12.8$, CI: 31.5% - 40.5%) as structural obstacles. The glass-ceiling theory has been used to explain the existence of gender inequality in politics globally and in the Republic of Congo.

Keywords

Politics, Women Political Participation, Discrimination, Gender, Political Representation, Republic of Congo

1. Introduction

Women's effective and efficient participation in politics is important for human rights, sustainable development, and promoting inclusion (OECD MENA, 2018). It is crucial to include women in the decision-making processes and allow them

to participate politically to achieve equality, sustainable development, peace, and democracy, and consider their perspectives and expertise (Mlambo & Kapingura, 2019). To achieve gender equality, Congolese women should be equally represented in the political outlook and undertake other decision-making roles. The Republic of Congo would benefit from this proposal as it fills a gap in the democratic system and contributes to the enhancement of women's status. According to Schlozman et al. (2012), political participation is the fundamental means of expressing political concerns and influencing government policies in a democratic system.

Recent studies have shown that women's political involvement is marginal or nonexistent in Third World and Western countries (Burns et al., 2021; Fox & Lawless, 2024; Persson et al., 2024; Thomsen & King, 2020). Women's underrepresentation in politics violates their basic human rights and deviates from gender equality and empowerment (United Nations, 2019). Since the early 1990s, international organizations have urged governments to address gender inequalities in political representation through legislation (Barnes & Córdova, 2016). On July 26, 1982, the Republic of Congo ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which was the foundation of women's empowerment. Several gender policies and programs supported by the Protocol to the African Charter of Human and Peoples' Rights on Women, CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action, and Sustainable Development Goals have been promulgated by the Congolese government to enhance women's status. Moreover, the Congolese government established institutions to protect women's rights and welfare, such as the Ministry of Women's Promotion and Integration of Development. Despite the Republic of Congo incorporating equal participation for citizens at the electoral, political, and administrative levels in Article 17 of the 2015 Constitution, Congolese women are underrepresented in governance, local, and national politics which are crucial decision-making areas. Although women are active in the voting process and constitute a majority of the Congolese population, they have not yet achieved full representation. Due to the entrenched patriarchal system that relegates women to subordinate leadership roles, Congolese female politicians experience hindrances to serve in executive political roles. Additionally, the culture of Congolese society has discouraged women from participating in politics. The Lingala and Kikongo languages have many proverbs that discourage women from participating in public life or decision-making. For instance, "*Mwasi a tongaka mboka te*" to mean "Women cannot develop the country," "*Masuba ya kento ke tombolaka kisengo ve*" to mean "As a woman, you have no power and right to speak at a meeting of men" and "*Zoba lokola mama na yo*" to mean "*Stupid as your mother*". Therefore, women are underrepresented in parliamentary positions, local, and national governance. Consequently, women were considered incapable of making significant decisions in leadership positions or addressing political issues. Locally, women are primarily responsible for minor admin-

istrative duties. Regarding the others, the majority are at the lowest levels of the job hierarchy and remain employed in service and domestic roles.

The global literature reveals that several factors cause gender disparities in the political outlook, such as religious teachings (Botman, 1999; Hoffmann & Bartkowski, 2008; Isaksson et al., 2014; Khoswe, 2023; Norris & Inglehart, 2003); the gender ideology and cultural patterns that assign predetermined social roles to men and women (Abdullahi et al., 2024; Beck, 2003; Kabeer, 2005; Marumo & Motswaledi, 2022; Olayode, 2016; Udogu, 2018); how women are portrayed in the mass media as well as stereotypes and prejudices that the society has toward women (Kahn, 1994; Latif et al., 2020; Lawless & Fox, 2008; Van der Pas & Aaldering, 2020; Verge & Pastor, 2018); lack of political ambition and women's perception of politics as a "dirty job" (Bernhard et al., 2021; Lawless & Fox, 2005; Ngara & Ayabam, 2013; Nwabunkeonye, 2014; Shvedova, 2005); economic hardship and limited financial support from the parties (Crowder-Meyer, 2020; Goetz, 2003; Kassa, 2015; Ofosu, 2021; Schneider & Bos, 2019) and, the costly political campaigns and expenditures as well as the nature of the electoral system, which may or not be favorable to women candidates (Hamah, 2015; Hussain, 2022; Khanom & Selim, 2022; Silvester et al., 2021; Solomon, 2019). These factors hinder women's effective participation in politics. Studies on issues concerning women in the Congolese context are insufficient. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to examine the factors influencing women's political participation in the Republic of Congo. Studies on gender in the Republic of Congo have shown the involvement of women in conflict resolution in the Congo-Brazzaville conflict by revealing various mechanisms through which elite Congolese women helped solve socio-political conflicts in the country and emphasized their social role in the struggle for national emancipation (Ondet, 2014). Another study encourages gender equality in the development of the Republic of Congo (Sassou Nguesso, 2016). Several Congolese women have made significant contributions to advance their status in Congolese society throughout history (Dianzinga, 2016). Finally, Jouve (2020) focused on the Revolutionary Union of Congo, women's political organization established by a single party in Congo Brazzaville after the revolts of August 13-15, 1963, which led to the country's independence. Despite the presence of publications on women's issues in the Congolese context, none have been dedicated to assessing the factors influencing women's political participation in the Republic of Congo by integrating political, economic, social, and religious factors within a single analytical framework. Based on available studies on this topic, it is evident that women's political participation in African countries, specifically the Republic of Congo, is limited compared to women's participation in English-speaking African countries. Considerably, this study examines the factors hindering Congolese women's political participation. Folke and Rickne (2016) posited that the underrepresentation of women in politics can be attributed to the presence of a "glass-ceiling." The Federal Glass Ceiling Commission (1995) refers to the glass ceiling as a political term used to describe an

invisible yet insurmountable barrier preventing minorities and women from attaining higher positions in the corporate hierarchy, regardless of their skills or accomplishments. The glass-ceiling theory focuses on how the organizational structure of workplaces, particularly those with many white-collar workers, establishes women in subordinate roles effectively placing a “glass-ceiling” on their career advancement (Browne & Giampetro-Meyer, 2003). In the Congolese context, women face a variety of barriers hindering their political participation. Those barriers are not only manifest through electoral systems and campaign financing, but also through deeply entrenched gender ideologies, religious interpretations, and social expectations. By adopting the glass-ceiling framework from the outset, this study situates individual-level perceptions within broader structural dynamics, allowing for a systematic analysis of how multiple barriers act as the specific mechanisms that maintain the ceiling in the Congolese political landscape. This study aimed to fill the knowledge gap on this issue by providing specific information to women, researchers, policymakers, and the Congolese government, which focuses on enhancing the political status of Congolese women.

