

**Research Article****EXPLORE THE PERCEPTION OF VILLAGE VOTERS TOWARDS FEMALE CANDIDATES IN RURAL ELECTIONS IN MPWAPWA DISTRICT, TANZANIA****¹Magdalena Wilbard Urono and ^{2,*}Dr. Sophia Jon Laiser**¹Department of Business Management, Institute of Accountancy Arusha, Tanzania²Department of Education, Tumaini University, Makumira, Arusha Tanzania**Received 26th August 2026; Accepted 20th September 2026; Published online 30th October 2026**

Abstract

This study explored the factors influencing voters perception towards female candidates in rural Tanzania, with a specific focus on Mpwapwa District. Employing a qualitative approach and a case study design, the research engaged a sample of 36 registered voters, selected via purposive and stratified sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and documentary review, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that voter perception is shaped by a complex interplay of factors, where a candidate's proven track record of service delivery is the paramount consideration, often superseding party affiliation and gender. Education and strong communication skills emerged as critical anchors for establishing credibility. Furthermore, cultural norms, endorsements from community gatekeepers (elders, religious leaders), and family support significantly influenced attitudes, while structural barriers such as unequal campaign resources and party support disproportionately disadvantaged women. The study concludes that while gender acts as an initial filter, perceptions are malleable and can be positively altered by demonstrated competence and social validation. Recommendations include institutionalizing transparent party primaries, ensuring equitable campaign financing, and implementing gender-sensitive civic education to foster a more inclusive political environment for women in rural constituencies.

Keywords: Voter Perception, Rural Elections, Political Participation, Female Candidates, and Village Voters.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout global history, the highest echelons of political power have been predominantly occupied by men. Despite a contemporary shift where voters are more likely than ever to support a woman for high office, the numerical representation of women in executive positions remains starkly low (Dolan, 2016). This global pattern of underrepresentation underscores a persistent gap between the ideal of gender equality in governance and the reality of political leadership, highlighting the need to investigate the foundational barriers that continue to impede women's political ascent. The challenge of achieving gender parity in political office is particularly pronounced in rural settings. In these areas, traditional gender norms profoundly shape societal roles and expectations, creating a distinct socio-cultural dynamic that influences electoral behaviour (Cella & Manzoni, 2023). Rural communities are often characterized by deeply entrenched patriarchal structures that systematically marginalize women's political aspirations, primarily by defining their roles within domestic spheres and constraining their perceived legitimacy as leaders (Bagues & Campa, 2021). This environment presents a unique context for understanding the complexities of women's political participation. The electoral evaluation process in rural constituencies is further complicated by the intersection of gender with other social factors such as class, caste, and economic dependency. In low-information environments, which are common in rural areas, voters often rely on cognitive shortcuts, or heuristics, to make electoral decisions (McDermott, 2020). In such circumstances, a candidate's gender becomes a highly salient cue, potentially overshadowing their qualifications, policy platforms, or track

record, and leading to inferences about their personality and competence based on stereotypes (Campbell *et al.*, 2021). In Tanzania, this dynamic is of critical importance. The country has made notable strides in promoting women's representation at the national level, largely through a special-seat system in parliament that has resulted in women occupying over 36% of parliamentary seats (Yoon, 2020). However, this institutional progress has not fully translated to the grassroots level. Female candidates contesting direct constituency seats in rural areas continue to face significant hurdles in securing voter support, indicating a disconnect between national policy and local electoral behaviour. This disconnect is especially relevant given Tanzania's demographic composition. Approximately 65% of the population resides in rural areas, making the rural electorate a decisive force in the country's political landscape (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Within these village settings, traditional governance structures and limited access to education often reinforce gender hierarchies, leading voters to evaluate candidates through a lens of deeply ingrained gender roles (Babeiya, 2021). Consequently, the very communities that form the backbone of the electorate may hold perceptions that systematically disadvantage female candidates. While cultural attitudes are often cited as the primary barrier, the specific constellation of factors that shape rural voters' perceptions remains underexplored. Existing studies, such as Yoon's (2020) work on gender and vote-buying, have provided valuable insights but often do not sufficiently focus on the nuanced, multi-faceted factors influencing perception in a purely rural context. There is a pressing need to move beyond broad generalizations about "cultural barriers" and systematically identify the distinct elements—be they related to candidate credibility, community influence, or structural inequities that shape how village voters perceive female candidates. Therefore, this article is driven by the specific

