

**A Political Ecosystem
Designed to Exclude**

YOUNG WOMEN

In Kenya



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By Dr. Katindi Sivi and Bina Maseno



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1. Foreword

Badili Africa, in collaboration with the Longview Futures Foundation, is proud to present the publication **“A Political Ecosystem Designed to Exclude Young Women in Kenya.”** This publication is more than a report. It is a critical interrogation of the structural and invisible barriers that continue to silence a vital demographic of our nation.

Despite the fact that young people constitute the vast majority of Kenya’s population, their representation in formal leadership remains a statistical anomaly. Data from the 2017 and 2022 general elections reveal a sobering stagnation. Young women account for less than 1% of elected leaders at both the national and county levels. Perhaps more concerning is the precipitous drop-in success rates. Of the young women who braved the ballot, only 9% were successful in 2017, a figure that plummeted to a mere 5% in 2022.

These dismal figures force us to confront a difficult question: why, despite significant investment in leadership training and civic education, does the success rate for young women remain so low? The findings suggest that our current approach is fundamentally misaligned with reality. This research moves beyond the well-documented headline barriers, such as campaign financing, party gatekeeping and political violence (offline and online) to surface the invisible and informal nuances that make or break a candidacy. We explore the barriers often omitted from policy briefs like the participation tax, the opaque gatekeeping, the domestic social contract, the supernatural warfare, relational dissolutions, the professional blacklisting or the psychological trauma of the campaign trail and the silent fading after the campaigns are over.

By documenting the lived experiences of candidates from the last two electoral cycles, this book provides evidence that supporting the individual is insufficient if the ecosystem remains hostile. A strategic pivot is required - a shift toward holistic support systems that address the candidate’s entire

ecosystem, from early pipeline development and domestic stability to the transformation of political party cultures. To this end, this publication offers specific recommendations on how political leadership training curricula must evolve to remain relevant within Kenya's unique political landscape. We believe that by surfacing these nuances and pushing for more holistic support, we have a chance of increasing young women's success at the ballot box.

As we look toward the 2027 election cycle, we invite you to engage with this analysis as a blueprint for an inclusive future. It is time to dismantle the ecosystem of exclusion and build, in its place, a theater of opportunity for the young women of Kenya.

Bina Maseno
Executive Director



Badili Africa.

Dr. Katindi Sivi
Executive Director



LongView Group



2. Our back story


Bina entered the election cycle with her head high, her folders full of 'Women in Leadership' certificates, and a firm belief that she was ready for the big leagues. Then, she met the Kenyan voter, the party gatekeeper, and the relentless political machinery. Suffice it to say, she quickly realized that the academic theories she had mastered held little water in the face of raw political reality. As they say on the streets: **"Vitu kwa ground ni different."**

The frustration that followed was born not merely of loss, but of the realization that her formal training had prepared her only for polite boardroom debates. It had offered no manual for when her reputation was dismantled in a WhatsApp group at 2:00 AM, nor for the brutal aftermath unique to Kenyan politics.

For a young woman, a political loss is rarely viewed as a milestone. It is often weaponized as a moral failure or a divine "I-told-you-so" from a society that views female ambition as an affront. Bina found herself navigating a "triple blow": political bankruptcy from drained savings, domestic instability as the strain tested her closest relationships, and a re-entry penalty where sexualized character assassination rendered her "unemployable" in a conservative job market. She was left to carry the debt, the shame, and the trauma in total invisibility - effectively penalized for her audacity to lead.

A Venting Session Turned into Mission

In the midst of this crisis, Bina sought out her mentor and friend, Dr. Katindi Sivi. Over a cup of coffee, a glaring truth emerged - there was no reference point for this grueling journey. Every generation of Kenyan women was entering the arena and stepping on the same landmines because those who walked the path before had not left a map. There was no a 'how-to-Survive-the-Political-Trenches' manual for the younger sisters. They were all reinventing a wheel that was expensive, exhausting, and often flat.



What began as shared frustration was transformed into a strategic mission. Through the visionary challenge of Dr. Sivi and the partnership of Badili Africa, a mentorship-led research project was born. Daktari trained 20 young women graduates in qualitative research, turning them into witnesses of the raw, unedited stories of women who contested the 2017 and 2022 elections. These women were mobilized by Badili Africa from the universities and from informal settlements they work in.

This work is more than a presentation of data. It is a call for a total overhaul of how we prepare women for power. By replacing abstract theory with the grit of real-world experience, we ensure that when a woman decides to run, she is not a mere participant in a flawed system - she is a formidable contender.

The following twenty-five principles are the distilled from the wisdom of people like Bina and the 122 young women we spoke to, who have bled on the battlefield. They are the map they wish they had.

25 things I wish I knew before running for office.


1. Politics is a Collective Endeavor, not a Solo Pursuit

While the name on the ballot is yours, the machinery is communal. Success depends on your ability to cultivate "the ground" early through *chamas*, youth groups, and informal networks. Be warned: when crises arise, formal institutions often retreat, leaving you to carry the financial and emotional burden alone. Invest in loyal human capital long before the official campaign period begins.

2. Political Parties are Vehicles, Not Homes

View a political party as a door to opportunity rather than a source of protection. Many candidates, particularly women, receive the ticket but no accompanying security, funding, or institutional backing. Parties are transactional and they invest where they see immediate returns. Build an independent support base so that you are never stranded if party loyalty shifts or promises of "future opportunities" vanish.

"I campaigned hard and played a key role in popularizing my party on the ground, fully prepared to contest for the MCA seat after being assured by my party leader that there would be a proper nomination process. Instead, just a day before nominations, I learnt through Facebook that the party ticket had been given to someone else. No party



official contacted me and no explanation was offered. After months of mobilization and loyalty, I was pushed out without courtesy or accountability and the silence really hurt almost as much as the decision itself.”

3. The High Cost of Personal Financing

In the Kenyan context, you are often your own primary donor. Most campaigns are fueled by personal savings, liquidated assets, or family loans. Before you jump in, ask yourself a very honest question, what can I afford to lose or not lose? Once the curtains fall, you alone will manage the financial aftermath of the race.

“I remember after elections I did not have money to do my hair let alone to pay my rent. I had exhausted everything and especially because the final months leading to the elections were too demanding. On the last night before election day I paid out my last resources to the agents to guard my vote.”


4. The Hidden Trauma of Political Debt

Financial depletion is one of the most enduring wounds of a campaign. Losing an election can leave a candidate unable to maintain basic lifestyle standards while servicing significant loans. Think about your exit plan early and survival beyond the campaign, not because you are planning to lose, but for professional and personal survival beyond the ballot.

“The debt I incurred during my campaign significantly strained my marriage. Despite the pressure from my husband not to run for office, I believed I had a strong chance and when I ran out of personal savings, I took a loan against family property held in my name. After the elections, my business had declined and I had no salaried work to rely on, making it difficult to service the loan. I requested my husband to step in since I could not afford money for our children’s food. The resulting financial pressure and the uncertainty created deep tension at home and became one of the factors that contributed to the breakdown of my marriage.”

5. Navigating the Spectrum of Political Violence

Violence in politics is rarely just physical. It manifests as character assassination, sexualized insults, and systemic intimidation. In high-stakes zones, "the ground" may necessitate engaging private security or "youth coordinators" also known as *goons* to ensure safety. This environment is designed to erode your confidence, therefore recognizing that this is a systemic failure, not a personal one.



“Sexual harassment is deeply entrenched in political spaces and women are often expected to manage it on their own. While working for a gubernatorial candidate as I also ran for an MCA seat, I faced constant sexual remarks from him, as well as advances from his bodyguard, driver and other politicians we encountered. The environment was so hostile that at times it felt safer to be perceived as “belonging” to one powerful man so that others would keep their distance because, as people would say, “wanajua hiyo ni mali ya mkubwa.”

6. The Double-Edged Sword of Social Media

Digital platforms offer affordable visibility but expose you to coordinated trolling and "deep-fake" smear campaigns. High follower counts rarely translate directly into voter turnout. Manage your digital footprint intentionally and protect your mental health by recognizing that you do not owe a response to every online provocation.


“During my campaign period, I was engaged and preparing to get married, but over time I realized my fiancé was violent. One day, an argument escalated after we got out of the car and he hit me and pushed me to the ground so hard and I genuinely thought I would die. After taking time to heal, I called off the wedding and ended the relationship. One day, I woke up to calls from friends and family informing me that false stories were trending online. My former fiancé had paid popular bloggers and a tabloid to claim that I had stolen our wedding money and ended the relationship because I prioritized politics over family. The experience was deeply traumatic especially with how personal violence and intimate relationships had been weaponized to publicly discredit me which really affected my campaign.”

7. Ageism as a Tool of Marginalization

Being a young aspirant means facing labels like “mrembo” or being told “bado hujafika” (your time hasn't come). This is a strategic attempt to gatekeep power. Do not be coerced into "waiting your turn" or being pigeonholed into future promises if your vision is to lead now.

8. The Politicization of the Private Sphere

Your marital status, parenting choices, and even your wardrobe (the "Vitenge budget") will be scrutinized. Decide early which boundaries are non-negotiable. Prepare your



family, especially children, for the reality that their lives may be used as political fodder by opponents.

“During my campaign period, I lost the father of my children and I was completely unprepared for the cruelty that followed. Smear campaigns quickly emerged, with rumors reaching my children that I had killed their father and offered him as a sacrifice in order to win the seat. Having to sit my children down and address such accusations was the hardest conversation I have ever had as a parent. At the same time, our home became a constant political space, with visitors coming almost every other day. My children were not used to entertaining strangers every waking moment, and this compounded their confusion and distress.”


9. The Terms of Entry Dictate the Terms of Service

How you enter the arena, whether through grassroots mobilization or elite appointment, shapes your mandate. Those brought in by godfathers often face pressures of loyalty that often conflict with their policy agendas. Understand that political sisterhood is often complicated by these competing loyalties and survival instincts.

“There are many moments when I want to support the agenda of a political friend or even an opposing party, especially when the cause is just. But when I decline, it is often misunderstood. What is rarely seen is that I am navigating complex loyalties to the people and structures that brought me into that political space and gave me a nomination. In many instances, politics becomes a matter of survival rather than solidarity, because our political systems reward loyalty far more than they reward collective principle or shared values.”

10. Mobilizers as the Pulse of the Campaign

Respected community leaders, youth networks, and grassroots women organized in collectives such as *chamas* are among your most valuable political assets. They carry deep influence but often operate in high-risk environments, absorbing pressure and exposure on your behalf. Treating them with respect and supporting their basic logistical needs such as airtime, transport, and modest facilitation is not merely transactional. It helps build trust and forms a protective grassroots shield around your campaign. Equally important is taking time to understand the voter dynamics of the area you are contesting in. Know the total number of registered voters in your ward or



constituency, how many votes the previous winner secured, and where turnout is strongest. Grounding your strategy in this local reality is as important as any public messaging.

11. The Architecture of Informal Power, Money and Access

Power in Kenya rarely sits only in formal offices. Much of it moves through informal but influential spaces long before elections. Faith leaders, elders, power brokers, business interests and political financiers quietly shape who is seen as viable, who receives resources and who is excluded. Money is central to these spaces, with expectations of “facilitation” or contributions often treated as the cost of access or support. Political coalitions are usually negotiated in private settings rather than public rallies and campaigns quickly learn that popularity alone is not enough. Understanding and navigating these informal power dynamics is therefore critical to political survival and success.

12. The Strategic Use of Faith Spaces


Churches and mosques are powerful mobilization hubs. Consistent presence and genuine relationship-building with clergy can grant you a vital platform. However, be wary of traditionalist expectations that may seek to silence young women. Engage these spaces on your own terms, maintaining a consistent presence (e.g., visiting two churches per weekend which also requires you to contribute to frequent fundraising drives, which tend to increase during election seasons when politicians heavily court religious institutions).

13. Active Pursuit of Mentorship

In the absence of formal structures, you must be the architect of your own “political sisterhood.” Seek out mentors intentionally. Peer-support networks are essential for sharing intelligence, pooling resources, and surviving the emotional toll of the trail. However, join forces cautiously because political abandonment and shifts in alliances without warning are normal.

14. The Limits of Formal Training

Capacity-building workshops provide skills but cannot insulate you from the “capacity for violence” often demanded by the terrain. Understanding community dynamics and institutional power is as important as any campaign manual. Be



prepared for a system that may initially fail to protect you when you engage formal security channels.

15. The Permanent Metamorphosis of the Candidate

Running for office is a transformative experience that alters how you are perceived by society. It will open new doors but may also close existing professional or personal ones. Enter the race knowing that you will emerge as a different person, marked by the resilience you were forced to develop.

“When people hear the word politics, they often associate it with corruption, and that stigma follows you long after an election ends. I was elected as an MCA in my late twenties, but in 2022 I was not re-elected. Since then, I have struggled to secure employment despite having a university degree, legislative experience as a policymaker, and strong skills in community engagement. The moment organizations learn that I am a former MCA, many simply switch off. It is a harsh reminder that political participation, especially for young women, can carry long-term professional penalties that are rarely acknowledged.”

16. The Solitude of the "Post-Election" Phase

Losing an election is not failure in itself; the real failure lies in the absence of any recovery framework. Many capable leaders leave politics permanently because the period after a campaign is marked by isolation, exhaustion and financial strain. Healing and rebuilding should therefore be treated as an essential part of any long-term political journey, not an afterthought once the race is over.

17. The Strategic Cost of Silence

While silence can offer temporary safety, it often reinforces the status quo. Identify the issues you are willing to be vocal about and fight for, then build a collective front. The patriarchy and established systems are designed to "swallow" individuals who attempt to challenge them alone.

18. Persistence Over Fairness

The political system is rarely fair, but it often rewards those who endure. Many of Kenya's most prominent leaders were successful only after multiple attempts. Ensure your endurance does not come at the cost of your core values or mental well-being.

19. The Impact on the Family Unit

Politics can strain or even dissolve marriages and family bonds. Honest, preemptive conversations with significant relations like partners, parents, and children are vital. Protect your support structure from becoming a secondary casualty of your ambition.

“I had been the primary breadwinner in my household and the campaign period deeply strained our relationship. My husband struggled with the late nights that politics required of me, especially when meetings ran late or I was dropped off by male colleagues. Because most political planning meetings happen at night and are dominated by men, he often felt uncomfortable and excluded, which led to growing tension and accusations of infidelity. Over time, this resulted in being locked out of the house and our bedroom and even after the elections, our relationship has never fully recovered to what it was before.”

20. The Politics of "Matanga" (Funerals)

In Kenya, funerals are somber but significant political arenas where visibility and empathy are measured. Your presence, consistency, and respect in these spaces speak louder than a formal speech. While it feels intrusive, "matanga" are currently an inescapable part of the political terrain.

21. The Burden of the "Invisible Crown"

As an aspirant, you become a "miracle worker" for community problems - from medical bills to family disputes. While this builds legitimacy, beware of "self-erasure." Do not allow your labor and popularity to be exploited by those who have no intention of granting you real power.

“Every day, people would come to my home with all kinds of problems needing help, and the same happened at rallies. Even when I had nothing to give, I found myself stretching and exhausting my networks to support community members and sometimes it would be community members who are not registered voters in my ward or constituency. If I declined to help, perhaps because I did not have enough resources, they would ask how I plan to be a responsible public servant if I could not even help with little things. The subtle blackmail was very pressurizing.”

22. The End of the Private Home

Once you run, your home effectively becomes a "community center." The constant presence of visitors expecting hospitality (the "ever-full tea flask") is a significant financial and psychological drain. Plan for this loss of privacy and the associated costs of hosting especially with the family members who prefer privacy.

23. The Strength of Collective Power

Despite the loneliness, a new generation of leaders is rising. Find your tribe. Collective power is not just a slogan. It is the primary mechanism for survival and eventual victory in a hostile system.


24. The Persistence of Ethnic Realities

You may be a nationalist at heart, but "tribe" remains a potent currency in Kenyan politics. Voters often retreat into ethnic alignments under pressure. Understand how your identity is perceived and navigate these alignments without losing your integrity.

"Until I ran for office, I did not realize how much my tribe mattered in elections. Suddenly, people began relating to me differently, with some voters gravitating towards or away from me purely based on where they thought I belonged, rather than on my ideas or track record."

25. The Weaponization of Opinion Polls

Be wary of sponsored polls designed to create a narrative of a wasted vote. These are often psychological tools used by well-funded opponents to demoralize your base. Focus on your ground mobilization.



Remember!
Polls measure perception,
but it is people that cast
votes.



3. Acknowledgements

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Asante sana



4. Executive Summary

Despite significant national and global commitments to gender equality, young women in Kenya remain systematically excluded from formal political power. This report, a collaborative effort by Longview Futures Foundation and Badili Africa interrogates the structural and invisible barriers that contribute to a sobering stagnation: young women account for less than 1% of elected leaders at both national and county levels - a figure that has remained unchanged across three electoral cycles.

The Crisis of Representation

- **Declining Success Rates:** Of the young women who vied for office, the success rate plummeted from **9% in 2017** to a mere **5% in 2022**.
- **Invisible Demographics:** While Africa is the youngest continent (median age 20), this reality is not reflected in political institutions. Globally, less than 1% of parliamentarians are young women and Kenya mirrors this deep exclusion.
- **Intersectionality of Exclusion:** Young women sit at the intersection of "youth" and "women," falling through the cracks of both frameworks and experiencing simultaneous exclusion based on gender and age.