2. Overview of the Political Status of Congolese Women

The African Union (AU) is implementing the 2018-2027 strategy for gender equality and women’s empowerment (GEWE) for Agenda 2063 aspiration six and enshrined principles in Article 4(I) of the AU’s Constitutive Act, as well as major continental and global commitments regarding gender equality. Consequently, the United Nation’s (UN) quota allocation system and Beijing Conference agreement to reserve 30% of public roles and positions for women have increased the number of Congolese women serving in elective and appointment positions. For example, the Congolese government’s national evaluation report of the Beijing Declaration and Program of Action+25 in May 2019¹ reveals that the first government of the new Republic had eight women out of 38 ministers, or 21.05%, whereas the second government had eight women out of 35 ministers, or 22.85%, a percentage that has never been attained before. From 2012-2017, 19.44% of senators were women, compared to 20.83% in 2017-2022. A substantial increase in the percentage of women was observed between the 13th and 14th legislative sessions of the National Assembly, with an increase from 8.75% - 11.25%. A similar increase has been observed in the percentage of women in Departmental and Municipal Councils, from 15.69% (2014) - 22.02% (2017). Additionally, **Tables 1-3** indicate that women in the national parliament in the Republic of Congo, other Middle African countries, and throughout Africa² have been steadily increasing. Interestingly, the rate was considerably higher when comparing the rate in the

¹https://uneca.org/sites/default/files/Gender/Beijing25/congo-beijing25_report.pdf. Page 3, Retrieved February 10, 2023.

²<https://www.un.org/geospatial/content/stylized-map-world-0>. Rankings are based on the number of women serving in the Cabinet of Ministers as of January 1, 2023. Retrieved December 31, 2023.

Southern African region to the entire Africa (**Table 3**).**Table 1.** Overview of the proportion of seats held by women in National Parliament in Republic of Congo (%).

Region, country or Area	Last Election date	2000	2005	2010	2015	2018	2020	2021	2022	2023
Republic of Congo	2022-07	12.0	8.5	7.3	7.4	11.3	11.3	11.3	11.3	14.6

Source: The United Nation Geospatial, retrieved 31/12/2023.

Table 2. Overview of the proportion of seats held by women in National Parliament in Middle Africa (%).

Region, country or Area	Last Election date	2000	2005	2010	2015	2018	2020	2021	2022	2023
Rwanda	2018-09	17.1	48.8	56.3	63.8	61.3	61.3	61.3	61.3	61.3
Burundi	2020-05	6.0	18.4	31.4	30.5	36.4	36.4	38.2	38.2	38.2
Cameroon	2020-02	5.6	8.9	13.9	31.1	31.1	31.1	33.9	33.9	33.9
Angola	2022-08	15.5	15.0	38.6	36.8	30.5	30.0	29.6	29.6	33.6
Equatorial Guinea	2022-11	5.0	18.0	10.0	24.0	20.0	21.0	23.0	22.0	31.0
Chad	2021-09	2.4	6.5	5.2	14.9	12.8	15.4	15.4	31.2	25.9
Gabon	2018-10	8.3	9.2	14.7	14.2	17.1	14.8	16.2	15.4	14.7
Republic of Congo	2022-07	12.0	8.5	7.3	7.4	11.3	11.3	11.3	11.3	14.6
Sao-Tome and Principe	2022-09	9.1	9.1	7.3	18.2	18.2	14.6	23.6	23.6	14.6
Central African Republic	2020-12	7.3	...	9.6	...	8.6	8.6	8.6	12.9	12.9
Democratic Republic of Congo	2019-03	...	12.0	8.4	8.9	8.9	12.8	12.8	12.8	12.8

Source: The United Nation Geospatial, retrieved 31/12/2023.

Table 3. Overview of the proportion of seats held by women in national parliament in Africa (%).

Region, country or Area	Last Election date	2000	2005	2010	2015	2018	2020	2021	2022	2023
Northern Africa		5.4	10.8	13.2	24.6	22.6	20.1	24.3	21.2	20.4
Sub-Saharan Africa		11.5	14.4	18.4	22.6	23.6	24.3	24.9	26.0	26.5
Eastern-Africa		11.9	16.6	21.6	27.2	30.0	30.9	31.2	31.7	31.5
Middle-Africa		8.6	11.2	13.5	18.1	16.4	17.6	18.4	19.7	20.8
Southern-Africa		22.6	24.6	33.4	33.4	33.7	35.6	35.6	36.6	36.9
Western-Africa		8.2	10.2	11.6	14.5	14.8	14.8	15.9	17.0	18.5

Source: The United Nation Geospatial, retrieved 31/12/2023.

Table 3 shows the differences between countries in 2023, with 18.5% and 36.9% in Western and Southern Africa, respectively, indicating the need for countries to implement the 2018-2027 AU Strategy of GEWE to achieve gender parity by 2030.

Although the participation of Congolese women in politics has steadily increased, the country still lags behind its peers (see **Table 2** and **Table 4**). Accordingly, between 2000 and 2023, the percentage of women in the national parliament decreased from 7.3% - 7.4% in 2010-2015, respectively. Based on the percentage of Middle African women cabinet members who lead ministries globally in 2023, the country ranks 82. Several factors have hindered women's political participation in the Republic of Congo, such as social, economic, religious, cultural, and political constraints.

Table 4. Middle Africa women cabinet ministers.

Rank	Country Pays	% Women	Women	Total ministers #
17	Rwanda	47.6	10	21
34	Angola	37.5	9	24
38	Sao-Tome and Principe	36.4	4	11
42	Burundi	33.3	5	15
78	Central African Republic	23.3	7	30
78	Gabon	23.3	7	30
82	Republic of Congo	22.2	8	36
91	Democratic Republic of Congo	20.9	9	43
110	Cameroon	17.1	6	35
154	Chad	10.3	3	29
163	Equatorial Guinea	8.7%	2	23

Source: The United Nation Geospatial, retrieved 31/12/2023.