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objective to identify the factors that influence voter perception towards female candidates in rural Tanzania. Focusing on Mpwapwa District, this research seeks to unpack the complex interplay of performance-based criteria, sociocultural influences, and institutional dynamics that voters weigh when evaluating women seeking political office. By pinpointing these factors, the study addresses a critical gap in the literature on gender and politics in Tanzania. Ultimately, understanding these perceptual drivers is not merely an academic exercise; it is a prerequisite for designing effective interventions. Without a clear comprehension of what shapes voter attitudes in rural constituencies, efforts to promote gender equality in Tanzanian politics risk being undermined by unaddressed, foundational biases. This study aims to provide the empirical evidence necessary to inform strategies that can enhance the electoral prospects of competent women at the grassroots level, thereby contributing to more substantive and inclusive political representation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Literature Review

The Social Role Theory: This study is anchored in Social Role Theory, a foundational framework for understanding how gender perceptions are formed and sustained. Proposed by Alice Eagly in 1987, the theory posits that societal expectations and norms, derived from observed distributions of men and women into social roles, shape individuals' behaviours and perceptions. The basis of the theory is that men and women have historically occupied different roles in society, men in agentic, public-facing roles and women in communal, domestic roles, and these historical divisions create stereotypes that associate men with leadership competence and women with nurturing qualities.

A primary strength of Social Role Theory is its powerful explanation for the persistence of gender stereotypes in political evaluation, a phenomenon known as "role congruity" (Eagly & Karau, 2002). It elucidates why female candidates in rural Tanzania, even when qualified, may be perceived as less competent or authoritative than their male counterparts because their candidacy appears incongruent with traditional feminine roles. However, a key weakness of the theory in its original formulation is its potential to overemphasize the stability of these roles, potentially underestimating the capacity for rapid attitudinal change in the face of significant social or institutional shifts. Despite this limitation, the theory's dynamic aspect, which acknowledges that attitudes can evolve as women increasingly occupy non-traditional roles, makes it highly relevant. In the Tanzanian context, the visibility of women in parliament through gender quotas, for instance, provides a natural experiment in changing social roles (Yoon, 2016). This study will therefore apply Social Role Theory not as a static model of determinism, but as a dynamic lens to analyse both the entrenched stereotypes that female candidates must overcome and the potential for these perceptions to be reshaped by demonstrated competence and increased visibility of women in leadership.

Empirical Literature Review

The perception of village voters towards female candidates in rural elections: Research on voter perceptions of female candidates reveals significant insights across diverse cultural

contexts. A study by Bagues and Campa (2021) in rural Spain found that the implementation of gender quotas in municipal elections positively influenced voter attitudes. Their findings indicate that village voters increasingly came to recognize the strong leadership qualities and dedicated commitment to community well-being that female candidates bring to local governance, suggesting that institutional mechanisms can foster greater acceptance.

In Ghana, research by Staffan and Minion (2015) explored the stability of voter allegiance and its interaction with gender perceptions. They determined that a large majority (82%) of the electorate forms a core voting base, and that this allegiance is influenced by factors such as education level, the rural-urban divide, income, and occupation. This underscores that understanding voter perception in rural elections is crucial, as these structural socio-economic factors are deeply intertwined with entrenched gender biases at the grassroots level (Staffan & Minion, 2015).

The role of ideology and education is further highlighted in a systematic review in Indonesia. White et al. (2024) constructed a "political patriarchy" index, revealing that Muslim identity was a significant predictor of patriarchal attitudes, while university education correlated with more gender-egalitarian views. Critically, the study established that these patriarchal viewpoints directly correlated with opposition to gender quotas and a lower likelihood of supporting female candidates, demonstrating a profound link between deep-seated attitudes and electoral behaviour (White *et al.*, 2024).