Core Findings: The Hostile Ecosystem

The research confirms that young women candidates are not disengaged. Most are highly educated and deeply rooted in community leadership through *chamas*, faith-based spaces, and grassroots initiatives. However, they encounter a profoundly hostile environment characterized by:

- **Violence as a Tool of Exclusion:** Gender-Based Violence (GBV) including sexual harassment, cyberbullying, and intimidation is systematic and strategic, functioning to erode confidence and force self-censorship.
- **Financial Gatekeeping:** High campaign costs and a lack of party funding (less than 5% of women receive party support) create a "participation tax". Roughly 97.6% of women rely on personal savings, often leading to severe economic erosion or post-election debt.

- **The "Invisible" Barrier of the Private Sphere:** Political participation often carries high personal costs, including domestic instability, marital dissolution (reported by 20% of respondents), and family rejection.
- **Informal Power Dynamics:** Success often depends on navigating opaque networks of party gatekeepers, elders, and informal brokers who routinely exclude young women.

Pipeline and Intervention Failures

- **Late Interventions:** Current leadership programs often intervene too late (at the point of candidacy) and focus narrowly on the individual rather than the surrounding ecosystem.
- **Theoretical Gap:** Traditional trainings are often overly theoretical, failing to address on-the-ground realities such as voter mobilization, fundraising, or security.
- **Fragmented Socialization:** Leadership development rarely starts early for girls, who are often socialized into supportive rather than decision-making roles.

Strategic Pivot: Redefining the Table

The report advocates for a radical paradigm shift in how women are prepared for and supported in politics:

- **From Individual to Ecosystem:** Move beyond "fixing the woman" to "securing her perimeter" through holistic support systems that address early pipelines, financial risks, and domestic stability.
- **Organic Leadership Model:** Shift away from a power-centric "career politician" model to one rooted in service and structural disruption.
- **Resilience and Sustainability:** Establish a multi-year framework for the 2027 cycle, focusing on long-term professionalization, mental wellness, and intra-party diplomacy.

The persistent underrepresentation of women is both a **pipeline and an ecosystem failure**. As Kenya looks toward 2027, this analysis serves as a blueprint to dismantle the theater of exclusion and build a theater of opportunity for young women. Training the individual is insufficient if the environment remains unsafe and extractive.

We must prepare politics for women as much as we prepare women for politics.



5. Introduction

In every election cycle in Kenya, a familiar pattern emerges. Women step forward to contest political office with conviction, courage, and deep commitment to their communities. They mobilize support, walk difficult terrains, face public scrutiny, and endure personal sacrifice in pursuit of leadership. Yet, long after campaign posters fade and ballots are counted, the space women occupy in political power remains strikingly narrow. Progress is visible, but fragile; representation is improving, yet uneven. And for young women, the road into politics remains especially steep.

5.1 Background

A review of the literature on young women's political participation in Kenya reveals a landscape defined by a sharp contradiction between progressive constitutional frameworks and a regressive socio-political reality. Literature consistently identifies systemic patriarchy as a foundational barrier, where the masculinization of politics socializes the public to view leadership as a male attribute, often relegating women to subordinate roles or domestic spheres. This is exacerbated by a voter-candidate gap, where young women are high-turnout voters but face gatekeeping by political parties that prioritize patronage and established male networks over inclusive representation.

The rise of violence against women, both physical and digital, serves as a potent tool of exclusion. Online harassment, and gendered disinformation are increasingly used to silence young women and damage their reputations before they can gain political traction. Economically, the feminization of poverty and the high cost of campaigning create a resource deficit that makes elective politics nearly inaccessible for young women without independent wealth or high-level sponsorship. Collectively, these factors suggest that while the 2010 Constitution provides a legal roadmap for equity, the path is obstructed by deep-seated cultural norms, financial hurdles, and an environment of digital and physical insecurity that requires targeted, long-term interventions to dismantle.



5.2 The problem


Kenya's political landscape remains a hostile and structurally unequal ecosystem that actively resists the entry of young women. There is a profound tension between the promise of inclusion (laws and quotas) and the realities of exclusion (violence, financial gatekeeping, and patriarchal norms). The crisis is not a lack of capable women or individual readiness, but rather a political culture designed to privilege established male voices while treating young women's ambition as a by-the-way rather than a democratic right. The problems and challenges facing young women who are about to vie are often further compounded by the traditional formal leadership training they receive.

A review of 5 curricula surfaced various assumptions.

Formal training often assumes that the primary barrier is a woman's lack of skills in public speaking, writing a manifesto, or political confidence. By focusing solely on *'fixing the woman'*, these programs inadvertently individualize systemic failure and place a psychological burden on the candidate, to feel responsible for overcoming systemic barriers like political violence or gatekeeping. Unfortunately, no amount of "public speaking or confidence training" can resolve such challenges. In the end, readiness becomes only a myth.

Most formal trainings also teach politics as a technical, rule-bound process like how to fill nomination papers, and how to use the law. While these are important aspects of the training, politics in Kenya unfolds in an ecosystem of informal power brokers, religious institutions, and rogue security arrangements. When a young woman therefore enters the political arena only armed with formal technical skills, she is often blindsided by the dirty informal tactics used against her such as character assassination, digital doxxing, and physical intimidation, that the training did not prepare her for. Training that assumes clean, neat formal political processes becomes a futile exercise. No wonder in 2017 and 2022 only 9% and 5% of those who vied for political positions respectively actually became successful.

The critical failure of formal political leadership training lies in its "train and release" architecture, which prepares young women for the ballot but abandons them to the political hangover that follows after elections. These programs focus almost exclusively on technical readiness, while ignoring the catastrophic personal and



systemic costs of political ambition. Consequently, candidates are thrust into a hostile ecosystem without the necessary post-election safety nets to navigate the psychological trauma of loss, the physical exhaustion of the trail, or the financial ruin that often accompanies a run for office. This lack of structural support is further compounded by the visceral reality of "sextortion" and gendered disinformation, which exact a heavy mental health toll and often lead to professional blacklisting, as political biases make re-entry into the job market nearly impossible. Ultimately, without an intentional shift toward preparing the political ecosystem to sustain women through the entire lifecycle of engaging in politics, these trainings inadvertently foster a cycle of betrayal and disillusionment, discouraging a generation of leaders from ever daring to challenge power again.

By focusing on increasing the number of women running, these programmes encourage young women to vie without the structural protection needed for safety or legitimacy. Ultimately, we prioritize preparing women for the battle rather than disarming the battlefield for women to engage effectively.


5.3 Objectives of this work

By documenting the informal regressive socio-political realities young women face when they engage in politics, the objectives of this work are centered on shifting the focus from individual candidate readiness to systemic political reform. More specifically, the work seeks to:

- a) Illuminate the "ecosystem" that actually dictates political outcomes in Kenya as a way of psychologically preparing women for the "dirty informal tactics" used in the field.
- b) Bridge the gap between the "promise of inclusion" and the "realities of exclusion" by providing a basis for targeted, long-term interventions, to be adopted, particularly in political leadership trainings.

5.4 The methodology

The project adopted a participatory research design centered on the "learning by doing" model. The work ensured that the process of documentation was as transformative as the resulting data. The methodology commenced with the specialized training of twenty young women graduates in qualitative research methods, equipping them to serve as primary investigators who could psychologically and intellectually engage with the "ground-level" realities of political aspirants. The



data collection phase began with a rigorous sampling process, utilizing official IEBC records of young women who qualified to run for office in the 2017 and 2022 general elections. To ensure a comprehensive national perspective, the study targeted a balanced regional representation across all 47 counties, aiming to interview 150 young women who were aged 18 - 35 at the time of their candidacy. Ultimately, the data captures a synthesis of stories from 122 women across 30 counties who responded to our invitation.

The research instruments were meticulously crafted, beginning with a Key Informant Interview (KII) guide derived from an extensive literature review of global and regional reports on women in politics, specifically tailored to the nuances of the youth demographic. This tool underwent a rigorous validation process through a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with former candidates, whose insights were used to refine the instrument before full-scale fieldwork was conducted between 2024 and 2025. Following the data collection, all interviews were transcribed, cleaned, and qualitatively analyzed to produce a synthesis of narratives that extracted key lessons and strategic insights.

To ensure the highest level of authenticity and lived realities, the project convened a review session with both former candidates and 2027 aspirants. This consultative phase served as a vital feedback loop, allowing for the inclusion of nuanced experiences that had not been initially captured, thereby ensuring the final report serves as a robust, survivor-centered manual for navigating the complex and often murky terrain of Kenyan politics.

We are confident that this work will contribute immensely to enhancing the democratic participation of young women in Kenya.

6. Our findings

This analysis offers a multi-dimensional perspective on the lived experiences of young women navigating the campaign trail, serving as a strategic roadmap for those aspiring to follow a similar path. By documenting these journeys, the data surfaces the unique challenges and systemic hurdles that must be addressed when designing training and support frameworks for young women candidates. Ultimately, these insights move beyond mere observation, providing critical evidence base for stakeholders committed to preparing and equipping the next generation of female political leaders to seek office successfully.

6.1 Demographic Analysis of Respondents

6.1.1 Distribution of women surveyed by age group

The total sample size was 122 women, out of the intended 150 key informants. The demographic profile of the participants reveals a population primarily composed of young to middle-aged adults, with an average (mean) age of approximately 36 years. The data (see Figures 1 and 2) also shows that 91% of respondents provided their specific age, while only a small minority of roughly 9% (11 individuals) chose not to specify their age.

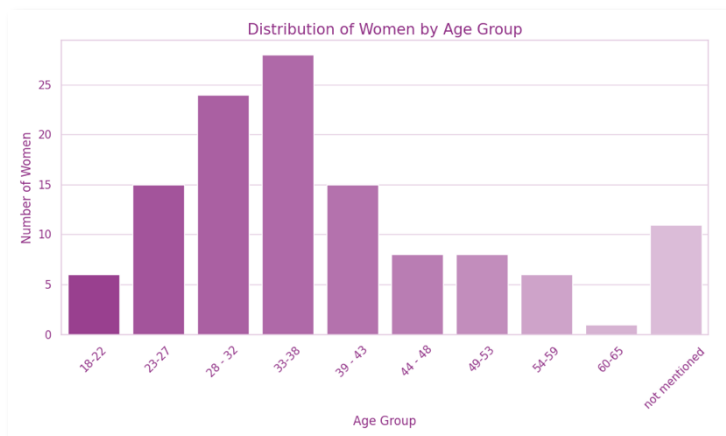


Figure 1: Distribution of women surveyed by agegroup

The age group distribution analysis reveals a distinct concentration of participants within the mid-adult stages, with the 33 - 38 age bracket emerging as the primary peak demographic consisting of 23% of the women surveyed i.e. (28 individuals). This is closely followed by a secondary peak in the 28-32 age group, which accounts for 20% of the respondents (i.e. 24 of the individuals), highlighting a significant cluster of representation between the ages of 23 and 43. When examining the data through a

more granular lens of individual age frequency, specific years in the mid-30s, most notably ages 30, 32, 35, and 40, show the highest density of respondents. In contrast, younger adults aged 18-27 represent approximately 17% of the total, while mature adults aged 44 and older account for roughly 19%, illustrating that the core of this demographic is firmly rooted in the millennial and early Gen X stages.

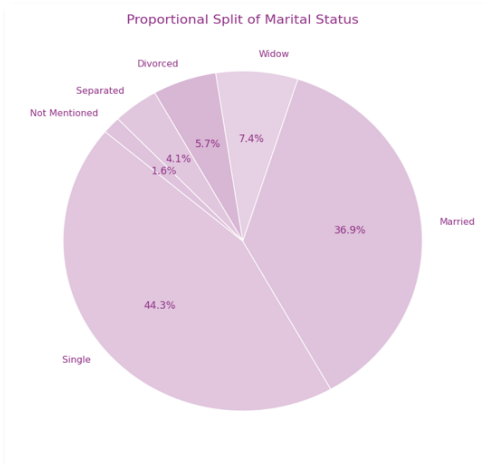
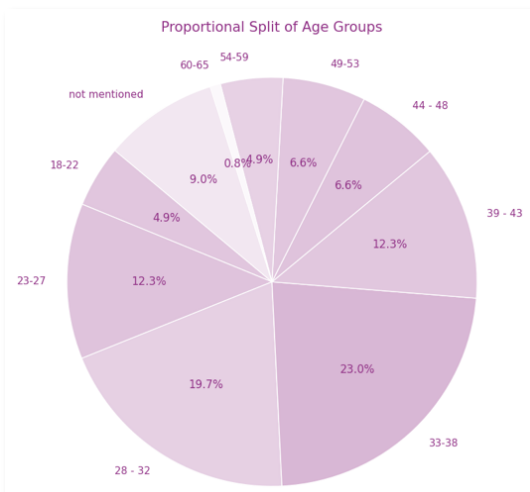


Figure 2: Proportion of women surveyed by age group

6.1.2 Personal demographic status



The majority of candidates were single i.e. 54 respondents (44%) followed by the married people who were 45 respondents i.e. 37% of the people surveyed (see figure 3).

Figure 3: Respondents by marital status

A cross-analysis of marital status & family size breakdown (see figure 4) explores the intersection between the candidates' personal family structures and their marital status, revealing how family dynamics vary across different candidate profiles (see figure 4).

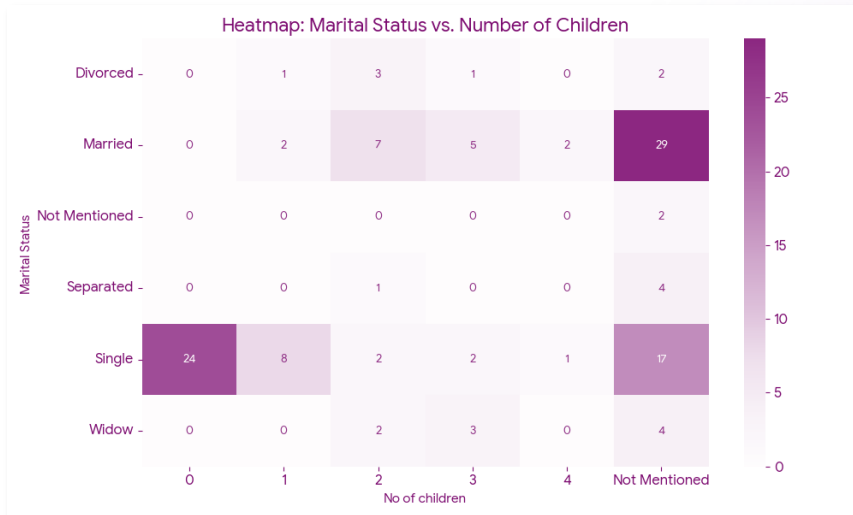


Figure 4: Marital Status & Family Size Breakdown

This relationship between marital status and the number of children shows distinct patterns for each group. Married Candidates predominantly did not mention their number of children, but those who did had an average of 2 to 3 children. Very few married candidates reported having only one child or no children. There is a strong correlation between being single and having no children, with 24 individuals falling into this category. However, a significant number of single candidates (8) are mothers to one child, and a few have larger families. Widowed and divorced candidates mostly report 2 to 3 children. The data suggests that almost half of these women juggled intense political dynamics alongside family responsibilities.

6.1.3 The geographical location of respondents

The interviews were carried out across 30 Counties. Efforts were made to reach candidates in all the regions to ensure all voices were represented in this survey. Nairobi (37 candidates) and Kiambu (15) had the highest level of response. The trend mirrors IEBC data (see annex 2) which shows that Nairobi County recorded the highest number of women candidates vying for political office in both 2022 (46 young

women) and in 2017 (18 young women). Kiambu County recorded the third highest number of women candidates vying for political office (2022- 23 women and 2017- 12 women). The County with the second highest number of candidates in both years was Meru (2022- 29 women and 2017-10 women) but we got fewer responses from there. The dataset also shows a strong response rate from Counties like Makueni, Machakos, and Nyeri (which also had notable numbers of young women vying in both 2022 and 2017).

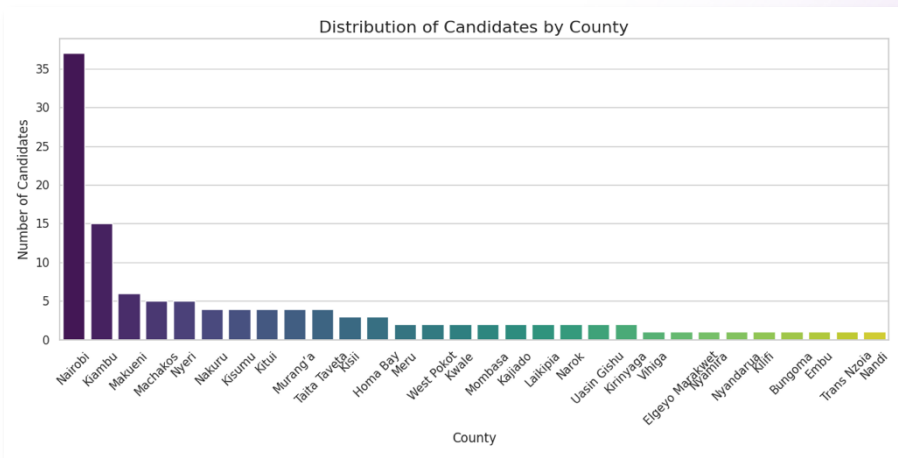


Figure 5: Distribution of respondents by County in 2017 and 2022

Despite Nairobi County recording the highest number of women candidates vying for political office electoral outcomes remain profoundly unequal. Of the 85 elected Members of County Assembly (MCAs) in Nairobi, only five (5) are women, exposing a stark disjuncture between women’s political participation and their actual electoral success. This outcome is particularly striking in a cosmopolitan and ostensibly progressive urban context such as Nairobi, where one might reasonably expect more gender-inclusive voting patterns. Instead, these figures underscore the depth of the structural, institutional, and socio-cultural barriers that continue to constrain women’s access to elective office, especially for young women attempting to enter formal politics. The significance of this disparity is further heightened by the fact that the MCA seat often constitutes the primary entry point into electoral politics for women contesting office for the first time (see figure 7). As such, these statistics provide a powerful empirical illustration of how early-stage political pathways are

systematically constricted, weakening the pipeline of women leaders into higher political offices.