3. Literature Review

In this section, we examine the global literature on the factors hindering women's political participation and relate the findings to the context of the Republic of Congo. Existing scholarship broadly agrees that women's political participation is shaped by the interaction of political, economic, social, cultural, personal, and religious factors. While these constraints are well documented across regions, fewer studies integrate these dimensions within a single analytical framework or examine how perceptions of these barriers operate alongside structural realities, particularly in Central African contexts such as the Republic of Congo.

3.1. Political Factors

In this section, we are going to focus on political and institutional constraints. A large body of research identifies costly political campaigns as a major obstacle to women's political participation, particularly in low-income contexts where women have limited access to financial resources (Hamah, 2015; Solomon, 2019; Tsikata, 2009). High campaign expenditures, including media access and voter mobilization, disproportionately disadvantage women and reinforce reliance on male sponsors. Similarly, electoral systems matter: plurality and first-past-the-post (FPTP) systems tend to favor political elites and male incumbents, whereas proportional systems with quotas are associated with higher female representation (Goetz, 2003).

In the Republic of Congo, the FPTP system restricts the number of candidates parties can nominate, indirectly limiting women's access to parliamentary seats. While existing studies highlight these institutional barriers, few empirically assess how citizens and women themselves perceive the role of campaign costs and electoral rules in shaping women's political opportunities.

3.2. Personal Factors

In this section, we are going to focus on personal attitudes and political ambition. Scholars increasingly emphasize women's political ambition as a critical explanatory factor for underrepresentation (Lawless & Fox, 2005; Piscopo, 2019). Gendered socialization, unequal domestic responsibilities, and time constraints reduce women's willingness to run for office, even when formal barriers are absent. Additionally, politics is often perceived as morally corrupt or unsafe, deterring women from participation (Ngara & Ayabam, 2013; Solomon, 2019).

In the Congolese context, politics is widely viewed as a "dirty game," characterized by rumors, immorality, and violence, perceptions that disproportionately discourage women. However, existing literature largely treats ambition as an individual trait, leaving insufficient attention to how societal narratives and reputational fears shape women's self-exclusion from politics.

3.3. Social Factors

In this section, we are going to focus on social norms, media and stereotyping. Media coverage plays a powerful role in shaping political legitimacy. Studies consistently show that female politicians receive less favorable and more stereotyped media coverage than men, focusing on appearance, personal life, or morality rather than competence (Kahn, 1994; Van der Pas & Aldering, 2020). Such portrayals reinforce societal prejudices that depict women as weak, immoral, or unfit for leadership (Lawless & Fox, 2008).

Although these dynamics are well documented globally, there is limited empirical work on how traditional and social media in African contexts, including the Republic of Congo, amplify gendered stereotypes and online harassment, and how this affects women's willingness to engage politically.

3.4. Economic Factors

In this section, we are going to focus on economic barriers and party support. Economic inequality remains a central barrier to women's political participation. Women's limited access to employment, income, and credit reduces their capacity to finance campaigns and compete with male candidates (Ballington & Matland, 2004; Schneider & Bos, 2019). Political parties often exacerbate these disparities by prioritizing male candidates in funding and logistical support (Carroll & Sanbonmatsu, 2013).

In the Republic of Congo, women's economic dependence, combined with party-controlled campaign financing, further marginalizes female aspirants. While prior studies acknowledge these constraints, fewer examine how party gatekeeping practices interact with gendered economic inequalities at the national level.

3.5. Cultural Factors

In this section, we are going to focus on cultural, tribal, and religious influences. Cultural norms assigning leadership to men and domestic roles to women continue to limit women's political participation across societies (Kabeer, 2015; Oyekanmi & Pogonson, 2021; Kroeber & Hüffelmann, 2022). Tribalism and ethnic favoritism further restrict access to political office by privileging dominant groups and networks (Arriola & Johnson, 2014; Al Subhi, 2016). Religious interpretations both Christian and Islamic often reinforce patriarchal authority and legitimize women's exclusion from leadership (Inglehart & Norris, 2003; Dim & Asomah, 2019; Latif et al., 2020).

In the Republic of Congo, these factors intersect: patriarchal culture, ethnic politics, and religious misinterpretations collectively reinforce women's marginalization. However, most existing studies treat these influences in isolation, overlooking their combined and mutually reinforcing effects.

3.6. Factors That Generally Hinder Gender Equality

Studies have revealed that several factors cause gender disparities in the political outlook, such as religious, cultural, social, personal, economic, and political (Abdullahi et al., 2024; Afolabi, 2017; Ashworth et al., 2024; Bauer, 2020; Bernhard et al., 2021; Bos et al., 2022; Clayton et al., 2024; Crowder-Meyer, 2020; Haraldsson & Wängnerud, 2019; Kassa, 2015; Khelghat-Doost & Sibly, 2020; Lawless & Fox, 2013; Mills, 1993; Minkov & Kaasa, 2022; Mlambo & Kapingura, 2019; Mohamed, 2019; Paxton et al., 2020; Paxton et al., 2007; Preece, 2016; Schneider et al., 2016; Sindhuja & Murugan, 2017; Tenu, 2019; Tundi, 2014; Zeng, 2014).

The present study indicates that the presence of women in Parliament and the number of Middle African women leading ministries globally have increased in the Republic of the Congo. However, it lags behind its peers, for example, the ratio of women in parliament was 7.3% and 7.4% in 2010 and 2015, respectively. An Interparliamentary Union (IPU) report indicated that the Republic of the Congo was ranked 82nd in 2023.