Further evidence from Africa illustrates the practical barriers shaped by negative perceptions. A study in Ethiopia by Wasihun and Yitagesu (2023) found pervasive negative perceptions regarding women's leadership capabilities, which systematically undermined their electoral potential. Female aspirants faced a compounded set of obstacles, including limited professional experience, diminished self-confidence, educational constraints, and the dual burden of domestic and societal responsibilities. The study confirms that fostering positive voter attitudes is fundamental to increasing support for female candidates (Wasihun & Yitagesu, 2023). Focusing specifically on Tanzania, Yoon (2020) examined voter perceptions of gender dynamics in electoral practices like vote-buying in the Dar es Salaam region. The research found that while voters condemned the practice, they viewed men as the primary perpetrators due to a significant gender divide in opportunities and resources. This disparity was attributed to men's greater presence in politics, a perceived resource gap, and social norms that limit women's visibility and mobility. This analysis underscores that addressing the structural and cultural elements that shape perception is key to advancing gender equality in Tanzanian political arenas (Yoon, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in Mpwapwa District, Dodoma Region, Tanzania, selected for its distinctive record of female political participation. The district has demonstrated a relatively higher number of female contestants in ward-level and parliamentary positions across three consecutive election cycles (2010, 2015, 2020), making it an pertinent location for examining the dynamics of voter perception in a rural context where women's candidacy is present yet faces significant barriers (NBS, 2023). A qualitative research approach was

adopted, as it is essential for uncovering the nuanced, subjective perspectives and lived experiences of voters regarding female candidates (Chivanga & Monyai, 2021). This approach was operationalized through a case study design, which facilitates an in-depth, contextual investigation within a real-life setting, thereby allowing for a rich exploration of the specific factors influencing electoral choices in Mpwapwa District (Creswell, 2018). The study population encompassed all registered voters in the rural villages of Mpwapwa District, totaling 436,719 individuals (National Census, 2022). The sample size was determined by the principle of data saturation, whereby data collection continues until no new themes or insights emerge (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). To ensure both depth and diversity of perspectives, a mixed sampling strategy was employed. Purposive sampling was used to identify information-rich participants with substantial electoral experience, while stratified sampling ensured representation from various wards, capturing a spectrum of viewpoints across gender, age, and socio-economic backgrounds. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, a method prized for its flexibility in allowing for in-depth exploration and the clarification of complex issues, enabling the researcher to probe responses and capture non-verbal cues (Garcia & Patel, 2019). This primary data was supplemented by a documentary review of electoral commission reports, political party manifestos, and relevant scholarly literature, which provided essential context and aided in triangulating the findings (Yin, 2018). Data analysis, thematic analysis was employed following the framework proposed by Flick (2022). This involved a systematic process of transcribing the data, generating initial codes, and identifying, reviewing, and defining overarching themes that directly addressed the research objectives, ensuring a rigorous and structured interpretation of the collected narratives.

FINDINGS

Demographic Information of Respondents

A total of 36 registered voters participated in this study, drawn purposively and through stratified sampling from multiple rural villages within Mpwapwa District. The demographic questionnaire captured participants' gender, age, education level, occupation, and voting experience. This section presents the demographic distribution to provide a context for interpreting the qualitative findings that follow.