At the national level, the pattern is equally sobering. In the 2022 general election, only 27 women were elected as Members of Parliament out of 249 constituencies. More strikingly, even under the hypothetical scenario in which all women who contested parliamentary seats in 2017 or 2022 had been elected, Kenya would still fall short of meeting the constitutional two-thirds gender rule. This reality points not merely to electoral underperformance but to a deeper structural crisis in political inclusion, where the rules of the game remain fundamentally misaligned with gender-equitable representation.

6.1.4 Level of education

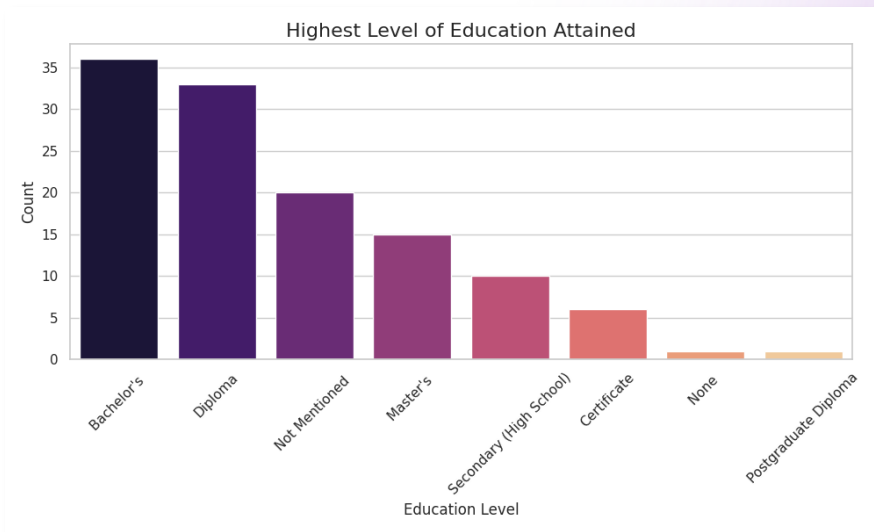


Figure 6: Highest level of education attained by the respondents

Education serves as a critical enabler in leadership by equipping individuals with the mental flexibility, technical literacy, and social capital necessary to navigate complex institutional landscapes. As evidenced by the demographic data, which shows a strong link between higher academic qualifications and political ambition, education provides a basis for critical thinking and strategic decision-making, allowing leaders to move beyond reactive management toward long-term policy formulation. Beyond

cognitive skills, formal education facilitates the development of structured communication and persuasion, essential for mobilizing constituents and articulating a clear vision. As shown in figure 6, over 80% of the respondents have diplomas or higher, with bachelor's degrees being the most common (36 respondents). There is also a significant group of 15 candidates holding Master's degrees, indicating a high level of professional preparation among these women. The few with only secondary education prove leadership is also not limited by formal schooling. There is a noticeable correlation where candidates with Bachelor's and Master's degrees tend to be younger on average (i.e. 31-32 years) compared to those with High School certificates (i.e. 45 years), reflecting a trend of increasing academic achievement in younger generations of political aspirants.

6.1.5 Seats vied for

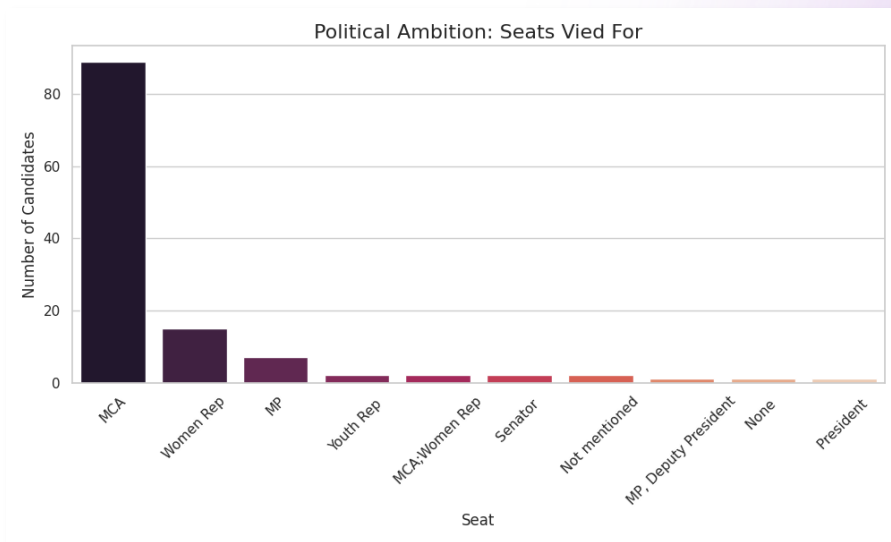


Figure 7: Seats vied for

As shown in figure 7, the political aspirations of the group are primarily focused at the grassroots and legislative levels. The Member of County Assembly (MCA) seat is by far the most pursued position, with 89 candidates vying for it. 15 candidates vied for Women Representative, 7 for MP, and there were even single entries for high-level executive roles like President and Deputy President. In Nairobi, while the MCA seat is the most popular, there is a wider variety of seats being contested (Women Rep, MP,

etc.) compared to smaller counties where candidates focus almost exclusively on MCA roles.

6.1.6 Election year vied

A significant number of women (78) did not mention which year they vied in. Of those who disclosed, 7 women ran in both 2017 and 2022 indicative of a group of seasoned aspirants who are building long-term political capital and name recognition. This represents a 328% increase in identifiable first-time or one-time candidates in 2022 compared to 2017 (30 versus 7) and it highlights an uptake of women's interest in elective politics.

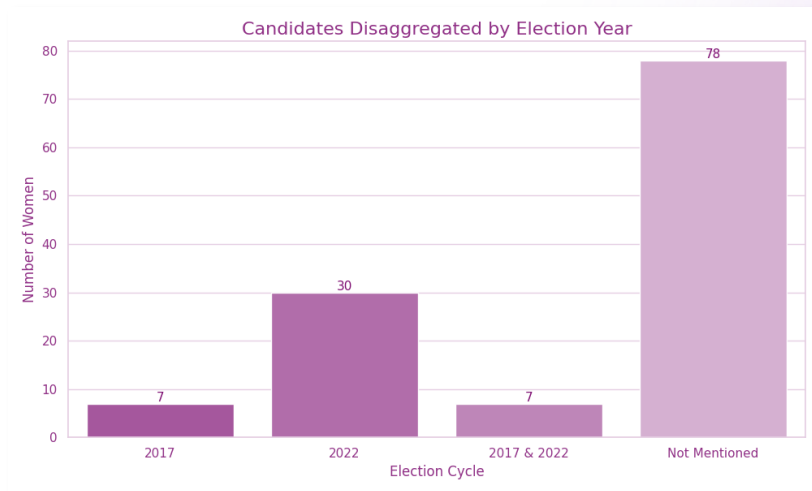
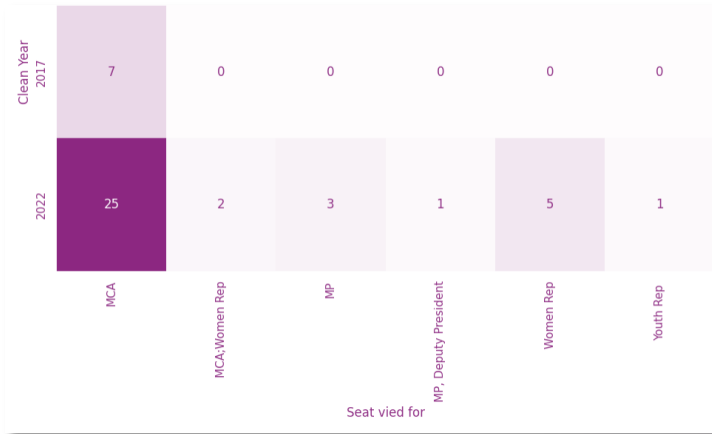


Figure 8: Respondents disaggregated by election year

6.1.7 Election year vs. Seats vied for

Of those who responded, the MCA seat remains the most consistently sought-after position across different election cycles (2017, 2022). Higher-level seats (women rep, MP) also saw a surge in 2022, showing a growing appetite for legislative roles among this group.



As shown in figure 9, the majority of the respondents did not specify the seat they vied for in the year(s) they vied.

Figure 9: Election Year vs. Seat Vied For

6.1.8 Education level vs. seat vied for

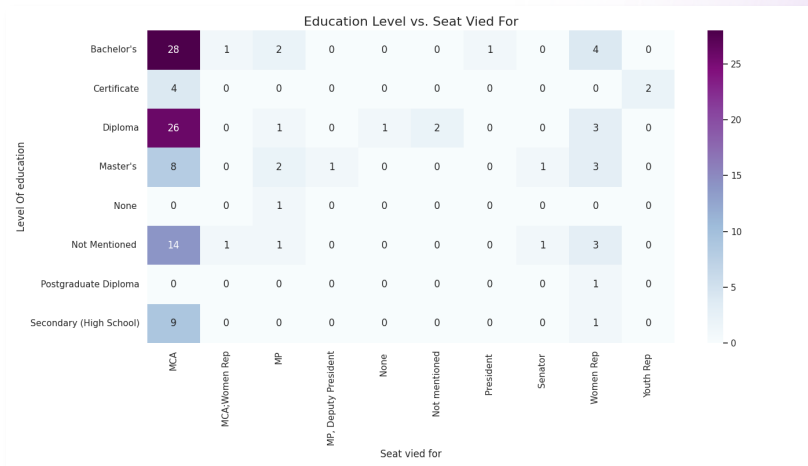


Figure 10: Education level vs. seat vied for

As shown in figure 10, there is a clear academic trend among aspirants for specific seats. All education levels are represented in the MCA level but the highest concentration holds Bachelor's Degrees or Diplomas. Women Rep, MP candidates almost exclusively hold Bachelor's or Master's Degrees,

6.1.9 Professional Backgrounds (Primary & Secondary Occupations)

As shown in figure 11, the candidate pool is professionally diverse, with a significant tilt toward entrepreneurship and community service. Business/entrepreneurship is the leading primary occupation, followed by education and health professionals. This suggests that many candidates are financially independent or have community-facing roles that serve as a springboard for politics. Many candidates maintain secondary roles, often in business or community development, indicating a high level of multitasking and community engagement outside their main jobs. The side activities underscore their role in building political networks.

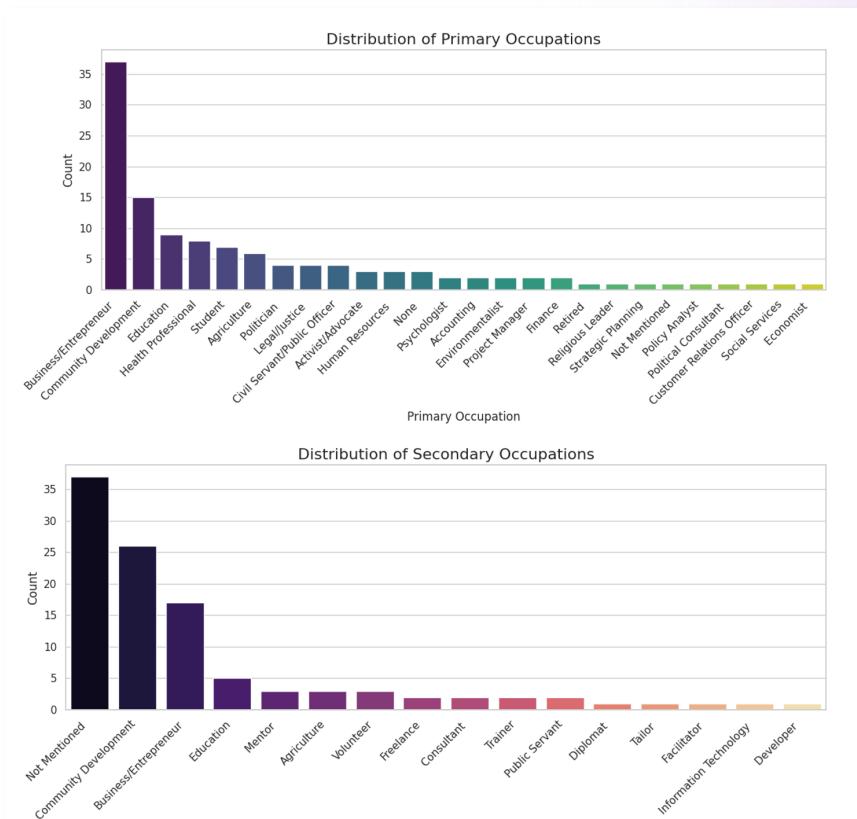


Figure 11: Distribution of primary and secondary occupations of respondents

6.1.10 Age distribution by seat vied for

The age distribution varies significantly depending on the position sought. MCA candidates have a wide age range, with many young aspirants starting in their early 20s. As expected, youth rep candidates are concentrated in the lower age bracket (early 20s) while the women rep / and MP seats tend to attract slightly older on average (mid-30s to 40s), reflecting the time needed to build the political capital and professional credentials required for these competitive seats.

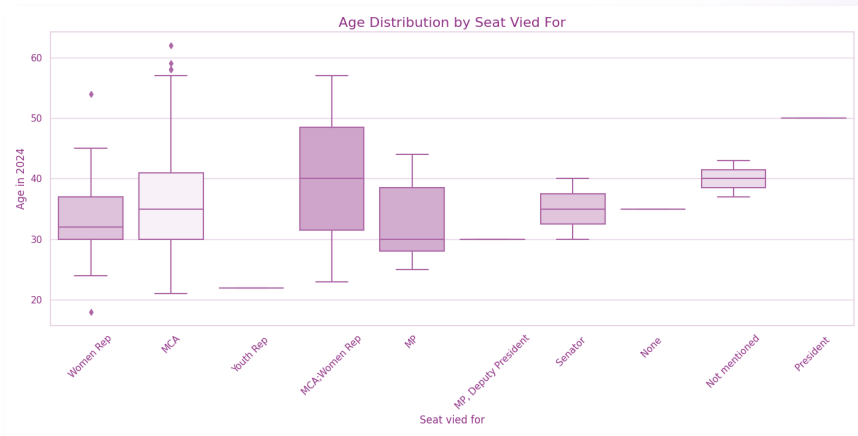


Figure 12: Age distribution by seat vied for

6.1.11 Current state of occupation / leadership

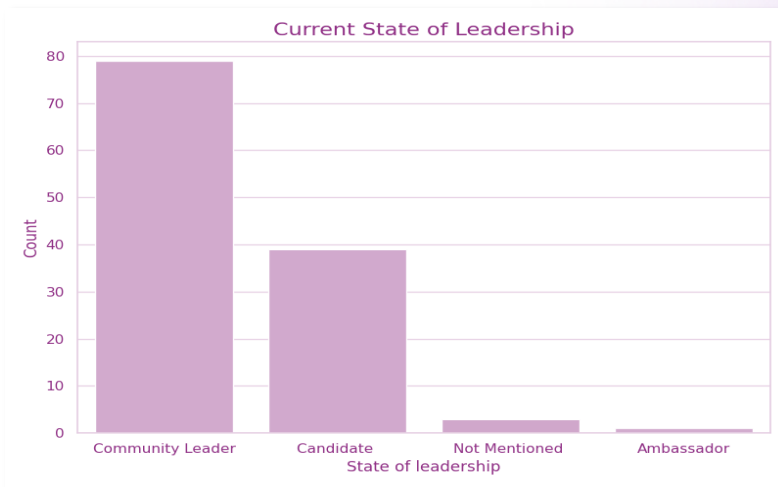



Figure 13: Current state of leadership



The political realities after campaigns are interesting to note. Figure 13 shows occupations that those surveyed defaulted to. Most became community leaders (79) i.e. 65% while a big group (39) i.e. 32% mentioned that they were candidates for the 2027 elections. 1 was appointed as an ambassador while 3 did not mention. This graph is reflective of the broader labor-market risks associated with entering electoral politics, particularly for salaried professionals. For teachers, health workers, development practitioners, and other formally employed individuals, political participation can interrupt career trajectories in ways that are difficult to reverse. Re-entry into formal employment after an electoral loss is often fraught with stigma, professional displacement, and reputational reclassification, where former candidates are perceived primarily as “politicians” rather than as professionals with transferable skills and sectoral expertise. This dynamic renders elective leadership a disproportionately risky undertaking for professionals, whose livelihoods depend on institutional credibility, stable contracts, and predictable career progression.

Politics therefore becomes comparatively more accessible to businesswomen and entrepreneurs, whose economic independence provides greater flexibility, financial cushioning, and autonomy over their time. In a political environment, electoral competition is costly, unpredictable, and weakly institutionalized around private capital and informal income streams function as de facto entry requirements into political office. As a result, business and community engagement become the default landing grounds after campaigns. This structural asymmetry produces a quiet but consequential distortion in political recruitment. While professionals and community development practitioners are often deeply embedded in grassroots service delivery and civic engagement, they continue to face both material and reputational barriers that limit their political entry and post-electoral reintegration. The political system thus not only filters who can afford to run for office, but also who can afford to lose thereby narrowing the social and occupational diversity of women able to sustain long-term political ambition.