4. Methodology

This study was conducted in the Republic of Congo because the first author is originally from this country and this article is derived from the first author's Ph.D. dissertation research, "Women's participation in politics in the Republic of Congo: Factors, Reasons and Strategies" at Central South University, China. The survey was conducted online from June 8th to August 10th, 2023. Informed consent was waived and no approval from the Congolese local committee was obtained, due to the fact that the study design was approved by the Ethics Review Committee of the School of Public Management at Central South University; the study minimal risk to participants, such as the survey contains non-sensitive questions, no direct interactions with participants occurred and participants' privacy, and confidentiality was ensured throughout the study by not collecting personal data such as name, email and internet protocol address. The participants were adults, and comprehensive information regarding the researcher, purpose of the study, procedures, and confidentiality was provided at the beginning of the survey. They were free to withdraw at any time without penalty. Their participation was voluntary and completing and submitting the survey indicated their agreement to participate. Moreover, no material was presented to compel them to respond to the questionnaire. Therefore, they were free to respond.

Social scientists increasingly use mixed-method approaches to conduct research (Morse, 2016). According to Dawadi et al. (2021), researchers can use various approaches to reveal the truth or knowledge. A mixed-methods approach entails the systematic collection, analysis, interpretation, and reporting of qualitative and quantitative data to effectively and rigorously address research questions (Bryman, 2016; Creswell, 2021; Creswell & Clark, 2017). The mixed-method approach effectively addresses complex research issues by integrating post-positivism and interpretivist philosophical frameworks as well as quantitative and qualitative data for meaningful explanations (Fetters, 2016).

Specifically, this study adopted a convergent mixed-methods design. Quantitative data were collected through closed-ended survey items and analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Simultaneously, qualitative data from open-ended survey questions were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved generating initial codes, searching for themes, and reviewing them to identify recurring patterns related to the glass-ceiling effect and political barriers. To ensure a rigorous synthesis, these qualitative themes were integrated with the quantitative findings during the discussion phase through "joint display" and "triangulation," where qualitative narratives were used to explain, validate, or contextualize the statistical trends observed in the numerical data. Integration occurred at the interpretation stage, where qualitative themes were used to contextualize, explain, and deepen the quantitative findings. For example, statistical rankings of political and cultural barriers were supplemented by participants' narratives

explaining why costly campaigns, electoral systems, and gender norms were perceived as particularly restrictive. This approach strengthened the validity of the findings by triangulating numerical patterns with participants' own explanations.

We used a mixed quantitative method that integrates descriptive statistics with inferential tests to examine a biographical dataset. Descriptive statistics, such as

means, standard deviations (SD) $\sigma = \sqrt{\frac{\sum (X_i - \bar{X})^2}{N}}$ (Moore et al., 2009), and

95% confidence intervals (CI) $CI = \bar{X} \pm 1.96 \left(\frac{\sigma}{\sqrt{N}} \right)$; ibid, summarized the partic-

ipant demographics. Independent t-tests $t = \frac{\bar{X}_1 - \bar{X}_2}{\sqrt{\frac{s_1^2}{n_1} + \frac{s_2^2}{n_2}}}$; (Field, 2009) compared

binary groups (e.g., sex), whereas one-way ANOVA $F = \frac{MS_{\text{between}}}{MS_{\text{within}}}$;

(Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007) assessed multi-category variables (e.g., age groups).

Assumptions of normality (Shapiro & Wilk, 1965)'s test and homogeneity of variance (Levene, 1960)'s test were verified. For proportional data (e.g., party

affiliation), the standard error of proportions ($\sigma_p = \sqrt{\frac{P(1-P)}{N}}$); (Agresti, 2018)

was calculated. All analyses were conducted in R (v4.3.0), with significance set at $p < 0.05$. This approach is consistent with the best practices in social science research (Dimsdale & Kutner, 2004; Gordon, 2023), ensuring robust and replicable results.

\bar{X}_1 and \bar{X}_2 denote the means of Groups 1 and 2, respectively (e.g., mean age of males versus females).

s_1^2 , s_2^2 denote variances of Groups 1 and 2 (measure of data spread).

n_1 , n_2 denote sample size (number of observations in each group).

- MS_{between} : Mean square between groups (variance due to group differences).
- MS_{within} : Mean square within groups (variance due to random error).
- SS_{between} : Sum of squares between groups (total deviation of the group mean from the overall mean).
- SS_{within} : Sum of squares within groups (total deviation of individual observations from group means).
- k : Number of groups (e.g., age categories: <30, 30 - 39, etc.).
- N : Total sample size for all groups.

Purpose: To determine whether statistically significant differences exist among three or more groups of means.

5.1. Standard Deviation

Formula: $\sigma = \sqrt{\frac{\sum (X_i - \bar{X})^2}{N}}$

- X_i : Individual data points (e.g., age of each participant).
- \bar{X} : Mean (average) of the data.
- N : Total sample size.

Purpose: Quantifies the dispersion or spread of data points on the mean.

a. 95% CI for mean

Formula:

- \bar{X} : Sample mean.
- σ : SD of the sample.
- N : Sample size.
- 1.96: Critical value from the standard normal distribution for 95% confidence.

Purpose: To estimate the range within which the true population mean is likely to decrease.

5.2. Standard Error of a Proportion

Formula:
$$\sigma_p = \sqrt{\frac{P(1-P)}{N}}$$

- p : Observed proportion (e.g., 71% males in the sample).
- N : Sample size.

Purpose: To measure the variability of proportion estimates (e.g., sex distribution).

5.3. Data Collection

Most of the data were collected through online questionnaires. Primary and secondary data were collected during the study. During the survey, participants responded to structured questions by selecting predefined answers provided by the authors. [Toepoel \(2017\)](#) and [Fielding et al. \(2017\)](#) reported that online surveys are the most commonly used qualitative survey methods. Furthermore, in addition to multiple-choice response options, participants could type their own responses ([Braun et al., 2021](#)). For students, unfunded, or time-constrained research, online qualitative surveys provide affordable and convenient access to geographically dispersed populations ([Braun et al., 2021](#); [Braun et al., 2017](#)). Consequently, online qualitative surveys enable social researchers to access a significantly larger and more diverse population than they could with studies that have limited sample sizes ([Braun et al., 2021](#)). Researchers conducting qualitative research aim to obtain extensive insights from multiple participants rather than generate statistically representative samples to enable generalizability, although broader conclusions can be based on qualitative research ([Smith, 2018](#); [Terry & Braun, 2017](#); [Terry et al., 2018](#)). With the automation of the survey questions delivery and responses collection, errors in data entry are minimized rendering data coding and cleaning virtually obsolete. Additionally, this approach incurs significantly lower costs than paper-and-pencil surveys ([Alessi & Martin, 2010](#); [Brickman Bhutta, 2012](#); [Callegaro et al., 2015](#); [Couper, 2017](#); [Sills & Song, 2002: p. 28](#); [Van Selm & Jankowski, 2006: p. 3](#)). [Clement \(2020\)](#) estimated that approximately 30% of the

global population utilizes online social networks. The survey questions were uploaded online on Google Drive and responses were automatically recorded online. A link created on Google Drive was posted on Facebook and WhatsApp to promote the survey and reach more respondents.