The data indicates an equal gender balance (50% male; 50% female), which was deliberate to ensure comparable insights across voter categories. This balance is critical for a gender-focused study, allowing the analysis to capture both male and female perspectives on women's political leadership. The age distribution reveals that the largest cluster of respondents (22.2%) fell within the 28–32 age band, closely followed by those aged 33–37 (19.4%) and 43+ (19.4%). This reflects a mix of both youthful and older voters, ensuring generational diversity. Younger participants (18–27 years, 22.2%) represent emerging voters with limited electoral history, while older respondents (38 years and above, 36.1%) bring long-term experience in rural political life. With regards to education, respondents ranged from certificate holders (22.2%) to graduates (16.7%), with the largest group being undergraduates (33.3%). Voting experience was notably high: 91.7% had participated in at least one election, and 25% reported voting more than four times.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 36)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	18	50.0
	Female	18	50.0
Age (YEARS)	18–22	3	8.3
	23–27	5	13.9
	28–32	8	22.2
	33–37	7	19.4
	38–42	6	16.7
	43 and above	7	19.4
Highest education	Certificate	8	22.2
	Diploma	10	27.8
	Undergraduate	12	33.3
	Graduate	6	16.7
Voting experience	Once	3	8.3
	Twice	7	19.4
	Thrice	9	25.0
	Four times	6	16.7
	More than four times	9	25.0
	Never	2	5.6
Occupation	Smallholder farmer	19	52.8
	Petty trader	7	19.4
	Primary school teacher	4	11.1
	Community health worker	2	5.6
	Skilled artisan	2	5.6
	Unemployed/odd jobs	2	5.6

Occupationally, the majority of respondents were smallholder farmers (52.8%), consistent with Mpwapwa's agrarian economy. Other occupations, such as traders, teachers, health workers, and artisans, provided perspectives tied to social services and community needs, complementing the dominant agricultural

Perceptions of Village Voters toward Female Candidates

The primary objective of this study was to explore the perceptions of village voters toward female candidates in rural elections in Mpwapwa District. Interviews revealed a mixture of respect for the contributions of women in leadership and reservations rooted in cultural norms and gender stereotypes. The findings are presented under five interrelated themes: recognised strengths of female candidates, persistent challenges and unequal treatment, cultural beliefs shaping initial perceptions, capability and role fit, and perceived community benefits of women in leadership.

Theme 1: Recognised Strengths of Female Candidates

A strong majority of participants emphasised that women candidates brought specific strengths to political leadership at the village level. Women were frequently described as approachable, empathetic, and more closely aligned with the daily needs of households. Respondents cited women's attentiveness to issues such as water access, school feeding, and health services, viewing these as central to community wellbeing.

One female trader explained:

"Women listen. They know our problems—water points, school feeding. When a woman is councillor, those things move." (P07-F, 33–37, Petty Trader)

Similarly, a male elder stressed the value of women's honesty and measured promises:

"They don't promise big roads and disappear. They show us a small plan and finish it." (P22-M, 43+, Farmer)

Teachers and health workers reinforced this view, noting that female leaders were often more present at local meetings and diligent in following up on school attendance and health facility needs. This demonstrates that voters associated female leadership with responsiveness and accountability, even in resource-constrained settings.

Theme 2: Persistent Challenges and Unequal Treatment in Campaigns

Despite recognising women's strengths, participants repeatedly highlighted the stricter standards female candidates face compared to their male counterparts. These included heightened moral scrutiny, especially regarding campaign mobility and public interactions.

As one young female farmer remarked:

"If she goes house to house in the evening, people talk. They say, where is her husband? A man can campaign at night, but not a woman." (P30-F, 23–27, Farmer)

Financial constraints and weak party backing were also noted as persistent barriers. A male artisan reported:

"Parties are run by men. Money for fuel goes first to their chosen man. She is told to wait and be patient." (P16-M, 38–42, Artisan).

These testimonies underline the perception that female candidates are disadvantaged not only by cultural expectations but also by institutional practices within political parties.

Theme 3: Cultural Beliefs Shape Initial Perceptions

Cultural and traditional beliefs remain a significant filter through which voters initially view female candidates. Older respondents in particular expressed the view that leadership was historically associated with men, while women were primarily responsible for household management.

An elder farmer noted:

"In our customs, a woman is respected at home. To lead men publicly is still uncomfortable for some." (P02-M, 43+, Elder Farmer)

However, this perspective was not universal. Younger and more educated participants challenged these assumptions, arguing that competence rather than gender should determine leadership suitability. Some voters also admitted that once women demonstrated ability and persistence, their initial scepticism diminished.

Theme 4: Capability and Role Fit—Evolving but Uneven

When directly asked about capability, most participants (27 out of 36) affirmed that women are as capable as men of leading communities. However, capability was frequently conditional on education, confidence, and previous committee or civic roles.