6.2 A Synthesis of the Narratives

6.2.1 Motivation for Vying – The Driving Forces Behind Women’s Political Participation

The decision by women to vie for political office is rarely impulsive. Rather, it is shaped by a powerful convergence of personal experience, community demand, social justice ideals, and a desire to correct systemic failure. An analysis of the responses provided by women candidates reveals a broad and layered spectrum of motivations, many of which cut across regions, age, and educational background. The core themes that emerged from the respondents as to why women vie for political seats include:

a) Community-Centered Leadership as a Launchpad for Political Aspirations

The centrality of grassroots engagement and leadership as both a preparatory and legitimizing space for political ambition was a recurring theme. These women did not wake up one day and decide to enter politics. They were drawn in by a longstanding commitment to solving local challenges, supporting marginalized groups, and responding to the persistent failures of elected leaders to deliver basic services.

Many began their journeys in informal leadership spaces such as organizing Chamas, mobilizing self-help groups, mentoring youth, offering psychosocial support to women in distress, and initiating education and sanitation projects, to mention a few. Their eventual candidacy was therefore community-driven as much as it was self-initiated. One respondent encapsulated this trajectory by stating:



"Having lived in Makadara for 20 years, I was deeply involved in community work such as youth and women's empowerment through Chamas and self-help groups. My decision to run was driven by community demand."

This embeddedness in community life gave rise to a form of leadership that was experiential, relational, and service-oriented, rooted in trust cultivated over time. Respondents spoke less of political party affiliations and more of their everyday proximity to community needs and the sense of duty it produced. Two women emphasized:

“I wanted to serve my community, particularly women facing challenges in the slums,” while another declared: “My desire was to empower grassroots women and youth.”



The transition from the informal organizing to seeking a formal leadership position often stemmed from deep frustration with the failures of existing political actors. As one participant noted, her community’s challenges included poor infrastructure, unemployment, and lack of services, which were not abstract policy problems but daily realities she had already been working to alleviate. As such, she felt compelled to vie because of:



“A desire to bring leadership and positive change, especially in a community facing various challenges without proper representation.”

Several women explicitly framed their candidacies as a moral obligation to their communities, a civic duty of care that blurs the boundary between political leadership and community service. For these women, then, politics was not an entry point into leadership but a formalization of the leadership they were already practicing. Their legitimacy was not conferred by party structures or elite endorsements, but by lived relationships and years of unpaid, often invisible, labor.

These reasons challenge the prevailing conceptions of political ambition as merely opportunistic. What emerges here is a redefinition of political aspiration rooted in the desire to scale impact and institutionalize the values that had guided their prior community work. One respondent said:



“I wanted to make a difference in my ward... to improve leadership and ensure accountability at a much larger scale than I have been doing as a community worker.”

These women’s motivations reveal a leadership model of development that is based on community trust and collective hope, to gain the power to correct power’s absence in the spaces that they shape as much as they were shaped by those spaces.

b) Gender Equity and the Drive to Challenge Patriarchy

A second dominant theme emerging from the narratives is the conscious resistance of patriarchal exclusion, and the drive for gender equity within political spaces. For many respondents, vying for office was not merely a pursuit of electoral success, it was an act of political defiance, to deliberately challenge the entrenched norms that have historically sidelined women from positions of formal power. Interviewees consistently underscored the double invisibilities faced by young women marginalized by both age and gender. The act of vying was therefore layered with symbolic resistance. To be a young woman candidate was not just to demand representation, but to embody a counter-narrative, that leadership could, and should, reflect the complexity and diversity of the populations it serves. The women’s motivation was therefore rooted in a desire to dismantle gendered hierarchies and increase women’s visibility in decision-making. One respondent explicitly described her candidacy as a response to “cultural patriarchy”. Another woman stated unequivocally:

“I wanted to challenge the gender imbalance in politics, where men often take credit for the work done by women.”



Their emphasis was not on merely increasing numbers of women in office, but on altering the ideological and structural landscape in which leadership is imagined and practiced. This assertion also captures a common grievance among the women interviewed - the systematic erasure of their contributions within both communities organizing and political party structures. Another put it more broadly while citing inspiration from feminist movements and a commitment to improving women’s representation:



“I was motivated by a desire to challenge gender barriers in Kenyan politics”

This drive to challenge patriarchy was not expressed only in abstract ideological terms. It was rooted in personal encounters with exclusion, erasure, and marginalization. Respondents shared how their aspirations were often dismissed, their ideas undervalued, and their presence in political spaces undermined. One woman reflected on how “women’s challenges in leadership” compelled her to enter the race not merely for symbolic representation, but to open space for other women to be heard.

Some respondents linked their political ambitions to specific social injustices affecting women, particularly in low-income communities that prevent women from attaining gender equity. One participant explained:

“I wanted to address issues affecting widows, orphans, and underprivileged members of the community,” while another pointed to the urgency of “addressing societal issues, particularly those affecting women and girls, such as early pregnancies and lack of education which hinder young women from enjoying a good life like their male counterparts.”



These motivations illustrate how gendered experiences of vulnerability and injustice were converted into political platforms, positioning women as both advocates and agents of systemic change.

Many women also expressed a desire to redefine leadership away from dominant models of authority that are extractive, to those that empower. One respondent noted that her aim was to:



“Represent youth and women and improve economic opportunities,” while another emphasized “I wanted to inspire women and address societal challenges.”

These aspirations illustrate a feminist ethic of care, highlighting the intention to foster responsible representation, structural inclusion, economic justice, and autonomy. Crucially, their motivations were not framed as individual quests for power, but as collective interventions aimed at transforming the political culture.

Thus, it is clear that these women are seeking to interrogate, disrupt, and reconstruct the political system.

c) The Urgency of Youth Representation and Economic Inclusion

An urgent, cross-cutting motivation among the women candidates was the desire to dismantle the structural exclusion of youth particularly young women from political and economic life. Far from being peripheral, youth inclusion emerged as a central political ethic, deeply bound to the broader struggle for gender equity, development, and justice.

For many of the women interviewed, vying for political office was not only a personal assertion of agency, it was a deliberate act of creating space for the next generation. Their ambition was generational - to interrupt cycles of exclusion and inject youthful perspectives into governance processes that have long rendered young people invisible. Their lived experiences of marginalization formed both the emotional bedrock and intellectual architecture of their campaigns. Others, while older, expressed deep concern over the compounding crises facing youth, including skyrocketing unemployment, inadequate access to quality education, and lack of health services. One candidate highlighted the proliferation of school dropouts in her ward stating:

“Young people have no access to opportunities or direction.”
Another one added, “youth are absent from county budget forums and public participation spaces. That means they are excluded from decisions that most affect their futures.”



These were not isolated observations but diagnostics of systemic neglect, rendered all the more powerful when voiced by those who are most affected by that neglect. Unlike political actors who reduce youth issues to merely rhetoric or give symbolic and tokenistic interventions, these women envisioned concrete, scalable interventions that are community led and owned such as vocational training centers, enterprise incubation hubs, community innovation labs, and talent development programs. These agendas championed by young women -tended to be more holistic and socially embedded, linking youth empowerment with broader themes of gender justice, intergenerational solidarity, and equitable development. The solutions would also contribute to redistribution of resources, anchored in the belief that youth are not

passive recipients of policy, but active agents of societal transformation. This reflects a pivotal shift toward issue-based leadership, where youth concerns are understood as opportunities for building community resilience and long-term economic inclusion.

In this light, these women saw themselves not merely as political aspirants, but as architects of inclusion, designing a governance future that centers youth energy, creativity, and aspirations as fundamental to national progress. Through their bids for office, they sought to redefine political legitimacy itself, not as age, experience, or elite lineage, but as the ability to imagine and advocate for a society where all generations, especially the most neglected, can thrive.

d) Governance Reform and the Desire to Disrupt the Status Quo

One of the most pronounced and consistent motivations expressed by the women who vied for political office was a deep dissatisfaction with the failures of existing governance systems. The interviews revealed a widespread disillusionment with elected officials who had abandoned their mandates, failed to deliver services, or remained distant and inaccessible to their constituents. For many respondents, this governance vacuum became the catalytic point, not just to critique but for action. Some women said:



“I wanted to improve governance efficiency and public service delivery, inspired by my experience in leadership and advocacy for good governance.” Another echoed: “I saw the challenges in my community and the lack of proper representation, so I decided to offer leadership.”

For many, the call for reforms was not abstract or theoretical, but grounded in daily proximity to poor infrastructure, misallocated resources, and citizen neglect. One respondent explained her motivation as a:

“Desire to address challenges faced by local residents and provide impactful leadership,” while another said she sought to “improve governance and community welfare.”



Such responses position these women as problem-solvers operating at the intersection of policy failure and community expectation. Crucially, these frustrations were often paired with prior leadership or advocacy experience, indicating a preparedness to govern. One woman cited her background in advocacy and governance as the bedrock of her candidacy. Others, similarly, referenced years of work with self-help groups, education initiatives, and grassroots networks, from which they gained insights into governance gaps and institutional weaknesses. This convergence of lived experience, political awareness, and service orientation underscores a critical distinction of being able and equipped for reform. As one respondent put it, her goal was to:



“Offer transformative leadership and address youth concerns, particularly where existing leaders had failed.” Another emphasized her intention to “bridge the gap between the community and county government,”

These sentiments revealed a recurring theme of restoring the social contract between citizens and the state. In this light, these candidates represent a grassroots-driven, reform-oriented political consciousness. The women in this study articulate a vision of leadership that is service-based rather than power-centric, reformist rather than elitist, and grounded in ethical responsibility to the communities they come from. It is an intentional reimagining of what governance should look like.

e) Personal Stories and the Politics of Lived Experience

Another powerful and often under-acknowledged theme was the deeply personal nature of political motivation. For many of the women who entered political contests, the impulse to vie did not begin with ideology or party alignment, it began with lived experiences. Some women were compelled by the cumulative weight of witnessing everyday injustice in their immediate environments. Invoked by direct encounters with poverty, domestic violence, and depression as key motivators, they reflected how proximity to suffering often matured into civic obligation. Their political ambition was not external to these realities it was born from them. One respondent reflected:



“As someone growing up in the slums, I wanted to serve my community, particularly women facing challenges in the slums, because of what my mother went through.” Another participant cited her personal engagement in “helping women with issues like depression, domestic violence, and poverty, because of how these things ravaged my family”

Respondents also pointed to their own positionality within marginal or excluded groups as sources of political consciousness. One woman explicitly stated:

“I have members of my family that live with a disability. I see firsthand how policy exclusion disadvantages their lives every day and I have to do something about it.”



These testimonies reveal how embodied experience became a site of political knowledge, turning personal marginalization into platforms for structural advocacy.

Others described how formative personal losses or early socialization shaped their political identities. Here, political aspiration was entangled with memory, grief, and a sense of inherited duty. One woman named her late mother as a pivotal influence, stating her entry into politics was:



“Inspired by my late mother and a desire for community service.”

Several respondents acknowledged the influence of teachers, mentors, and local women activists whose “courage had quietly shaped their worldviews”, suggesting that even in the absence of institutional mentorship, interpersonal models of resilience and service provided a powerful template for leadership.

In totality, these narratives reveal a direct connection between personal experiences and empathy with political mission. These stories are not anecdotal footnotes to their campaigns, they are epistemological anchors that infuse their political participation with authenticity and purpose.

In contrast to the professionalized and often detached profile of the conventional politician, these women emerge as embodied agents of transformation, whose leadership is steeped in memory, pain, and radical hope. Their entry into politics is therefore an act of claiming or reclaiming power where it was once denied, withheld, or misused.

f) Leadership as Empowerment (for Self and Others)

While many respondents emphasized community service, governance reform, or feminist resistance as motivations for entering politics, a subtler but equally important theme emerged around leadership as a space of personal transformation and empowerment. For these women, political participation was not only about serving others, it was also about claiming space, voice, and agency in a system that had long denied them visibility.

Several women expressed an interest in growing their own confidence, influence, and capacity, viewing politics as a legitimate avenue for self-actualization. One respondent, for instance, cited:

The “belief in leadership and desire to make a difference in my ward.” Another noted her “love for politics and desire to empower youth economically,”



These sentiments articulate both a personal and political intention as public service. Yet even where personal ambition was articulated, it was rarely individualistic. Women consistently linked their empowerment to broader symbolic representation understanding that their candidacies were also acts of visibility for those who had historically been excluded. As some respondents framed leadership as both aspirational and inspirationally contagious. One woman said:



“I vied to inspire young women and lead the way in a patriarchal society.” Another aimed “to inspire women and address societal challenges,”

This logic of empowerment extended beyond formal office to the everyday act of showing up. The women positioned their campaigns as proof of possibility, especially for those who had never imagined themselves as leaders. One woman emphasized that by running for office, her goal was to:

“Ensure young girls in my community see someone who looks like them becoming a leader, so that they do not only think that leaders are just men”



In this case, the act of vying itself served as a mirror and a message - that leadership was not the preserve of some privileged individuals, but a rightful claim for women shaped by struggle, resilience, and ordinary life.

What also emerges here is a quiet but radical rejection of the narrative that women must only seek leadership in service to others. While collective uplift remained central, these women also claimed politics as a space for self-growth and rightful ambition - dimensions long naturalized for male politicians but often viewed as selfish when pursued by women. Their candidacies disrupted this double standard and advanced a more expansive vision of female political subjectivity - one in which self-empowerment and collective empowerment are not opposites but mutually reinforcing goals.

6.2.2 Campaign Strategies

Women’s campaign strategies during political contests were as diverse as their backgrounds and motivations. The analysis reveals a dynamic blend of grassroots mobilization, social networks, organizational support, and personal sacrifice. While some employed highly structured strategies, others navigated campaigns with minimal resources, relying on community goodwill, religious networks, and digital tools. These strategies not only reflect the candidates’ adaptability but also expose systemic barriers in political financing and party support. Several core themes emerged from their accounts.

a) Ground-Level Mobilization: Door-to-Door as the Anchor

The most dominant strategy across board was door-to-door engagement. Candidates consistently prioritized personal interaction with voters walking from household to household, participating in small group meetings, and speaking in community forums. This approach allowed them to build trust, listen to community concerns directly, and present their manifestos in an intimate setting.

Women emphasized that face-to-face interaction was especially crucial in areas where formal campaign infrastructure was lacking or inaccessible. Despite limited financial backing, many chose this method over expensive rallies, finding it more effective in reaching undecided or marginalized voters. In some cases, candidates worked independently; in others, they built small teams or relied on volunteers from the community to support their outreach. One respondent said:



“I had to do the campaigns myself, door-to-door. Even when my mobilizers failed me, I showed up because people needed to see who I was.”

The prioritization of door-to-door engagement over traditional mass rallies fundamentally redefines political legitimacy by shifting the focus from performative, elite-driven platforms to deeply relational and human-centered strategies. This strategy functions as a vital democratic equalizer, bypassing the prohibitive costs and physical insecurities of the masculinized public square to intentionally include ‘invisible voters like the elderly, the disabled, and those burdened by domestic roles, within the safety of the private sphere. By politicizing the domestic space, women candidates bridge the gap between private struggles and public policy, fostering a resilient economy rooted in mutual trust rather than financial patronage. Ultimately, this intimate approach transforms the campaign into a site of authentic accountability, ensuring that governance is grounded in the lived realities of the community while providing a strategic pathway for young women to compete effectively, despite systemic financial and structural exclusion.

b) Leveraging Community and Faith-Based Networks

Beyond the door-to-door model, many candidates drew heavily on **churches**, **Chamas**, **women’s groups**, and **youth organizations**. Churches, particularly

Catholic and Pentecostal networks, emerged as safe and influential spaces where candidates could present their vision. Women's groups served as effective organizing units, offering both moral and logistical support. In some cases, candidates held “Kamkunjis,” joined funeral and wedding committees, and used these culturally embedded spaces to connect with people. Some respondents said:

“The women networks of our larger church were instrumental in providing already organized campaign platforms.” Another said “I worked closely with church groups and youth barazas. These were the spaces where real conversations could happen.”



This network-based strategy highlights how embedded social capital functions as political currency. Women did not simply "borrow" networks, they built and sustained them over time through previous community involvement, which later converted into electoral capital. Leveraging community and faith-based networks transforms political discourse from a distant, partisan exercise into a culturally embedded dialogue rooted in existing social trust and shared moral values. By utilizing ‘safe spaces’ such as churches, chamas, and funeral committees, women candidates effectively bypass the aggressive, male-dominated public square that is masculine and instead tap into relational power structures that offer immediate legitimacy and logistical support. These networks function as vital organizing units that bridge the gap between abstract governance and the "politics of care."

C) Resourcefulness in the Face of Financial Constraints

Most women faced significant challenges with financing their campaigns. Many operated without strong party support, relying instead on personal savings, friends, family, and small donations. Some held mini-fundraisers, while others received limited support from NGOs (such as branded material or transportation stipends). Financial strain dictated much of the strategies used with some candidates opting to attend other politicians' meetings instead of hosting their own, to save on cost.

Others noted the difficulty of sustaining campaign momentum without consistent funding, especially when it came to paying mobilizers or producing campaign materials. Despite this, many adapted creatively, such as offering basic incentives (e.g., transport fare, food, or small branded tokens) or organizing low-cost events like football tournaments to engage youth.