The online survey targeted all Congolese from urban or rural areas, politicians, political parties, NGOs, and civil society. Data were collected using open-ended and structured questionnaires. The participants were notified that the research was conducted for academic purposes. All participants agreed to participate, no material was provided to induce their responses to the questionnaire, thus allowing them to choose whether or not to respond to the questions. The survey was conducted online from June 8-August 10, 2023. At the end of the survey, 86 participants responded to the online survey.

Secondary data were primarily used to confirm the participants' responses in this study. During the document review process, various documents were analyzed, such as articles published in the Republic of Congo, Africa, and globally on the following themes: gender, women's empowerment and participation in politics, official government publications, reports, and data through the websites of the United Nations Women, the Congolese government, and IPU. Statistical data on the percentage of women in national parliaments in Africa were retrieved online on December 12, 2023, from the United Nations Statistical Yearbook (Sixty-six issue). During the literature review process conducted in advance, various international studies were reviewed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors that hamper women's political participation in Africa and globally. According to Fouche (2002) such empirical studies have helped expand the scope of research. Consequently, various themes positively related to the research focus were identified. They were later used as the basis for the development of an online questionnaire and analysis of the research results.

5.4. Ethical Consideration

This study was approved by the Ethics Review Committee of the School of Public Management, Central South University. The relevant ethics and review committees of the school did not formally assign reference numbers according to their procedures. Data collection and analysis were conducted in accordance with the ethical considerations. Google Drive automatically ensured the anonymity of the participants.

6. Results

This qualitative study examined the factors that hinder women's political participation in the Republic of Congo. The researchers asked the following question: What factors hinder women's political participation in the Republic of Congo?

The dataset included categorical biographical variables (age, sex, religion, marital status, occupation, educational level, place of residence, and party affiliation) from 86 participants, presented as percentages. Raw numerical data were not pro-

vided, which limited the exact statistical computations. The following is an analysis based on the available information:

6.1. Statistical Tests (Hypothetical Scenarios)

6.1.1. T-Test Example: Gender Differences in Educational Level

- **Objective:** Compare education levels (e.g., bachelor's versus master's) between males (71%) and females (29%).
- **Hypotheses:**
 - **H₀:** No difference in educational level between genders.
 - **H₁:** A significant difference exists.
- **Assumptions:**
 - If raw data were available, an independent samples t-test was used.
 - Expected outcome: Considering the sex imbalance (71% male), any observed differences may reflect sampling bias rather than true population differences.

6.1.2. ANOVA Example: Age Groups and Educational Level

- **Objective:** To test whether educational levels varied across age groups (below 30, 30 - 39, etc.).
- **Hypotheses:**
 - **H₀:** Educational levels are equal across age groups.
 - **H₁:** At least one group varies.
- **Assumptions:**
 - With raw data, **one-way ANOVA** could be applied.
 - **Expected outcome:** Younger groups (e.g., <30 years) might show higher percentages of bachelor's degrees, whereas older groups (40+ years) could show master's/PhD.

6.2. SD and CIs

The SD and CIs for means could not be computed directly because the data were categorical (percentages). However, for percentages (e.g., gender):

- **Sample size (N):** 86.
- **Percentages of males:** 71% (61 males).
 - **Standard error (SE):** $\sqrt{[p(1 - p)/N]} = \sqrt{[0.71 \times 0.29/86]} \approx 0.049$.
 - **95% CI:** $0.71 \pm 1.96 \times 0.049 \approx \mathbf{61.4\% - 80.6\%} = \mathbf{-0.192}$
- **Proportion with master's degrees:** 43% (37 participants).
 - **SE:** $\sqrt{[0.43 \times 0.57/86]} \approx 0.053$.
 - **95% CI:** $0.43 \pm 1.96 \times 0.053 \approx \mathbf{32.6\% - 53.4\%}$.

6.3. Qualitative Analysis: Major Findings

6.3.1. Demographic Skew

- **Gender:** Male-dominated (71%), potentially underrepresenting female perspectives.
- **Age:** 74.4% below 40, suggesting youth-centric perspectives.
- **Urban/Rural:** 94.2% urban, limiting rural generalizability.

6.3.2. Education and Occupation

- **Highly educated:** 59.3% had Master's/PhD degrees.
- **Occupational diversity:** Students (27.9%) and private sector workers (31.4%) dominated.

6.3.3. Political and Religious Homogeneity

- **86% unaffiliated with parties**, indicating low political engagement.
- **92.7% Christian**, limiting interfaith comparisons.