A community health worker explained:

"Capacity is not male or female. It is planning and accounting." (P21-F, 28–32, CHW)

Despite this acknowledgement, role expectations persisted. Female candidates were often viewed as more suited to portfolios associated with social services, such as education, health, and water, while issues like security or infrastructure development were described as "men's areas." These findings reveal an evolving but uneven acceptance of women's full leadership capacity.

Theme 5: Perceived Community Benefits of Women in Leadership

Participants identified several ways in which women's inclusion in leadership could benefit the wider community. These included greater focus on social welfare issues, enhanced transparency in handling community funds, and the promotion of youth and girls' empowerment.

A male farmer observed:

"When there are more women, meetings talk about real family issues." (P05-M, 33–37, Farmer)

Female leaders were also perceived to strengthen trust between leadership and ordinary villagers by bridging the gap between governance structures and households. This benefit was repeatedly described as especially valuable in rural communities where household concerns dominate daily life.

Discussion

The research in Mpwapwa District reveals a nuanced perception among village voters, who increasingly acknowledge the distinct strengths female candidates bring to local governance. Voters frequently described women as more approachable, attentive listeners, and more transparent in handling community funds, with a pronounced focus on critical household-oriented issues such as water access, education, and maternal health. This growing appreciation for women's dedication to community well-being and their grounded approach to everyday concerns aligns with findings from Spain, where rural voters similarly valued these leadership qualities in female candidates (Bagues & Campa, 2021), indicating a potential shift in electorates that have historically favored male leadership. Despite this progress, significant barriers rooted in cultural norms and unequal treatment persist. Female candidates in Mpwapwa face heightened moral scrutiny and are judged more harshly than their male counterparts for activities like late-night campaigning or travelling with male staff. These challenges reflect how socio-structural factors and patriarchal traditions, as also observed in Ghana by Staffan and Minion (2015), continue to reinforce stereotypes that question women's suitability for roles requiring public authority and assertiveness. A pivotal finding from the Tanzanian context, however, is that these entrenched biases are not absolute. A majority of voters in Mpwapwa now openly affirm women's capability for political leadership, often contingent on a candidate's individual education and demonstrated competence. This suggests the electorate is in a state of transition, where tangible performance and proven accountability can override gender biases. Notably, this community-level acceptance has developed organically through visible service delivery, highlighting that in under-resourced rural settings, lived experience with effective female leaders can be a more powerful agent of change than top-down institutional reforms like quotas alone.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

Research in Mpwapwa District reveals that voter perceptions of female candidates are characterized by a complex duality, marked by both progressive acceptance and enduring barriers. While a growing number of voters recognize women as competent, approachable, and effective leaders, particularly in community welfare sectors like water, health, and education a trend observed in similar rural contexts (Bagues & Campa, 2021) this acknowledgment exists alongside persistent patriarchal expectations. Female candidates face heightened moral scrutiny and stereotyping regarding their mobility and public conduct, echoing findings from other developing democracies (Staffan & Minion, 2015). Consequently, women's electoral viability hinges on a dual burden: they must consistently demonstrate tangible competence while simultaneously navigating and negotiating deep-seated cultural norms that impose a significant perception penalty.

Recommendations

Based on the findings related to the second objective, identifying factors influencing voter perception, this study offers critical implications across theoretical, policy, and research domains. Theoretically, it demonstrates that voter perception is not monolithic but shaped by an intersection of performance-based factors like track record and communication skills with socio-cultural influences such as family support and religious endorsements, challenging purely structural explanations of gender bias in politics. For policy, these specific factors point to targeted interventions: political parties must institutionalize transparent primaries and equitable resource allocation to counter systemic disadvantages, while electoral bodies should address safety concerns that disproportionately affect female candidates' visibility and credibility. The identification of these nuanced drivers suggests that future research should quantitatively measure the relative weight of factors like gatekeeper endorsements versus educational attainment, employ longitudinal designs to track perceptual changes, and conduct comparative studies across different rural contexts to build a more robust understanding of how to effectively shift voter perception toward female candidates in constituency-based elections.

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