“I couldn’t afford rallies, so I joined existing meetings and used the moment to share my vision.”

The imperative for resourcefulness in the face of financial constraints forces a radical shift in political discourse from a *capital-heavy* model to a *creativity-heavy* one, where strategic adaptation replaces traditional spending. This financial exclusion necessitates a move away from expensive buys toward the volunteer economy, where personal savings and micro-donations from family and friends become the bedrock of a campaign. Ultimately, while this forced resourcefulness showcases the grit of women candidates, it also highlights a systemic barrier where the lack of sustainable funding limits a candidate’s ability to control her own narrative or maintain campaign momentum, often reducing her to creative survival rather than equitable competition.

d) Strategic Alliances and Political Piggybacking

Some women aligned themselves with more prominent political figures or parties to boost visibility and benefit from broader campaign infrastructure. In many cases, this alignment helped with name recognition, access to audiences, and sometimes resource sharing. Others joined party structures as a pathway to legitimacy but remained cautious of the internal challenges that came with party politics including unfair nomination processes and tokenistic inclusion.

A few strategically rode the momentum of presidential or gubernatorial candidates, co-branding their campaigns to mirror the higher-profile figures, especially when vying under the same party.

“I aligned with a national-level candidate who believed in my vision - that’s how I got noticed in areas I couldn’t reach alone.”



Strategic alliances and political piggybacking serve as essential survival tactics that reshape political discourse from a battle of individual resources to a narrative of shared legitimacy and tactical visibility. For young women operating outside lucrative patronage networks, aligning with seasoned, high-profile figures allows them to

‘borrow’ established campaign infrastructures and name recognition that would otherwise be financially or structurally inaccessible. This creates a discourse of co-branding, where the candidate’s local vision is grafted onto broader national momentum to overcome the exclusion of the masculinized political arena. However, this strategy introduces a complex tension. While it provides a vital platform to reach distant audiences, it often forces women to navigate the double-edged sword of party gatekeeping, where they must balance the benefits of visibility against the risks of tokenism and unfair nomination processes that can undermine their independent political agency, and political legitimacy.

e) Digital Mobilization and Media Use

Digital tools especially WhatsApp, Facebook, and local radio stations played a growing role, particularly among younger candidates or those running in urban and peri-urban settings. WhatsApp groups were commonly used to coordinate mobilizers, share campaign messages, and gather feedback from the field. Facebook was useful for announcements and photo-based updates, while local vernacular radio helped reach rural populations.

However, digital campaigning was used selectively. Some candidates were cautious, citing exposure risks, online harassment, or lack of digital literacy among their core constituents. In contrast, a few managed to build entire outreach structures virtually, using social media to amplify visibility and connect with supporters



“I began with WhatsApp and Facebook. With posters and a few videos, I could reach people even when I had no fuel to travel.”

The implications of digital mobilization and media use in political discourse signify a transformative yet precarious shift toward decentralized, high-speed communication that both expands and threatens women's political participation. While digital and local media platforms provide essential, low-cost avenues for young women to coordinate mobilizers, share manifestos, and bypass traditional media gatekeepers, they simultaneously serve as primary sites for gendered disinformation and online violence. This digital duality creates a selective engagement pattern where candidates must weigh the benefits of increased visibility and virtual outreach against

the high risks of coordinated cyberstalking, doxxing, and reputational damage intended to silence them.

Ultimately, while digital tools offer a strategic equalizer for those in urban or tech-literate settings, their use in political discourse underscores an urgent need for multi-stakeholder interventions, including specialized content moderation and strengthened cybercrime laws to ensure that the digital sphere becomes a site of empowerment rather than a systemic mechanism for exclusion.

f) Empowerment through Development Projects

Several women used community development initiatives as part of their campaign strategy. These included organizing mentorship sessions, offering skill-building workshops, distributing food or sanitary products, or helping residents access government services. While these efforts served campaign goals, they also reflected the candidates' ongoing commitment to social development. Rather than transactional handouts, these were positioned as sustainable, community-driven interventions. In many cases, the candidate's long-standing role in development work gave credibility to their leadership aspirations.

“Before politics, I helped women with small businesses and girls in school. During campaigns, I just expanded that support.”



The implications of empowerment through development projects in political discourse signify a shift from transactional handouts to a model of service-based legitimacy, where a candidate's authority is built through long-term, tangible contributions to community welfare. By integrating mentorship sessions, skill-building workshops, and essential service provision into their campaigns, women candidates frame political leadership as a natural extension of the social development work they were already performing. This approach allows candidates to bypass the traditional patronage economy and instead establish a politics of care that is both sustainable and community-driven, providing the necessary credibility to challenge entrenched male-dominated hierarchies. These initiatives serve as a strategic "launchpad," enabling women to demonstrate their capacity for effective governance and service delivery long before the ballots are cast.

g) Organized Teams and Campaign Structures

While many campaigns were informal, some candidates built structured campaign teams. These teams were often segmented by ward, constituency, or sub-county. Leadership structures were created, with representatives for women, youth, and PWDs. In some cases, strategy teams coordinated media engagement, grassroots events, and fundraising efforts.

Although only a few could afford this level of structure, those who did were often repeat candidates or had stronger financial or institutional backing.



“We had a representative in every ward - they helped relay our message and keep us grounded in what voters were saying.”

The implications of organized teams and campaign structures in political discourse represent professionalization and institutionalization where leadership is modelled as a collective rather than a solitary endeavor. By segmenting teams into specialized roles for women, youth, and PWDs, candidates move beyond symbolic representation to create mini-governance structures that mirror the inclusive society they intend to build. This strategic organization allows for a more sophisticated, discourse, which lends the candidate a higher degree of perceived legitimacy and readiness in the eyes of the electorate.

However, the disparity in who can afford such structures creates a tiered political discourse. While repeat candidates with institutional backing use these teams to sustain momentum, first-time or under-resourced young women remain trapped in informal survival campaigning. This underscores a systemic gap where the ability to project professionalism is often tied to financial privilege, further necessitating a shift toward building community-owned campaign structures that can provide this institutional weight without the heavy overhead costs.

The campaign strategies employed by women across Kenya reflect ingenuity, resilience, and deep community ties. Whether through grassroots engagement, faith-based alliances, or lean digital operations, women adapted to the limitations of political financing and structural exclusion with remarkable agility. Yet, the widespread reliance on personal networks and unpaid labor underscores a broader

issue: the absence of institutional and financial support for young women candidates. Strengthening funding mechanisms, training programs, and political party accountability will be key to enabling more women to compete fairly and sustainably in future elections.

6.2.3 Hand holding and Support System

Women's campaigns existed along a wide support continuum from deep isolation to collective solidarity. On one end, candidates described their journeys as self-driven and unsupported, relying on volunteers or personal networks. Some had no mentorship, and several highlighted that women themselves were hesitant to offer support, especially when finances were limited. This loneliness was starkly felt by those who entered politics without established ties or political legacies.

On the other end, strong support systems, though rare formed around family, friends, church groups, youth movements, or NGOs. For example, some women received significant psychological and logistical support from parents or siblings. Others cited family abandonments and ostracization because of daring to engage in politics. Others cited financial contributions and moral encouragement from chamas, community-based organizations, and even strangers who “believed in the vision.”


a) Family: The First and Sometimes the Lasting Line of Support

Family featured heavily as a significant pillar of support though inconsistently. Parental and spousal support was mentioned as both foundational and transformative. One candidate emphasized the critical role her parents and siblings played emotionally and financially. They:

“Financed the campaign, supported her candidacy through their social networks, cooked daily for her campaign teams and even hired goons to provide the much-needed security for her”.



Another credited her in-laws and children as campaign anchors. However, many women noted initial resistance from their families, especially in the early stages of their political journey. In some cases, support only came “later” or after visible momentum in the campaign. Several women identified spouses as moral and logistical partners - offering prayer, financial input, and physical presence during



campaigns as well as managing care duties at home. This was particularly important where extended families withheld support.

When family support faltered, friendship networks, *chamas*, civil society organizations, spiritual leaders and church members stepped in. These groups often served as: surrogate sources of family-like encouragement, emotional anchors, sustaining candidates during demoralizing moments; financial partners, especially in grassroots campaigns with low budgets; and mobilization arms, helping women reach voters and build legitimacy. *Chamas* were particularly important, acting as both resource pools and trust circles. Some candidates leaned on women's business networks, while others acknowledged the support of organized civil society and CBOs. Support from other women leaders, like Esther Passaris or political sisters in WALA, signaled how symbolic mentorship from prominent female figures could ignite confidence.

The role of family in political discourse functions as a primary gatekeeper of legitimacy, where the domestic sphere becomes the first battleground for a candidate's political survival. When family support is robust, providing "hidden" infrastructure such as daily catering for teams, financial backing, and even security, it serves as a transformative foundation that lowers the cost of entry. However, the prevalence of initial resistance from spouses or parents highlights how young women must often 'win at home' before they can compete in public, reinforcing politics as a deeply gendered negotiation of family honor and care duties. When this primary line of support falters, the shift toward surrogate family networks signifies a radical reorganization of support to fill the emotional and logistical vacuum. Ultimately, these dynamics illustrate that for young women, the private family unit is an intensely political space that can either act as a launchpad or a significant structural hurdle to their public ambition.

b) Mentorship: Scarce, Inaccessible, or Male-Dominated

Perhaps the most concerning pattern was the widespread lack of political mentorship. The lack of structured political mentorship remains a strategic vacuum in Kenya's political empowerment ecosystem, significantly heightening the risk of failure for young women. Many aspirants explicitly report receiving no sustained guidance, as seasoned female politicians often view newcomers as competitors rather than protégés. In the absence of a formal pipeline, some women are forced into

high-risk ‘informal’ mentorship from male figures, which frequently comes at a non-committal or exploitative cost, including sexual favors and sextortion. This systemic abandonment means that while young women may be trained in technical campaign skills, they are often left without strategic guidance, protection, or insider knowledge necessary to navigate informal power structures. In a political ecosystem where networks determine access, the absence of mentorship becomes not merely a gap, but a structural disqualification.

Where support does exist, it is largely decentralized and deeply community-dependent, relying on the emotional, logistical, and moral backing of family networks, church groups, and youth associations. In rare but pivotal cases, strategic mentorship from former leaders or symbolic validation from a pastor or respected elder provides the essential legitimacy and resources needed to navigate a campaign. Ultimately, the current landscape reveals that formal political systems, particularly parties, have largely failed to nurture their female candidates. For most women, it is not the institutional party structures that facilitate their rise, it is their resilience, the community goodwill and the informal social capital they have built over time.

6.2.4 Mobilization of Campaign Funds

a) Funding Sources and Patterns

The overwhelming majority of **women relied on personal savings and informal networks, with little to no institutional or political party support.** The key sources of funding shown in figure 14 were coded into the following categories (not mutually exclusive).

Figure 14: Funding Sources for women in Politics

Funding Source	Percentage
Personal savings	97.6%
Family and close relatives	67.2%
Friends and well-wishers	56.0%
Community fundraising / chamas / churches	27.2%
NGO support or sponsorships	9.6%
Political party funding	4.8%

Business income / farming / side hustles	8.0%
Loans (formal and informal)	6.4%
Diaspora support / sponsors from abroad	4.0%

Most respondents described the campaign financing process as personally costly, emotionally taxing, and institutionally unsupported. Their narratives reflect a pattern of self-reliance driven by necessity rather than choice, as political parties and systemic support were largely absent. Respondents noted:

“I relied on personal savings and family contributions,”
 “I funded most of my campaign but I also received financial support from friends, especially those abroad.”
 “I used my savings and support from chamas (women’s groups) and also relied on personal loans from friends, promising to repay them later.”



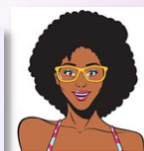
Several respondents tried to be **innovative**. A few organized tea parties, WhatsApp group drives, or church support meetings, but these efforts were modest in scale and raised insufficient resources. One woman recalled:



“I relied on community support and when that was not forthcoming, I sold bananas to raise funds.” Despite all these efforts, I still could not meet the financial demands that come with a political campaign.”

Almost all women said that the available **financial resources were insufficient**. A few women who received some NGO or external support described it as helpful, but not nearly enough to offset the broader financial burden. Even diaspora-based sponsors provided only partial support, leaving candidates to patch together funds from multiple informal sources. Some respondents stated bluntly:

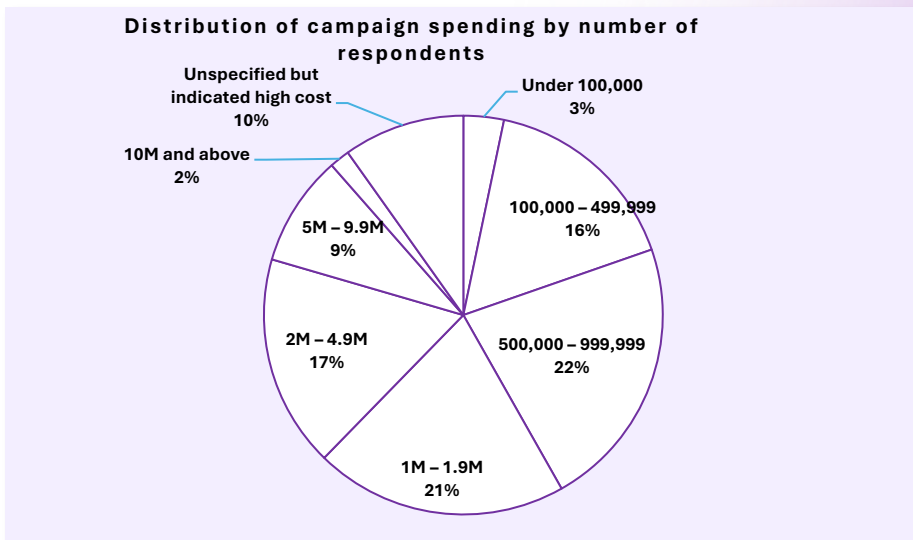
“I could not afford to hire agents for polling stations in 2017 and 2022.”
 “I struggled financially, even with personal resources, significant donations from an NGO and sponsors like Kingdom Bank.”



b) The cost of political campaigns

Respondents consistently described the financial demands of political campaigning as a substantial and often an overwhelming burden. The cost of political campaigns in Kenya is prohibitive to say the least. According to Karuti & Mboya (2021), and based on a survey of 300 aspirants from the 2017 elections, running for office is a high-stakes, capital-intensive venture that significantly impacts democratic participation. According to this report, the Senate is the most expensive seat to contest (average cost of Kshs. 35.5 million i.e. US\$ 350,000), followed by the Woman Representative (average cost of Kshs. 22.8 million i.e. US\$ 228,000) and Member of Parliament position (average cost of Kshs. 18.2 million i.e. US\$ 182,000). The least cost was incurred by Members of County Assembly (average of Kshs. 3.1 million i.e. US\$ 31,000).

Figure 15: Distribution of Campaign Spending by Cost Range and number of respondents



Most young women in our study did not have these kinds of financial resources referenced by Karuti & Mboya (2021). Those with relatively higher budgets (28% of the respondents) had resources ranging from Kshs. 2 million i.e. US\$ 20,000 to Kshs. 20

million i.e. US\$ 200,000 (reference figure 15 for more disaggregated details)¹. Costs varied widely, ranging from as little as Kshs.10,000 to upwards of Kshs 20 million. However, 42% of the respondents spent between Kshs. 500,000 and Kshs 1.9M. Overall, the spending variance reflects disparities in campaign scale, resources, and candidate backgrounds.

A few candidates demonstrated adaptive budgeting, running leaner campaigns in 2022 than in 2017 e.g., reducing spending from KES 300,000 to KES 50,000 highlighting resourcefulness amid financial limitations.

Top spending categories based on frequency of mention by respondents included: logistics and transport; printing and branding materials; campaign agents' fees; handouts and allowances; security and nomination fees. The respondents however were not forthcoming on exactly how much they spent on each budget item.

c) Exclusion from formal political party financing

Many respondents voiced frustrations at being excluded from formal political party financing, with one noting that her party offered no material help, forcing her to rely entirely on friends and a local support network. One respondent remarked:

“Despite running 3 times now in the same political party, I highly relied on support from men who had higher access than me in the party, for printing campaign materials. There was no significant backing from the political party.”



d) Measures to fill the financial gaps

Respondents took measures to fill the financial gaps. Some respondents end up selling household items, draining family resources, or taking personal loans including informally from shylocks to finance their campaigns. The insufficiency forced most respondents to make painful trade-offs, some of which had dire consequences later on. Some managed their debts post-election through the incomes they were getting, while others faced long-term repayment issues, including selling personal assets to

¹ Please note that the exchange rate used in this narrative is the 2021 rate by Karuti & Mboya (2021) for comparative purposes. In 2026, the exchange rate is Kshs. 130 not Kshs. 100 for 1 US\$).

offset the bills. Some respondents experienced severe post-campaign financial instability. Some respondents said:



“Yes, I incurred debts during the campaign. I borrowed money from friends and promised to repay them...”

“I incurred debts and sold personal assets to finance campaigns”

“I took loans and I had to eventually sell personal assets to settle debts”

“I did not incur debts but I used up all my savings”

“I avoided debt by carefully budgeting my money and exercising strict discipline”

According to Figure 16, 30% of respondents did not incur debt but the narratives show that even for those who avoided direct debt, they often reported substantial financial strain. Eighteen percent (18%) incurred minor/manageable debt, while 17% were unclear about their status. Fourteen percent (14%) did not incur debt but experienced financial strain, while 12% incurred debts of unspecified scale. Nine percent (9%) of the respondents stated that they incurred significant debts.