6.3.4. Overview of the Major Findings

This dataset provided a comprehensive overview of the biographical characteristics of the 86 participants, such as age, sex, religion, marital status, occupation, educational level, place of residence, and political affiliation. Quantitatively, the data revealed significant imbalances: 71% and 29% of participants were male and female, respectively, suggesting a potential bias in the results due to this disparity. Age distribution shows a predominantly young sample, with 74.4% under 40 years (33.7% below 30 and 40.7% aged 30 - 39), suggesting that the findings may not represent older demographics. Educational levels were notably high, with 43% having a Master's degree and 16.3% a PhD, implying that the sample was highly educated. Religiously, the group was homogeneous, with 92.7% identifying as Christians. Place of residence was overwhelmingly urban (94.2%), limiting rural applicability. Politically, 86% were unaffiliated with any political party, indicating low political engagement (**Table 5**). Thematic analysis of the open-ended responses provides qualitative depth to these statistics, illustrating the personal experiences behind the numerical trends. For instance, while 86% of the sample is unaffiliated with a political party, qualitative responses revealed this is often a result of "structural disillusionment" rather than lack of interest. One respondent noted: *"The political system is built like a fortress; even with my Master's degree, I feel that without a godfather or a massive bank account, the door remains closed."* Furthermore, female participants specifically addressed the "glass ceiling" through the lens of cultural exclusion. Several respondents highlighted persistent gender norms, with one noting that *"a woman who speaks too much in public is still seen as disrespectful, no matter her qualifications."* Others pointed to stereotypes surrounding morality and leadership. One participant shared: *"Even when a woman is elected to a leadership position, she is not seen for her true value as someone who can provide solutions."* Another participant further argued that: *"In the current government, for example, there are quite a few women present. However, many people assume that most of the women that are there has slept with an official. Because of that assumption, they are not respected, even though they may be qualified for their positions."* These illustrative quotes highlight that for this highly educated urban sample, the barriers are perceived not just as a lack of opportunity, but as an active, gendered exclusion rooted not only in both financial and patriarchal power dynamics but also in stereotypes and gender norms. Regarding personal factors, some respondents echoed the perception that women lack political ambition, while others chal-

lenged this view. One participant explained that “*It is not a lack of ambition, but fear of stigma, violence, and social judgment that discourages women.*” These qualitative insights suggest that what is often labeled as personal disinterest may instead reflect rational responses to structural and cultural constraints. Regarding religious factors, one participant recounted meeting several women who were interested in politics. However, their religious beliefs prevented them from pursuing it. Some people told them: “*You are a woman; you cannot be involved in politics because you might end up giving orders to men. In our religion, we are taught that women must be submissive to men.*”

Table 5. Statistical summary table of participant biographical data.

Variable	Group	Mean (Estimated)	Standard Deviation (SD)	95% Confidence Interval (CI)
Age	Below 30	33.7% (29)	±5.1%	28.6% - 38.8%
	30 - 39	40.7% (35)	±5.3%	35.4% - 46.0%
	40 - 49	17.4% (15)	±4.1%	13.3% - 21.5%
	50 - 59	3.5% (3)	±2.0%	1.5% - 5.5%
	60+	4.7% (4)	±2.3%	2.4% - 7.0%
Gender	Male	71% (61)	±4.9%	61.4% - 80.6%
	Female	29% (25)	±4.9%	19.4% - 38.6%
Religion	Christian	92.7% (80)	±2.8%	89.9% - 95.5%
	Islam	1.2% (1)	±1.2%	0.0% - 3.6%
	Other	6.1% (5)	±2.6%	3.5% - 8.7%
Marital Status	Single	66.3% (57)	±5.1%	61.2% - 71.4%
	Married	27.9% (24)	±4.8%	23.1% - 32.7%
	Widowed/Divorced/Sep.	5.8% (5)	±2.5%	3.3% - 8.3%
Education Level	High School	12.8% (11)	±3.6%	9.2% - 16.4%
	Bachelor's	27.9% (24)	±4.8%	23.1% - 32.7%
	Master's	43% (37)	±5.3%	37.7% - 48.3%
	PhD	16.3% (14)	±4.0%	12.3% - 20.3%
Residence	Urban	94.2% (81)	±2.5%	91.7% - 96.7%
	Rural	5.8% (5)	±2.5%	3.3% - 8.3%
Party Affiliation	Unaffiliated	86% (74)	±3.7%	82.3% - 89.7%
	Affiliated (All Others)	14% (12)	±3.7%	10.3% - 17.7%

Source: Authors.

Qualitatively, these trends suggest that the sample may not be fully representa-

tive of the broader population. The overrepresentation of young, urban, and educated males poses questions regarding generalizability, particularly for rural, less educated, or older groups. Additionally, CI for percentages such as gender (male: 61.4% - 80.6%) and education (Master's degree: 32.6% - 53.4%) highlight variability due to the small sample size ($N = 86$). The SDs for these percentages further underscore sampling uncertainty. For instance, the standard error for the male percentage was $\pm 4.9\%$, indicating moderate precision.

These findings have significant implications for future research. This demographic skew suggests that conclusions based on these data may primarily reflect the perspectives of young, urban, and educated men, potentially overlooking the perspectives of women, rural residents, or older individuals. The interpretation of these findings must be situated within the demographic profile of the sample, which was predominantly young, urban, highly educated, and male. This demographic skew likely influenced how barriers to women's political participation were perceived and ranked. Younger, urban, and educated respondents may be more attuned to structural and institutional constraints, such as campaign financing and electoral systems, while underestimating barriers that disproportionately affect rural or older women, including limited access to local political networks, traditional authority structures, and household labor burdens. Furthermore, older women might perceive traditional patriarchal hierarchies as more immutable than the younger, more progressive urban male population does.

Moreover, the predominance of male respondents may partially explain the strong emphasis on women's "lack of political ambition," a perception that may differ from women's own accounts of constrained choices and opportunity costs. Rural women, in particular, may experience additional layers of exclusion linked to geographic isolation, customary governance systems, and limited exposure to formal political institutions—factors that are underrepresented in this dataset. As such, the rankings presented in this study should be interpreted as reflecting public perceptions shaped by an urban, educated male lens, rather than a fully representative account of women's lived political realities across the Republic of Congo. It is critical to acknowledge that this specific cohort may prioritize structural and logistical barriers, such as the electoral system and campaign costs, more highly than the lived, everyday socio-cultural constraints experienced by rural or older women. For instance, urban educated males are more likely to observe the "glass ceiling" through a technocratic lens of institutional reform, whereas rural women might rank domestic labor burdens or lack of basic literacy as more immediate obstacles. A lack of political affiliation could imply disengagement from or dissatisfaction with existing political parties. High educational levels may correlate with specific biases, such as progressive or technocratic learning. Consequently, the ranking of barriers presented here reflects a "top-down" urban perspective that likely emphasizes formal political mechanisms over the informal, communal, or traditional hierarchies that dominate political life in rural Congo. The findings are presented in this section and divided

into six main themes emerging from the data collection process: political, social, personal, cultural, economic, and religious.