Figure 16: Status of respondent debt

Debt Status	Percentage
Incurring significant debts	9%
Incurring minor/manageable debts	18%
Incurring debts, unspecified scale	12%
Did not incur debts but experienced financial strain	14%
Did not incur any debts	30%
No mention or unclear	17%

The implications of funding patterns in political discourse reveal a *participation tax* that systematically marginalizes young women, shifting the political narrative from a contest of ideas to a trial of personal financial endurance. With 97.6% of women relying on personal savings and a mere 4.8% receiving political party funding, the discourse is stripped of institutional support, forcing candidates into high-risk "survivalist" financing. This reliance on informal networks, *Chamas*, and the

liquidation of personal assets like land or household items transforms political ambition into a debt-laden venture that often leads to severe post-campaign financial instability.

Consequently, the political discourse becomes exclusionary and elitist. When the "cost of entry" for a Senate seat averages Kshs. 35.5 million while most young women struggle to raise even a fraction of that, the democratic process effectively silences those without inherited wealth or high-net-worth social circles. This financial chasm necessitates a creativity-heavy discourse like selling bananas to fund posters or "piggybacking" on wealthier candidates which, while demonstrating remarkable resilience, ultimately highlights a systemic failure where the lack of enforced campaign finance laws reduces the elective office to a commodity available only to the highest bidder.

6.2.4 Gender based Violence Concerns for Women in Politics

Kenyan women navigating political campaigns in recent elections encountered a range of security threats. Gender-based violence remains a persistent undercurrent in the lived experiences of women who ventured into Kenya's political arena. From the dataset (see figure 17), the following categories of GBV emerged. Note that many women experienced more than one form simultaneously. Some women did not mention GBV at all, partly because they did not want to relive the trauma.

Figure 17: Types of GBV experienced by the respondents

Type of GBV Experienced	Frequency Mentioned
Verbal Harassment / Abuse	70+
Online Bullying / Harassment	35+
Emotional / Psychological Abuse	20+
Societal Bias / Cultural Stigma	45+
Sexual Harassment / Coercion	10+
Physical Violence	7+
None / Not Explicitly Mentioned	20+

This breakdown highlights the pervasiveness of verbal and societal abuse, while also pointing to the underreported but severe forms of sexual and physical violence that

some women endured. Gender-based violence remains a persistent undercurrent in the lived experiences of women who ventured into Kenya’s political arena.

a) Verbal Harassment

The most frequently reported form was verbal harassment, often manifesting in public insults, ridicule, and slander. These were not isolated incidents but embedded in everyday interactions within communities, political rallies, and even campaign teams. Women shared that:



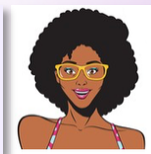
“I faced verbal harassment and betrayal within her campaign team”
“I endured verbal abuse from a political party member”
“I discovered defamatory leaflets being circulated about me”

This is a reminder that violence can come from within, not just from political adversaries. It also underscores how internal party dynamics can be just as hostile as the external public sphere. For many, these attacks were not merely personal affronts but carried sexist undertones that questioned their very presence in the political space.

b) Online bullying and harassment

Alongside verbal abuse was the growing menace of online bullying and harassment, especially through platforms like Facebook and anonymous social media accounts. These digital attacks were often gendered, targeting women's marital status, dress, and perceived morality. Some respondents explained:

“I faced significant online bullying and systemic biases.”
“I experienced online abuse, blackmail, and verbal attacks.”
“I faced stigma and rejection from men and older women,”



For many, the violence online extended beyond words it became a tool for silencing and undermining credibility, especially when coordinated by anonymous users or political opponents. The narratives capture the multilayered nature of online and societal condemnation. The effects of online attacks are devastating yet they go underreported. One woman reported that:



“I was mentally affected by verbal abuse and derogatory comments, especially from people I valued.”

c) Cultural and societal stigma

Cultural and societal stigma remain a profound barrier for women in Kenyan politics, manifesting through deep-seated patriarchal norms and traditionalist language. The level of stigma often correlates with a candidate's personal status, with unmarried, young, or widowed women facing the most intense scrutiny. Unmarried women frequently find their ‘qualification’ questioned based solely on their marital status, while married women navigate a dual-exclusion trap. They are seen as ‘outsiders’ in the communities where they are married and as those who have “left” in their birth communities. For many, a husband’s permission acts as a ‘legitimate covering’ that provides the moral authority required to speak publicly, effectively making patriarchal approval a prerequisite for political access.

Figure 18: Status of Experienced Clannism and Negotiated Democracy

Clannism and Negotiated Democracy	% of Respondents
Faced clanism and/or negotiated democracy	50%
Did not face clanism or found it minimal	22.5%
Did not mention	27.5%

As shown in Figure18, these cultural biases are institutionalized through clannism and negotiated democracy, which function as systemic gatekeepers. Data indicates that 50% of women aspirants directly faced barriers from clan-based politics or negotiated democracy processes. These informal systems often exclude women from critical decision-making forums; for example, many candidates report being barred from elders' meetings where mobilization strategies are finalized. One woman intimidated:

“I couldn’t access the elders' meetings. All mobilization strategies were discussed there, and as a woman, I was not welcome.”



In the context of negotiated democracy - a process ostensibly meant to foster community consensus - women are frequently the ones pressured to step aside or sacrifice their ambitions for the greater good of clan unity, under the guise that they are young and can wait for their turn.

d) Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment appeared across multiple accounts often framed in euphemism or indirect references, possibly due to stigma or fear of reprisal. Some candidates were propositioned in exchange for political favors or campaign support. Many women recounted how they faced inappropriate demands for sexual favors in exchange for support from multiple men. These accounts expose the gendered power dynamics embedded in political gatekeeping where access to resources and endorsements is sometimes traded for submission.

One woman confessed:



“I joined a political party because I knew and respected one of the party leaders in our region. I had requested him to mentor me and he assured me that he would hand hold me. I worked hard on my own to clinch the nomination and on the day, I was to get my certificate, I was asked to go to a certain hotel where the certificates were being issued. On reaching there, I was directed to a certain room where I found the said leader. He made sexual advances and when I declined, he verbally abused me. I never got my certificate and eventually, the nomination certificate was given to someone who never campaigned for the seat. In the appeal process within the party, I faced the same challenge. No one would help unless I ‘complied’. what was worse is that in covering up for their fellow man, they accused me of perhaps tempting him or framing him. The humiliation was too much. That is how I ended up becoming an independent candidate”.

While the prevailing discourse often frames women in politics as survivors of systemic exclusion, there is a complex, darker narrative where the "currency of access" becomes a deliberate, albeit high-stakes, political strategy. In a system

where the "cost of entry" is ridiculously high, some women realize that traditional pathways are practically impassable without immense wealth. For a subset of aspirants, the realization that they cannot "buy" the vote with cash leads to the pragmatic, or painful decision to leverage sexual favors as a powerful political currency to secure resources, endorsements, or prestigious nominations.

This "transactional politics" offers a shortcut to the top, where some women gain access to luxury rewards, campaign financing, and government positions without the grueling grassroots labor typically required. However, this access is rarely a "free gift". It is often a strategic trade-off within a patriarchal political economy that prioritizes submission over merit and it is increasingly being exploited by some aspirants. Respondents did not admit to taking this route but they disclosed that they knew several peers who made a choice to access political leadership through sexual favours.

This narrative exposes a fractured democracy where sextortion and sexual coercion are not just individual harms, but structural tools of gatekeeping. While some may find a temporary foothold through these transactions, the long-term cost is often the erosion of their political agency and the entrenchment of a hostile culture that continues to treat female leadership as a commodity to be traded rather than a right to be exercised.

e) Physical violence

Physical violence was deeply concerning for the respondents. Some faced intimidation to outright assault. Some women reported that:

“I faced a very humiliating scenario. I happened to get access to one ‘*muheshimiwa*’s’ sun roofed car and was given an opportunity to greet the people. As I stood someone from the crowd beneath me and touched me and made inappropriate comment. That was very humiliating”.

“I was once on a caravan and when I was given the microphone to greet the people, someone jumped from the crowd and touched my breasts as they fell on stage. I couldn’t engage after that”



A few women also reported assassination attempts which they escaped by a whisker because they were a political threat to prominent politicians. These incidents were not just threatening to personal safety they were also symbolic acts meant to dissuade women from political visibility.

f) Emotional and psychological toll

The emotional and psychological toll of these experiences emerged vividly across responses. Even in the absence of physical violence, the trauma of constant verbal attacks and social rejection left many mentally strained. Respondents said:




“I did not experience physical violence, but I was psychologically, mentally, and emotionally distressed from negative comments, particularly from people I valued.”

For many women, the emotional abuse stemmed not just from strangers but from party members, friends, or respected elders who expressed disappointment in their political ambitions

Figure 19: Trigger Zones for GBV

Trigger Zones	Notes
Night Campaigning	Fear of attack or harassment limited movement and visibility.
Male-Dominated Spaces	Town halls, party meetings, and public rallies often became very hostile spaces.
Online Platforms	Facebook and WhatsApp were key channels for coordinated smear campaigns.
Rural or High-Tension Areas	Physical insecurity, ethnic tensions, or being blocked during rallies.


Figure 19 outlines a landscape where violence is not random but strategically utilized in specific environments to silence and exclude women from the political process. These "zones" represent a combination of physical, social, and digital spaces where



the risks for women candidates are most acute. The fear of physical attack or sexual harassment during night campaigns severely limits a woman's visibility and mobility. This creates a *participation tax* where women must often end their activities early, while their male counterparts continue to organize, placing women at a distinct strategic disadvantage. Formal political venues such as town halls, party meetings, and public rallies are often transformed into hostile environments intended to intimidate women. In these spaces, violence can manifest as verbal abuse, sexually-laden propaganda, or physical blocking of access to the podium, all aimed at undermining a woman's credibility and authority.

Online Platforms have emerged as critical channels for coordinated smear campaigns. These platforms are used to deploy gendered disinformation, doctored images, and "sextortion" to damage a candidate's reputation. Because digital abuse is permanent and fast-reaching, it often deters women from standing as candidates before they even begin their ground campaigns. In rural or high-tension areas, political competition often intersects with ethnic tensions and physical insecurity. In some regions, such as Meru, gender-based violence has been cited as a primary concern, with gangs reportedly targeting women aspirants to instill fear in them and their families. Ultimately, these trigger zones illustrate that violence against women in politics is a systemic barrier rather than an isolated incident. What begins as digital harassment or verbal abuse in a town hall often escalates into real-world intimidation, creating a cycle of survival that forces women to negotiate their safety at every stage of their political journey.

This data reveals that GBV against women in politics is both multifaceted and systemic presenting itself not just through physical aggression but more commonly through normalized societal behaviors such as verbal abuse, moral policing, cultural stigma, and online bullying. The fact that verbal and psychological abuse were far more prevalent than physical violence does not reduce the severity of harm. Instead, it points to how political spaces are structured to effectively erode women's confidence through humiliation rather than outright physical assault. These experiences are not just reflective of individual hostility, they are embedded in all the spaces (some in more subliminal ways than in others). The findings suggest a need to broaden our understanding of political violence beyond the physical, recognizing that the cumulative weight of these "everyday violence" can be just as silencing. Nearly every candidate experienced some form of gendered insecurity, often



unacknowledged, unreported, and unsupported. The invisibility of emotional and cyber harm underscores the need to broaden how we define "security" for women in politics. Those who did not face direct GBV often witnessed it in their environment, indicating that the threat alone is enough to intimidate them.

6.2.5 Security Strategies for women in politics

For a young woman in Kenyan politics, security is not an abstract concept. It is a daily negotiation for bodily autonomy and survival. To enter the political arena is to realize that the system was never designed for young women, and its primary defense mechanism is the threat of violence.

a) The Specter of Sexualized Violence

One of the most harrowing realities of the campaign trail is the deliberate use of sexual harassment as a political tool. At rallies, the "ground" can turn predatory in an instant. Aspirants face groping, pulling of clothes, and public humiliation. The survival strategy for many is as practical as it is heartbreaking - wearing tight trousers or thick stockings beneath dresses just to maintain a layer of protection against violation in public spaces. Unlike their male counterparts, women carry the constant, heavy risk of being sexually targeted and this is a threat used to scare them into silence and retreat.

b) The World of "Goons" and Hired Hostility

Hostility is often a staged performance. Opponents frequently deploy goons not to debate policy, but to intimidate. For a woman, this danger is doubled when campaigning in "enemy territory" where the dominant party's supporters treat her as an intruder. To navigate these spaces, many women find themselves forced to engage their own security teams who are often local youth or "goons" just to ensure they can walk through a marketplace or enter a hall safely. In this arena, one's physical presence is an act of defiance, and it must be protected by any means necessary.

c) Collateral Damage

The security plan must extend beyond yourself to your backbone - the chief mobilizers. These are the people conducting door-to-door reaches and reading the community's mood. Because they are effective and influential, they easily become the primary targets for attacks, beatings, and threats. Often, they are also bought off to make your campaign vulnerable. It is not uncommon for your campaign team to

double deal you, and in fact be the one exposing you to danger. This call for vigilance and discernment on your part to be sure that everyone on the team is fully working for your good. It is also necessary to secure the teams security.

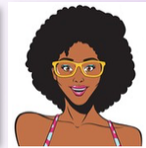


"There is a silent, brutal truth in the trenches. When a mobilizer is attacked or killed, there are no press statements. They are often treated as expendable collateral damage. But their insecurity is your exposure. When your manager is neutralized, your entire network collapses."

d) Poisoning and the "Matanga" Risk

Security also extends to what you consume. Campaigns are high-stakes environments where drinks are spiked and food is poisoned. Candidates and their teams have neutralized during meals. They become casualties of a war over power. Vigilance becomes a lifestyle. As one participant said:

"You learn never to casually accept a soda, tea, or water, knowing that at best, you face a severe illness, and at worst, you die!"



e) The Life-and-Death Stakes of Nominations

While the General Election is a high-profile event, the Party Primaries are often more dangerous. In areas where a party ticket guarantees an eventual win, people will kill for a nomination certificate. Submission day at the IEBC is a tactical hurdle where candidates are physically blocked or delayed to ensure they miss the strict deadlines. On primary day, the violence is deliberate. Voters are intimidated, stones are thrown, and knives are drawn to prevent your supporters from ever reaching the polling station.

Figure 20: Security Strategy for women in Politics.

Security Strategy	Adoption Rate	Examples
Community-Driven Protection	Moderate	Local men and youth voluntarily offered security during rallies.

Self-Funded Security Measures	Low	Hiring boda escorts, male aides, or friends for protection.
Avoidance & Silence	High	Many avoided volatile zones or never reported incidents officially.
Online Moderators or Allies	Few	Some used social media allies to help manage digital harassment.
Spiritual and Emotional Anchoring	High	Relied on prayer, family, and resilience as mental protection.

As shown in Figure 20, in the high-stakes theater of Kenyan politics, security strategies are rarely uniform. They are adaptive, often expensive, and deeply personal. When we unpack the comparison of how women navigate this terrain, we see a spectrum that ranges from formal protection to the quiet, internal resilience required to wake up and do it all again the next day.

Perhaps the most authentic form of safety is **community-driven protection**. This strategy carries a moderate adoption rate because it relies heavily on the candidate's social capital. It manifests when local men, boda boda riders, or village youth form a voluntary human shield around her during rallies. These are not hired hands but ordinary people who support your vision protecting you. While effective because it provides a layer of local intelligence that formal security might miss, it is often unpredictable and depends entirely on the strength of the candidate's grassroots relationships.

When the threat moves beyond heckling to physical intent, candidates often turn to **self-funded security**. Because of the high financial cost, this has a lower adoption rate. It involves the hiring of private male aides (often muscled huge men), "*mabouncer*," or dedicated boda-boda escorts to clear paths and monitor crowds. This is a strategy of visibility. It is designed to signal to opponents that the candidate is not vulnerable. However, for many young women, this is a luxury that eats into a limited campaign budget, forcing a difficult choice between being heard (marketing) and being safe (security).

Disturbingly, the most common strategy is **avoidance and silence**. Because the system is often unresponsive or even complicit, many women choose to navigate risks by simply avoiding volatile zones, canceling late-evening meetings, or remaining silent about harassment to avoid being labeled "weak" or "dramatic." While this preserves physical safety in the short term, it shrinks the candidate's political footprint. It is a defensive posture that highlights a systemic failure. When reporting an assault to a police station yields no help, silence becomes a survival mechanism rather than a choice.

As the battle moves to the palm of the hand, a small but growing number of women are employing **online moderators**. This strategy involves having a team, often trusted friends or hired bloggers, who "sanitize" social media comment sections, report coordinated trolls, and manage the candidate's digital reputation. This is essential for protecting mental health and preventing the 2:00a.m WhatsApp character assassinations that can dismantle a campaign before the sun rises.

Finally, there is the most widely adopted strategy, the spiritual and emotional anchoring. In a landscape where physical and financial resources are often depleted, Kenyan women candidates lean heavily on prayer, family networks, and sheer psychological grit. This is the "internal security" that allows a woman to face a hostile primary or a targeted smear campaign without breaking. While it doesn't stop a stone or a bribe, it provides the resilience necessary to stay in the race. It is the silent engine of the Kenyan woman's campaign, ensuring that even when the system tries to exclude her, she remains anchored in her purpose.

6.2.6 Party Affiliation among Women Aspirants

Figure 21: Party Affiliation among Women Aspirants

Party / Affiliation	Number of Aspirants	Percentage
Independent	45	40.2%
Jubilee Party	21	18.8%
UDA (United Democratic Alliance)	13	11.6%
ODM (Orange Democratic Movement)	9	8.0%
Chama Cha Kazi	5	4.5%
KANU (Kenya African National Union)	4	3.6%
The Service Party (TSP)	4	3.6%

Democratic Party (DP)	2	1.8%
Others (each mentioned once)	9	8.0%

a) Participation in political parties

The data and narratives surrounding the respondents' political participation in Kenya reveal a landscape of remarkable individual agency countered by deep institutional failure. A defining characteristic is the surge of women running as independent candidates, who now account for 40.2% of young women aspirants. This shift signals a profound mistrust of formal party structures, which are often perceived as gender-unfriendly or plagued by opaque nomination processes. For many women, bypassing established parties like Jubilee (18.8%), UDA (11.6%), and ODM (8.0%) was a calculated strategy to avoid biased primaries and favoritism, asserting their political agency through a more flexible, context-driven approach. One woman said:



"I felt completely unsupported by my party (Jubilee) in 2022."

The role of political parties in validating these candidates remains decisively uneven. Nearly 70% of women reported receiving minimal to no financial or logistical support from their affiliated parties, often feeling abandoned once the nomination certificate was issued. This "institutional vacuum" has forced aspirants to rely heavily on informal networks, for over 80% of women, family, friends, and local community groups formed the true foundation of their campaigns. From family-led WhatsApp groups to mobilization within churches and women's groups, these grassroots networks provided the moral and logistical legitimacy that the formal political system failed to deliver.

b) Role played by Political support / Validation

The dynamics of political validation are heavily gendered and often contradictory. While some women noted that male voters and leaders were surprisingly willing to offer support, they frequently encountered internalized patriarchal resistance from other women due to local competition. More concerning is the fact that validation from male political figures often came with strings attached, including "sexist offers" or demands for compliance with patriarchal norms. These findings underscore an urgent need for structural reform in the current Kenyan political economy. Women do

not just fight for votes, they must navigate a high-risk landscape where the cost of entry is often their personal safety or reputational integrity.

6.2.7 Use of voodoo or black magic to navigate the political terrain

In a political landscape often defined by balance sheets and manifestos, a deeper, more shadow-bound layer of competition emerged - the strategic navigation of outside forces and the supernatural. For the modern Kenyan woman aspirant, the specter of voodoo and black magic represents a surprising and sophisticated psychological battleground. While the overwhelming majority of women dismissed the direct encounters with the occult, they were forced to engage in a high-stakes spiritual race. The data reveals that witchcraft acted as a culturally recognized force of political engagement to sabotage and intimidate opponents. Rather than a relic of the past, this consciousness serves as a contemporary tool of intimidation, where rumors of an opponent's dark practices are used to demoralize a candidate's base and sow seeds of doubt regarding her personal safety. This invisible barrier functions as a form of non-physical gatekeeping, silencing dissent through the specter of unseen consequences.

Parallel to this intimidation is the strategic use of Voodoo, witchcraft, or black magic to construct an aura of invincibility. Candidates perceived to possess strong spiritual backing, whether through the endorsement of traditional healers or "divine protection", project an image of being untouchable. In high-stakes electoral environments, this perception can shift voter behavior, as the electorate may gravitate toward a leader who appears backed by higher forces, viewing their victory as an inevitable destiny. This spiritual narrative effectively bypasses rational political debate, instead anchoring a candidate's legitimacy in a culturally resonant authority that suggests they are more powerful than their earthbound competitors. A participant in the validation meeting said:



"I went to a spiritist *"kutengenezwa"* because I come from a lineage of traditional seers and healers. I perfumed some rituals, some of which included not bathing for some days or getting incisions in various places on my body. I cannot tell you some of the other rituals but all in all, it really helped my campaign. I did not spend any money. I did not campaign much but I got favorable treatment wherever I went. I did not win the elections but I emerged second in the elections."

The most striking strategy to emerge from this tension is the weaponization of the Christian faith as a protective and political buffer. The few respondents who explicitly cited their religious grounding, prayer and divine protection were not merely personal comforts but tactical choices. Another participant said that:

“My family invited the clergy members of all denominations in our area for a prayer meeting to consecrate me for leadership and for protection”




By leaning heavily into the church support mentioned in other narratives for prayers, these women effectively neutralized the fear of witchcraft, using their faith to build an armor that resonated with a deeply religious electorate. This phenomenon creates a fascinating paradox: to survive the perceived darkness of the political arena, women double down on a hyper-visible Christian identity, transforming their spiritual devotion into a shield against the psychological warfare of the supernatural narrative.

The framing of the definition of dark forces altogether is also worth noting. By candidates equating the "unseen" nature of witchcraft with the "opaque" nature of internal party bias and tribalism, respondents pivoted from the supernatural to the structural. One candidate boldly asserted that: “party gatekeeping operates in the dark.” Labeling tribalism and clannism as ‘invisible forces’ strip the supernatural of its mystery and expose it as a tool of patriarchal gatekeeping. This shift is used to dismiss the fear of "spiritual sabotage" while simultaneously highlighting the very real, very physical forces of ethnic exclusion and party betrayal that act as the true, unseen barriers to success.

The implications of this trend

The strategic integration of supernatural narratives into political competition effectively creates a secondary, parallel economy where influence is traded through fear rather than policy. This environment forces aspirants to navigate a "spiritual tax," where success is often contingent upon one's ability to either master the occult narrative or perform a high-stakes religious counter-strategy. For women, this landscape is particularly treacherous because traditional and spiritual gatekeeping is often synonymous with patriarchal control. When a candidate engages in rituals like *kutengenezwa*, she isn't just seeking protection, she is attempting to hack a



system that naturally views female leadership as a disruption to the spiritual and social order.

Beyond individual safety, the pervasive belief in "outside forces" fundamentally alters the democratic contract between the candidate and the voter. When victory is framed as a 'supernatural destiny' or an 'inevitable ordination,' the accountability of the leader to the electorate is diminished, as their mandate is perceived to come from a higher, untouchable authority rather than the ballot box. This creates a dangerous precedent where rational critique is reframed as spiritual opposition, effectively insulating leaders from secular scrutiny. The reliance on these narratives suggests that the formal structures of democracy, such as party tribunals and legal courts, are viewed as insufficient or easily manipulated, leading candidates to seek justice and validation in the spiritual realm.

Ultimately, the most profound shift occurs when aspirants realize that "dark forces" are not merely supernatural myths but are the very real, opaque machinations of political gatekeeping. By equating the "black box" of party nominations with the "darkness" of witchcraft, women are engaging in a sophisticated form of political deconstruction. They are exposing how tribalism, clannism, and favoritism operate with the same terrifying invisibility as a curse. This intellectual pivot allows women to challenge the systemic political "sabotage" by stripping the mystery away from patriarchal exclusion and presenting it as a structural failure that can be confronted through institutional reform rather than just spiritual warfare.

6.2.8 How Engagement in Politics Transformed Women's Lives

The experience of running for political office in Kenya serves as a profound catalyst for personal transformation, moving far beyond the boundaries of a simple civic act to become a disruptive force that reshapes a woman's entire worldview. For approximately 60% of aspirants, the journey functioned as a rigorous training ground for self-evolution, yielding significant gains in public speaking, leadership capacity, and resilience. This sense of empowerment often transcended the election cycle, providing women with the confidence to scale their businesses and advocate for their communities with newfound authority. For these women, politics was less about the ballot and more about becoming as they transitioned from private citizens to recognized public figures.

However, this transformation carries a heavy burden of visibility that frequently destabilizes personal and economic security. About 20% of respondents reported that their political ambitions severely strained or severed intimate relationships, with some facing divorce, breakups or family rejection because their male partners were reluctant to be associated with a woman in the public arena. Economically, the cost was equally stark. Nearly a quarter of the women saw their businesses or careers erode as they diverted essential time and funds toward their campaigns. This trade-off between civic duty and financial stability highlights the participation tax women pay, where the pursuit of leadership often comes at the expense of the very domestic and economic foundations they worked years to build. Some women said:



"Politics has deeply affected my personal life, especially my prospects of getting married. Men are reluctant to marry a woman involved in politics."

"Politics adversely affected my business negatively as I had to divert funds and time to the campaign but the experience provided valuable life lessons."

"I have strengthened relationships, clarified true friendships, and reshaped career and life perspectives."

"I lost family relationships and personal connections. However, I found strength through faith in God. Despite the challenges, I remain focused on my goals."

Despite these material and relational losses, the political journey often culminates in a clarified, almost liberating sense of purpose. Many women emerged from the fray with a transformed vision, reporting that the experience, while heavily bruising, was eye-opening and necessary to expose the structural gaps in governance. Even those who suffered significant setbacks did not express much regret. Instead, they viewed it as a vital journey and an act of "opening the door" for future generations. Ultimately, politics acted as a powerful lens that clarified true friendships and reshaped life perspectives, leaving these women with a reinforced resolve to challenge systemic injustice and a deeper, faith-grounded sense of self-worth that remains unshakeable regardless of the electoral outcome.



The implications of this trend

The profound shift in how women perceive their political journeys suggests that the true impact of their participation is measured not at the ballot box, but in the enduring alteration of their social and professional trajectories. By moving away from a binary win and loss framework, political discourse begins to recognize the emergence of a new class of civic champions. These women, having endured the rigors of campaigning, often re-enter their communities as sophisticated advocates who possess a specialized understanding of power dynamics. This evolution effectively diversifies the local leadership pool, ensuring that even in defeat, a woman's political attempt serves to normalize female authority and chip away at the historical monopoly of male influence in public spaces.

The participation tax highlights a critical flaw in the current democratic architecture. It is built on the assumption of a male default candidate who possesses unencumbered access to time and capital. For women, the cost of entry is often a zero-sum game played against their own economic survival. This reality forces a necessary debate on the necessity of institutional safety nets and targeted financial reforms within political parties. Without these, the luxury of leadership will continue to be a barrier that filters out highly capable but less wealthy women, perpetuating a cycle where only those with significant independent means can afford to represent the interests of the public.

The personal and relational destabilization experienced by these aspirants underscores that political reform cannot be successful if it stops at policy changes alone. It must extend into the cultural and domestic spheres. The social penalty paid through broken relationships and community stigma reveals that the 'public woman' is still viewed as a threat to traditional family hierarchies. By reframing their trauma as a strategic eye-opener, these women are essentially conducting a real-time audit of the nation's democratic health. Their unshakeable resolve to continue opening doors indicates that the transformation of the self is the final, most resilient defense against a system designed to discourage them, turning individual scars into a collective blueprint for systemic change.


6.2.9 Future Political Aspirations of Female Candidates

Figure 22: Future political Aspiration Responses

Response Category	Count	Percentage
Plans to vie again (with or without conditions)	101	77.1%
Considering vying again (undecided, conditional, or open)	15	11.5%
Does not plan to vie again	7	5.3%
Plans to remain in community leadership/advocacy, not electoral politics	2	1.5%
Not mentioned / unclear	6	4.6%

Figure 22 is indicative of the fact that the future political trajectory of women in Kenya is defined by an extraordinary sense of strategic resilience and recalibration, with a resounding 77.1% of aspirants expressing a firm intention to contest in the 2027 general elections. Far from being deterred by past challenges, these women are treating their initial campaigns as a "stress test" that has revealed the necessity of tactical readiness over mere ambition. Their narratives indicate a shift toward strategic re-entry, characterized by a commitment to deeper financial planning, refined team selection, and more calculated party alignments. This evolution suggests that the learning curve of Kenyan politics is producing a more seasoned cohort of female leaders who understand that longevity in leadership requires a move toward sustainable structures rather than one-off attempts. Even among the 11.5% who remain undecided, the hesitation is rarely a lack of will, but rather a pragmatic demand for systemic improvements in campaign financing and institutional support.

The data underscores that political ambition for women is increasingly being viewed as a long-term professionalization process rather than a singular event. Aspirants are no longer entering the fray blindly. They are vocal about the need for better party-based strategies and the elimination of systemic hurdles that were previous gatekeepers. For the small percentage moving away from electoral politics toward community advocacy, their journey still contributes to a broader leadership dividend, ensuring their experience remains within the civic ecosystem. Ultimately, the



overwhelming resolve to come back, armed with lessons on resource mobilization and grassroots mastery, highlights a critical shift in the political landscape. Women are no longer just seeking to open the door, they are preparing to occupy the room with the power, structure, and endurance necessary to transform the very nature of Kenyan governance.



7. The Political Realities Young Women Must Confront

The Gendered Reality of Politics and Why Young Women Pay the Highest Price.

Politics is often deliberately mystified. It is presented as technical, procedural and neutral so that many people, especially women, remain outside of it. Yet for those who attempt to enter, particularly women, politics quickly reveals itself as something far more complex and dangerous. It is not just about ideas, campaigns or leadership. It is about survival within a deeply gendered system of power.

Many young women enter politics believing that competence, preparation, having some resources and community legitimacy will be enough. Instead, they encounter political spaces where safety, dignity, mental well-being and bodily autonomy are constantly under threat. Harassment, exploitation and intimidation are illegal, yet so normalized in political spaces that they are rarely named as violence. Women are expected to endure these harms quietly, framed as the unavoidable “cost” of participation in politics.

This silence is not accidental. It is produced by systems that benefit from women’s endurance and exit rather than their sustained presence and power.

Gendered Violence as a Political Strategy.

Political violence against women does not only appear as physical assault. More often, it takes the form of sexualized comments, groping, rumours, online harassment, intimidation, and relentless boundary violations. These acts are illegal, but they are treated as routine. Women learn quickly that speaking up comes with consequences like being dismissed as weak, accused of exaggeration, or quietly excluded.

Institutions that claim to support women in politics often fall short because training programmes acknowledge gender-based violence but rarely address how to prevent it or dismantle the systems that enable it. Women are taught how to dress strategically, anticipate harm, seek counselling or report abuse after it happens but not how to demand protection, accountability or collective care.



Politics is Structured to be Traumatic


The psychological impact of political participation on women is profound. Many women who run for office vow never to vie again, not because they lack ambition or vision, but because the experience is too painful. The end of a campaign often brings exhaustion, financial loss, isolation and unresolved trauma. There is rarely any return on the emotional, spiritual, or economic investment except scars and hard-earned lessons. Without proper preparation, women enter politics unready for the harm they will face. Something as basic as a “what to expect” guide like this publication may go a long way in preventing severe breakdowns. Awareness itself is protection. Women need to know that trauma is not personal failure it is part of the political terrain.

When trauma goes unprocessed, it manifests physically. Chronic stress, hypertension, digestive disorders, autoimmune illnesses and long-term psychological distress are common. These costs are never factored into political participation frameworks. Yet women’s political trauma does not stop with individuals. It affects families, communities and health systems. This is not just a gender issue but a public health one as well.

Institutional Silence and Patriarchal Definitions of Peace.

Institutional responses to violence against women in politics are often absent or symbolic. Political parties may have gender desks or reporting mechanisms, but many are ineffective. Women who are attacked during campaigns are frequently left to navigate the aftermath alone. Sometimes women may involve senior political leaders to escalate the issue and get redress (but sometimes this is used and misused for political mileage).

Violence has become so normalized that unless a woman is killed or severely injured, that is when violence in politics may be acknowledged. The prevailing mindset is, “*You’re lucky it wasn’t worse,*” or “*You should have expected it.*” This logic was painfully evident during the 2017 elections, when reports documented widespread sexual violence against women, yet the elections were declared “peaceful” because there was no large-scale male conflict.



Peace, in this framing, is defined through a patriarchal lens that erases women's suffering. This normalization leads to neglect across the board from political parties and security agencies to electoral bodies and even international observer missions. When elections are labelled "free and fair" while women are violated, that silence becomes a form of complicity.

Mentorship, Power, and Gendered Survival

Mentorship in politics is also shaped by gendered scarcity. Older women in politics often see younger women as competition rather than protégées not out of malice, but survival. In a system where women occupy very few seats and are constantly fighting to retain them, solidarity feels risky.


This differs sharply from male political mentorship. Men tend to mentor once their power is secure. Women are expected to mentor while still under threat. As a result, many young women seek mentorship from men, where power imbalances often lead to exploitation. Access to opportunities becomes sexualized and refusal often results in exclusion.

Men also pass down what can be described as "negative mentorship" teaching survival through aggression, intimidation and dominance. Women are told to harden themselves, to show capacity for violence, to masculinize in order to survive. This is not empowerment. It is forced adaptation to a brutal system.

The Gendered Economics of Power and Proximity

Money exposes one of the biggest inequalities in politics. Men often have easier access to money for mobilizing supporters, paying for security, and tapping into informal networks. Men also 'invest' resources in risky ventures like politics much more easily than women. Most women, therefore rely on their own savings, and family support more than they rely on donations from their friends. Donations from male counterparts often come with hidden costs such as sexual advances, and if they refuse, the opportunities are simply closed off.

Politics also depends a lot on being close to power: being in the right room, at the right hotel, or seated at the right table. But this closeness is judged differently. For men, it



is seen as strategic. For women, it is often sexualized. When women are visible around powerful men, people question their motives instead of their ideas, and scrutinize their bodies rather than their leadership. This double standard makes it harder for women to be strategic and therefore to access power while protecting men's dominance.