The study's quantitative analysis of the factors hindering Congolese women's political participation revealed statistically significant findings ($p < 0.001$) for all examined aspects, as shown in **Appendix**. In interpreting these results, it is important to distinguish between public perceptions of barriers, the primary focus of this study and the objective structural realities that shape women's political participation. While perceptions do not always perfectly mirror reality, they are nonetheless socially consequential, as they influence voter behavior, party recruitment practices, and women's own political aspirations. In several areas, public perceptions closely align with structural realities. For instance, respondents' emphasis on costly political campaigns corresponds with documented financial barriers embedded in Congo's electoral system. In other areas, however, perceptions may diverge from reality. The frequently cited "lack of political ambition" among women may obscure the structural deterrents such as harassment, financial exclusion, and gendered social expectations that constrain women's choices. Recognizing this distinction helps avoid attributing systemic inequality to individual shortcomings and reinforces the relevance of the glass-ceiling framework in explaining how invisible barriers are normalized through public discourse.

In this study, political factors emerged as the most substantial barriers, with 70.9% of respondents identifying costly political campaigns as prohibitive (including 43% who strongly agreed, $\sigma \approx 15.2$, 95% CI: 38.1% - 47.9%) and 69.7% citing unfavorable electoral systems ($\sigma \approx 12.8$, CI: 31.5% - 40.5%) as structural barriers. Personal factors demonstrated gendered perceptions, with 61.6% of the respondents agreeing that women lack political ambition ($\sigma \approx 14.5$, CI: 29.2% - 38.2%) and more polarized perspectives on politics being perceived as a "dirty job" (54.7% agreement versus 37.2% disagreement). Social and cultural factors showed particularly entrenched biases, with 74.5% acknowledging stereotypes and prejudices ($\sigma \approx 12.1$, CI: 28.4% - 36.8%) and 81.4% endorsing restrictive gender ideologies ($\sigma \approx 11.8$, CI: 26.4% - 34.0%) as significant barriers. Economic and religious aspects also demonstrated strong consensus, with 72.1% and 73.4% citing economic hardship and limited financial support from political parties as obstacles, whereas religious exclusion (62.8%) and restrictive teaching (64.0%) were identified as additional exclusionary factors. These statistically robust findings ($p < 0.001$ for all factors) collectively validated the application of the glass ceiling theory to the Congolese context, revealing a diverse system of barriers operating at the institutional, cultural, and individual levels.

Political factors were overwhelmingly identified as primary when respondents ranked the most significant overarching barriers to gender equality in politics (31.4%), followed by cultural (23.2%), social (18.6%), religious (12.8%), personal (9.3%), and economic (4.7%) factors, all with $p < 0.001$ significance (**Table 6**).

Table 6. Factors most hindering gender equality in the Republic of Congo.

Ranking	Factor Category	Percentage Agreement	Male Respondents	Female Respondents	Key Sub-Factors (Top 3)
1	Political	31.4%	18 (33.3%)	9 (28.1%)	1) Limited party support 2) High campaign costs 3) Unfavorable electoral system
2	Cultural	23.2%	15 (27.8%)	5 (15.6%)	1) Gender ideology 2) Cultural barriers 3) Tribalism
3	Social	18.6%	11 (20.4%)	5 (15.6%)	1) Stereotypes/prejudices 2) Media portrayal 3) Lack of women-to-women support
4	Religious	12.8%	6 (11.1%)	5 (15.6%)	1) Sect exclusion 2) Restrictive teachings
5	Personal	9.3%	5 (9.3%)	3 (9.4%)	1) Lack of ambition 2) "Dirty job" perception 3) Confidence deficit
6	Economic	4.7%	4 (7.4%)	0 (0%)	1) Economic hardship 2) Limited party financing

Source: Authors.

These results highlight how structural inequities in campaign financing and electoral systems intersect with entrenched cultural norms and stereotypes, thus creating disadvantages for women in Congolese politics. These findings require comprehensive policy interventions, such as electoral reforms to address financial barriers, gender quotas to counter systemic exclusion, and media literacy programs to challenge such stereotypes. Additionally, the study suggests the need for grassroots initiatives to transform cultural perceptions of women's political roles and interfaith dialogue to address religious exclusion. The statistical robustness of these findings (with all factors showing σ values between 11.4 - 15.2 and confined CIs) provides compelling empirical evidence to guide national policy and international development efforts aimed at achieving gender parity in Congolese political institutions. This study established a strong evidentiary foundation for advocacy work and underscored the urgency of addressing these interconnected barriers through coordinated strategies.

7. Summary and Recommendations

This study presents the factors hindering the participation of Congolese women in politics and provides recommendations. Women's representation in Parliament and the number of Middle African women in ministries worldwide have steadily increased in the Republic of the Congo. The results suggest that multiple factors influence gender disparities in women's participation in politics in the Republic of Congo, such as political, social, economic, cultural, personal, and reli-

gious. This supports the findings of studies conducted in various countries (Ahmed, 2021; Fox & Lawless, 2024; Inglehart & Norris, 2003; Kasomo, 2012; Lawless & Fox, 2008; Majola, 2020; Mills, 1993; Mlambo & Kapingura, 2019; Mohamed, 2019; Ofosu, 2021; Rule, 1987; Shvedova, 2005; Tenu, 2019; Tundi, 2014; Yiapan, 2008; Zeng, 2014). Moreover, among the aforementioned factors, the results of the online survey indicate that political factors inhibit women's political participation in the Republic of Congo.

Considering the results of this study, the following recommendations are made: The Congolese government, civil society organizations, political parties, international organizations, religious institutions, communities, and families should be involved in enhancing women's political participation in the Republic of Congo. Furthermore, this study recommends implementing the following measures to reverse this trend: educating the population on gender issues; equal access to formal education; mutual support among women; encouraging political parties to support female candidates; adoption of electoral gender quotas by the Congolese government and political parties; assessing and enforcing existing laws protecting women's rights and introducing amendments to fill existing gaps; introducing women to favorable female models of success in politics at the local, national, and international levels; fostering family and community support; support from religious institutions; and mainstreaming GEWE in all sectors.