Perception, Symbolism and Visibility

Politics is not just about what you say or believe. It is also about how you are perceived. How you dress, where you sit in meetings, and who you are photographed with such as standing close to a party leader, sends a message about your importance. In Kenya, people often call this "*siasa ya vipindi*" meaning perception is everything. Visibility becomes a form of power and too often, how you look or don't look, where you are seen, or who you are seen with, carries more weight than your ideas or experiences. Therefore, being seen in the right way can sometimes matter more than everything else.

Young women are often forced to pay extra attention to their image just to be taken seriously. Where you sit who you stand next to in photos, or whether you are seen close to a party leader sends a message about your importance.


8. What Political Leadership Trainings Must Consider

8.1. Respondent’s Experiences with Formal Political Leadership Trainings

During the survey, the respondents indicated high variances in exposure to political leadership training. While a reasonable number of these women underwent formal or semi-formal leadership and campaign-related training, many did not receive any structured support. At least half of the respondents had some form of training, ranging from short workshops to months-long programs. The other half either had no training at all, and they relied on ‘on-the-go’ experience, or leaned on previous leadership roles to get by. Figure 23 gives a summary of respondent’s experiences with trainings.

Figure 23: Status of Leadership Training for Women in Politics.

Category	Description	% (Approx.)
No Formal Training	Many women lacked access to structured leadership or political training, relying instead on life experiences, community service, or religious roles.	40%
Short-Term Trainings	Attended brief workshops / forums for 1–2-days. Organizations mentioned include FIDA, CMD, Akili Dada, Jubilee, ActionAid and CREO - with a focus on women in leadership, GBV, or campaign messaging. Party-led trainings (e.g. Jubilee, ODM) were mentioned but less frequently and often described as minimal or resource-limited.	30%
Comprehensive Leadership Programs	A smaller group benefitted from extended programs (e.g., Oslo Center, UN Women, IRI, ELF, Ms. President) that covered budgeting, campaign strategy, branding, and governance and which took place for several months.	20%
Self-Mentored or Informally Trained	Gained knowledge through books, YouTube, or mentorship by political figures.	10%




The women who attended structured programs noted increased confidence, campaign skills, and understanding of political systems. The trainings helped demystify politics for first-time aspirants and provided valuable peer networks. The trainings, however, were often overly theoretical, with little connection to on-the-ground realities like voter mobilization, fundraising, or security. A lack of follow-up support was a recurring complaint. Many received one-off trainings with no sustained mentorship or technical aid. The timing of trainings was problematic for some. Most were held too close to elections, which was not timely for planning.

The data reveals a significant evolution in the landscape of specialized political training, characterized by a shift toward more accessible and thematic curricula. Respondents highlighted the burgeoning role of digital literacy, noting that online platforms and social media have become primary vehicles for teaching modern campaign messaging. Parallel to this technological shift is a deeper ideological integration, where leadership trainings now frequently incorporate robust themes of women's rights and personal empowerment. Furthermore, a distinct generational trend has emerged as young women aspirants increasingly report participation in youth-specific modules and Gender-Based Violence (GBV) awareness training. This suggests that contemporary training content is becoming more specialized, moving beyond general governance to address the intersectional and safety-related challenges unique to a new generation of female political leaders.

8.2 Considerations for Political Leadership Trainings

To bridge the gap between the "promise of inclusion" and the "realities of exclusion," formal political leadership trainings must move beyond providing technical skills to addressing the hostile ecosystem women navigate. Based on the data synthesis from the 122 women interviewed, training must undergo a radical paradigm shift. The objective is no longer to "fix the woman" to fit a flawed environment, but to move away from the power-centric "career politician" model toward an "organic leader" model that is rooted in service and structural disruption. By transitioning from generic skill-building, such as public speaking to a holistic, ecosystem-based approach, the curriculum shifts the goal from merely "getting a seat at the table" to "redefining the table itself." This involves arming candidates with the strategic, psychological, and tactical tools necessary to navigate and survive a hostile, informal, and under-resourced political landscape.



A cornerstone of this transformation is the creation of a "sustainable political career framework" that acknowledges the collective nature of a woman's journey. Central to this is a move to go beyond the candidate, and to secure her perimeter. This pillar recognizes that without intentional, strategic support, a woman is left to navigate a murky and often predatory ecosystem in isolation. Similarly, campaign financing must be reimagined as a strategic operation rather than a painful trade-off. Training should focus on building financial ecosystems that protect a woman's personal assets and prevent the "participation tax" from leading to economic ruin, ensuring her political vision is sustained by resourceful mobilization rather than personal bankruptcy.

Furthermore, the manual must address the most potent tools of exclusion - violence and intimidation. Gender-Based Violence (GBV) must be reframed not merely as a human rights violation, but as a strategic tax designed to bar women from power. Integrating a module that shifts women from being victims of circumstances to strategic managers of risks, empowers them to build safety systems that protect her physical, digital, and mental well-being. This must be complemented by addressing the invisible psychological battlegrounds that define the local political landscape.

Ultimately, because 77.1% of aspirants expressed a firm intention to return to the ballot, the curriculum must move beyond a "one-off" election guide toward long-term recalibration. This resilience and sustainability framework treats politics as a transformative life event with significant hidden costs, providing the tools for professionalized leadership and long-term endurance. By focusing on these structural realities, formal training can finally bridge the gap between democratic theory and the lived realities of women candidates, turning individual scars into a collective blueprint for systemic change. More specifically, the training manuals should:

I. Validating Informal Capital and Grassroots Legitimacy

The primary entry point for women into politics is often through lived relationships rather than formal party structures.

- **Asset Mapping and Leadership Audits:** Training must teach young women to audit their own lives, identifying leadership roles in *Chamas*, self-help groups, and community projects. They must learn to translate this invisible labor into political credentials.

- **Relational Organizing:** Curricula should focus on maintaining trust-based networks that serve as a buffer against elite gatekeeping. The core lesson is "*You are already a leader, we are just formalizing your office.*"
- **The Household Strategy:** Since success is built on intimate mobilization, training must include protocols for mapping households and scripting conversations that reach "invisible voters," such as the elderly and PWDs, who are often bypassed by traditional campaigns.
- **Managing Sweat Equity:** In the absence of financial incentives for mobilizers, candidates need skills to lead and sustain volunteer teams through shared vision and communal loyalty.

II. Navigating the "Murky" Ecosystem and Informal Power

Since formal rules are frequently bypassed, the curriculum must provide a "survival guide" for the actual political terrain.

- **Power Mapping:** Candidates need to identify and map informal power brokers, religious institutions, and local security arrangements within their specific wards.
- **Navigating Spiritual and Structural Intimidation:** A module to address psychological battlegrounds where rumors of voodoo and black magic are weaponized to demoralize a candidate's base should be included.
- **Psychological Resilience:** Training must provide tools to demystify an opponent's perceived *aura of invincibility* by re-focusing the electorate on earthbound issues like service delivery.
- **Consecration Strategy:** Candidates should learn to optimize on "hyper-visible Christian identity" for legitimacy.
- **Tactical Defensive Maneuvers:** Curricula must include techniques for accessing male-dominated elders' meetings and clan consultations i.e. the 'black boxes' of political mobilization.

III. Dismantling the "Patriarchy of Presence" and Countering Violence

The training must provide a feminist intellectual architecture to survive a system designed to doubt female authority.

- **Strategic Defiance:** Tactics for claiming space and voice in male-dominated forums without self-censoring, while navigating "erasure" where men take credit for women's work.

- **Internal Party Safety and "Sextortion":** The manual must provide clear "exit and appeal" protocols for navigating sexual coercion and predatory patronage within party structures, particularly regarding nomination certificates.
- **Decoding "Invisible" Violence:** Training must move beyond physical assault to address psychological defense, reframing public insults to maintain authority and deconstructing cultural stigmas used against unmarried or widowed women.
- **Digital Defense and Resilience:** Advanced digital literacy is required to combat gendered disinformation, doxxing, and image-based abuse. This includes creating "Rapid Response Digital Circles" to drown out negative narratives.

IV. Economic Resilience and Strategic Financing

To prevent the *participation tax* from leading to bankruptcy, training must pivot toward creativity-heavy financial operations.

- **Innovative Fundraising:** Training on crowdsourcing, micro-donations via WhatsApp group drives, and diaspora engagement to offset the lack of party funding.
- **Lean Campaign Budgeting:** Curricula must break down essential costs (agents, nomination fees) versus avoidable ones. A key skill is 'adaptive budgeting' to achieve visibility through strategic resourcefulness rather than raw capital.
- **Financial War-Room Training:** Candidates need business continuity planning to run their livelihoods on autopilot during the campaign, ensuring they ring-fence survival capital like rent and school fees.

V. Governance Literacy and Authenticity

Training should channel frustration with the status quo into reformist competence.

- **Technical Governance:** Candidates must understand the social contract i.e. how county budgets work and the distinct roles of MCAs vs. MPs.
- **Issue-Based Leadership:** Designing scalable interventions (enterprise hubs, innovation labs) that move from rhetoric to blueprints for redistributive change.
- **Authentic Storytelling:** Training young women to leverage lived experiences such as single motherhood or poverty as epistemological anchors that turn perceived vulnerabilities into public trust.

VI. Support Ecosystems and Horizontal Mentorship

- The goal must shift from **fixing the candidate** to **securing her perimeter**, recognizing that politics is a collective enterprise.

- **The ‘Winning at Home’ Strategy:** A guide to auditing potential resistance from spouses and parents, including conflict resolution tools for negotiating care duties and family honor.
- **Surrogate Family Networks:** Blueprints for converting women's savings circles (*Chamas*) into trust circles for financial and emotional sustenance.
- **Political Sisterhoods:** Fostering peer-based mentorship models where aspirants share strategic intelligence and cost-sharing alliances rather than just moral support.

VII. The Post-Election Lifecycle and Career Sustainability

Curricula must break the ‘train and release’ cycle by addressing the aftermath of the election and the high intention (77.1%) to return in 2027.

- **Managing the ‘Hangover’:** Tools for psychological recovery from the trauma of public scrutiny, loss, and the specific loneliness of the trail.
- **Financial and Career Re-entry:** Strategies to overcome professional blacklisting and repair relationships strained by the campaign.
- **Strategic Re-Entry and Recalibration:** Training must focus on a Post-Election Audit, a gap analysis of performance to build a multi-year roadmap for the next cycle.
- **Intra-Party Diplomacy:** Skills for high-stakes negotiation during negotiated democracy moments to ensure women leverage their participation for future appointive positions.

9. Conclusion

What emerges from this analysis is clear: women’s political participation is not simply about inclusion it is about survival within a deeply gendered system. Young women bear the heaviest burden, facing violence, economic exclusion, sexualization, and silence at every stage of their political journey. Their exclusion is not accidental. It is produced and maintained through power, fear, and unequal rules of engagement. Yet despite this, women continue to step forward. The courage required for a young woman to enter politics is extraordinary.

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Annex 1: Key Informant Interview Tool

Young people's participation in Political Campaigns. CONSENT FORM

Instructions: Introduce yourself, the purpose of the study, and read informed consent statement.

ORAL INFORMED CONSENT

My name is _____, and I am coming from Badili Africa office. We are conducting a research study to understand the participation of women in politics. The research is specifically targeting young women aged 18-35 who vied for seats in the 2017 and the 2022 elections. Since you vied for a seat, we are asking you to participate in this study. In this interview, you will be asked questions about your general political journey and the campaign process. This discussion is for research purposes only, and all the information obtained will be kept safe. You will not be identified in any presentation of the study reports by name to safeguard the insights you give us. With your permission, we would like to audio record the discussion to enable the accurate transcription of material for the report.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you may leave the discussion at any time. Also, you are free to refuse to answer any questions that you feel are not appropriate or that make you feel uncomfortable. You may ask us any questions about the study at any point during the discussion. Your participation or non-participation in the interview will not affect any services you currently receive from any of the insert the services provided to project participants in any way.

There is no anticipated discomfort for those contributing to this study, so risk to participants is minimal. Although you may not directly benefit from taking part in this study, (meaning we are not paying respondents for the study) the information you provide may lead to improved programs and services in the community.

There is no direct compensation for your participation. You can have a copy of this form, if you want. Do you have any questions?

[Check whether the participants has understood the question and any part of the informed consent.]

If you have any concerns about this study, you may contact:
 Badili Africa
 Tel:
 Email:

Do you agree to participate in this study? [If YES, indicate below that the oral informed consent has been obtained. Then proceed with the question below regarding audio recording. If they refuse, thank them for their time and dismiss them.]
 Oral informed consent received

Do you agree to be audio recorded? [If YES, indicate below. If participant responds “NO”, proceed with the interview without recording.]
 Consent to audio record interview received

Signature of interviewer: _____
 Date: ____/____/____

A. Background information

A1	Name of site/community/village	e.g. Machakos county, Athi river ward, Greatwall estate
A2	Date (dd,mm,yyyy)	
A3	Name of facilitator	
A4	Name of note taker	

B. Characteristics of the respondent

B1	Name of respondent	
B2	Sex	
B3	Age	
B4	Marital status	
B5	Ethnic group	
B6	Religious affiliation	
B7	Primary occupation	
B8	Secondary occupation	
B9	Level of education completed	

Introductory questions

1. Which year did you run for office?
2. Why did you consider running for office? / What made you run for office?

Prompting qs: Was this your first time running for office? Give reasons for your answer

3. How did you start the process?

Prompting qs:

- How did you organize/mobilize during your campaigns? (make sure we get the process and key issues to consider in a campaign)
- Why did you choose that way of mobilizing and organizing?
- What (process wise) contributed to your successes and what contributed to your failures?

4. What were your general experiences in politics?

Prompting questions

- What did you learn in that process?
 - What surprised you about politics?
5. If you were to do it all over again, what would you do differently?
 6. What was the response on the campaign trail - of fellow women? How did it compare to that of men?

Prompting question:

7. What is your estimated level of support from voters (Can be answered in number of votes received, campaign rhetoric from voters and whether it translated to real votes), visibility on media, media, digital platforms and offline? Etc.

8. How did your involvement in politics change your life?

Prompting qs:

- Did politics/campaigns affect your intimate relationships (like dating life, marital status, relationships with parents, siblings, children, extended family?), work/business status or opportunities? etc. If yes, how?

- How were your responsibilities affected and how did you handle that? (e.g. childcare, etc)
- 9. Did any form of support or validation play a role in your campaigns? (your significant. other, family, friends, workmates, male members of society etc.) and how?
- 10. Did you experience any form of violence (physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, mental or online?)
- 11. Would you vie again? Give reasons for your answer

Political party questions

- 12. Which political party did you vie in and why?
- 13. What were your experiences in that political party? (General treatment in the party by members, relationships with different officials, payment of fees, nominations and party ticketing in general, committee membership etc.)
- 14. What changes would you recommend to your party of choice regarding young women's effective participation in party politics?

Campaign financing

- 15. How much did your political campaign cost cumulatively?

Prompting questions:

- What were your itemized budget lines
- What were your top five biggest spenders?
- 16. How did you mobilize for your political campaign resources (mainly finances)?
- 17. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Annex 2: Young women who vied in 2022 and 2017

County	Female Youth Candidates (2022)	Female Youth Candidates (2017)
Nairobi	46	18
Meru	29	10
Kiambu	23	12
Murang'a	21	1
Nakuru	16	12
Nyeri	15	12
Machakos	11	15
Wajir	11	7
Laikipia	10	2
Bungoma	10	7
Vihiga	10	9
Kakamega	10	7
Mombasa	10	5
Kirinyaga	10	1
Taita Taveta	9	4
Kisii	9	9
Kajiado	8	4
Kitui	8	1
Kisumu	7	4
Busia	7	7
Nyandarua	6	2
Narok	6	3
Turkana	6	1
Kilifi	6	4
Embu	6	2
Kwale	5	2
Makueni	5	4
Trans Nzoia	5	5
Migori	5	2
Kericho	5	2

Isiolo	5	4
Nyamira	4	3
Tana River	4	4
Nandi	4	7
Lamu	4	2
Uasin Gishu	4	5
Tharaka-Nithi	3	1
Baringo	3	3
Mandera	3	1
Siaya	3	0
Bomet	3	2
Homa Bay	3	3
West Pokot	3	1
Marsabit	2	3
Elgeyo Marakwet	2	0
Samburu	1	3
Garissa	1	3

Source: IEBC



Annex 3: About Badili Africa and Longview Futures Foundation

About Badili Africa

Badili Africa is a Pan-African feminist organization dedicated to redefining leadership by centering the agency of young and grassroots women. Founded in 2015, it shifts civic engagement from elite spaces into everyday environments like beauty salons, campuses, and "Chamas" (women's collectives). Through innovative initiatives such as "Political Spas" and the "Women King-Makers" project, Badili has directly trained over 1,200 women and reached 10,000 more, building leadership pipelines and documenting invisible political labor. By tackling digital harassment and providing campaign strategy, the organization empowers historically excluded women to become formidable political actors in Kenya and beyond.

About LongView Futures Foundation

LongView is Kenya's premier strategic foresight firm, that conducts futures research policy analysis and trainings on topical socio-economic and political issues in Africa. LongView Consult was incorporated in 2015 and LongView Futures Foundation was instituted in 2019. We look at past and current trends, and consider – in a volatile, uncertain, complex, changing, and ambiguous environment – possible futures that can and should be planned for. Using this knowledge, we help governments, organizations, communities, and individuals become future smart and future fit, by thinking strategically about how to prepare for those eventualities.



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