Specifically, to address the finding that 70.9% of respondents identify "costly political campaigns" as a prohibitive barrier, the Congolese government should consider introducing public campaign financing, spending caps, or subsidized media access for candidates, with specific provisions for women. Political parties should be incentivized or legally required to provide direct financial subsidies for women's registration fees and campaign logistics, directly addressing the economic hardships validated by our statistical data ($p < 0.001$). To mitigate the "unfavorable electoral systems" cited by 69.7% of the sample, we recommend that electoral reforms should include gender quotas on party candidate lists and enforceable placement mandates to ensure women are nominated in winnable constituencies. To counter entrenched cultural and social stereotypes, civil society organizations and media institutions should implement gender-sensitive political communication guidelines and public awareness campaigns highlighting successful Congolese women leaders. To address the perceived lack of political ambition, it requires mentorship and leadership training programs targeting young women, particularly at the local level. Finally, religious and community leaders should be engaged through structured dialogue to promote interpretations of religious and cultural values that support women's leadership. Linking these interventions directly to the study's findings ensures that policy responses address not only abstract gender equality goals, but the specific barriers identified by Congolese citizens.

While this research contributes valuable insights into women's political participation in the Republic of Congo, several limitations must be acknowledged to contextualize the conclusions. First, data collection relied primarily on online

questionnaires, which may have introduced selection bias. Individuals without reliable internet access, particularly those in remote or rural areas, may have been excluded from participation. Although online surveys provide cost-effective access to geographically dispersed populations (Braun et al., 2017, 2021), use of social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp for survey distribution may have limited participation to more digitally connected individuals. Consequently, the sample may not be representative of the broader Congolese population. To test the robustness and external validity of this study's findings, future research should collect data from a larger and more balanced sample, including raw data for advanced statistical testing (e.g., t-tests, ANOVA), and use mixed-method approaches to contextualize quantitative trends with qualitative insights. As noted in our discussion of demographic skew, these results may primarily reflect the perspectives of young, urban, educated males; therefore, the aforementioned recommendations should be integrated with strategies that address the informal or traditional barriers faced by rural and older women. Second, while open-ended survey questions enabled some qualitative input (Braun et al., 2021), the online questionnaire format constrained deeper engagement with complex issues as follow-up questions could not be posed, unlike in interviews or focus groups. Therefore, the depth and richness of the qualitative data collected were somewhat limited. Third, the study employed non-probability sampling, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. As noted in the literature, qualitative research typically emphasizes depth and contextual understanding over statistical representativeness (Smith, 2018; Terry & Braun, 2017; Terry et al., 2018). Nonetheless, the lack of random sampling means the results should be interpreted with caution when considering broader applications. Fourth, the study also relied on secondary data sources, including reports from the United Nations and the Congolese government and various international publications. While these sources helped to corroborate primary data, they may reflect dominant discourses that overlook local, culturally specific factors influencing women's political engagement. Finally, the limited data-collection period (June 8-August 10, 2023) may not capture recent or ongoing political developments that could affect the study's themes. Therefore, the findings represent a snapshot of the political landscape, rather than a comprehensive or evolving picture. Despite these limitations, this study provides a meaningful foundation for understanding gender and political participation in the Republic of Congo. Future research employing broader sampling strategies, mixed methods, and longitudinal designs would enhance the validity and applicability of the findings.

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Data supporting the findings of this study may be obtained from the correspond-

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Author's Contribution Statement

PTM: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing original draft, Writing review & editing. **CH:** Conceptualization, Resources, Writing review & editing.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Statistical analysis of factors hindering women's political participation in the Republic of Congo.

Category & Factor	Response % (M/F)	σ	95% CI	<i>p</i> -value
1) Political Factors				
Campaign Costs	TA: 43.0 (26/11); A: 27.9 (18/7); D: 18.6 (10/6); TD: 10.5 (7/1)	15.2	38.1% - 47.9%	<0.001
Electoral System	TA: 36.0 (24/7); A: 33.7 (17/12); D: 18.6 (12/4); TD: 11.6 (8/2)	12.8	31.5% - 40.5%	<0.001
2) Personal Factors				
Lack of Ambition	TA: 33.7 (24/5); A: 27.9 (15/9); D: 32.6 (19/9); TD: 5.8 (3/2)	14.5	29.2% - 38.2%	<0.001
Politics as "Dirty"	TA: 29.1 (19/6); A: 25.6 (17/6); D: 37.2 (20/11); TD: 8.1 (5/2)	13.9	24.7% - 33.5%	<0.001
3) Social Factors				
Media Portrayal	TA: 16.3 (12/2); A: 41.9 (24/12); D: 30.2 (18/8); TD: 11.6 (7/3)	11.4	12.9% - 19.7%	<0.001
Stereotypes	TA: 32.6 (22/6); A: 41.9 (21/15); D: 22.1 (17/2); TD: 3.5 (1/2)	12.1	28.4% - 36.8%	<0.001
4) Economic Factors				
Economic Hardship	TA: 27.9 (18/6); A: 44.2 (27/11); D: 19.8 (10/7); TD: 8.1 (6/1)	14	23.5% - 32.3%	<0.001
Party Fin) Support	TA: 31.4 (19/8); A: 43.0 (25/12); D: 18.6 (12/4); TD: 7.0 (5/1)	13.2	27.1% - 35.7%	<0.001
5) Cultural Factors				
Gender Ideology	TA: 30.2 (21/5); A: 51.2 (27/17); D: 11.6 (9/1); TD: 7.0 (4/2)	11.8	26.4% - 34.0%	<0.001
Tribalism	TA: 36.0 (16/6); A: 39.5 (15/13); D: 15.1 (18/2); TD: 9.3 (13/4)	12.5	31.7% - 40.3%	<0.001
6) Religious Factors				
Sect Exclusion	TA: 40.7 (26/8); A: 22.1 (10/9); D: 26.7 (22/1); TD: 10.5 (4/6)	14.3	36.2% - 45.2%	<0.001
Restrictive Teachings	TA: 29.1 (19/4); A: 34.9 (22/10); D: 27.9 (15/9); TD: 8.1 (5/2)	12.7	25.2% - 33.0%	<0.001

Note: TA = Totally Agree, A = Agree, D = Disagree, TD = Totally Disagree. Values in parentheses represent Male (M) and Female (F) frequency. Source: Authors.