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Table of Contents:

Beyond Numbers: Measuring GBV at the Intersection of Migration, Race, and Gender	Hongxuan Xu	Asian Women Development Plan International, China	5
	Siyu (Nicole) Qian		
	Zhaoyun Dan		
Changes in Sexist and Gender-Inclusive Language in American English (1990–2019)	Yuki Sugiyama	Chubu University, Japan	23
The Power Beneath the Surface: How Attitude, Assumptions, and Expectations™ Shape Women's Leadership	Dr. Moni Kay	Doctor Moni Kay Consulting, USA	24
The Power of Her Ledger: Leadership Frequency and Ethical Innovation in Forensic Accounting	Dr. Chabela McFashion	The B Venture, USA	28
The Reflective Recovery & Reintegration (R ³) Framework	Juanae Crockwell	Women's Resource Centre, Bermuda	38
Women's Political Marginalization: Institutional Subordination and Reform	Mzuri Issa Ali	Zanzibar University, Tanzania	49
	Sikujua Omar Hamdan		

Index of Authors:

Xu, Hongxuan	5
Ali, Mzuri Issa	49
Crockwell, Juanae	38
Dan, Zhaoyun	5
Hamdan, Sikujua Omar	49
Kay, Dr. Moni	24
McFashion, Dr. Chabela	28
Sugiyama, Yuki	23
Qian, Siyu (Nicole)	5

Beyond Numbers: Measuring GBV at the Intersection of Migration, Race, and Gender

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ABSTRACT

This presentation addresses a critical gap in gender-based violence (GBV) measurement: the systemic invisibility of migrant and minority women within global data frameworks. While GBV indicators direct policy and resources, they frequently fail to capture how violence is shaped by immigration precarity, linguistic isolation, and racialized stereotypes. Drawing on academic literature and in-depth interviews from AWDPI's (Asian Women Development Plan International) multilingual protection network, this research analyzes these measurement gaps and proposes a set of intersectional indicators designed to identify experiences of immigration-related control, language-based coercion, and racially biased service denial. The aim is to advance more equitable data systems that translate into inclusive protection, ensuring historically marginalized communities are accurately seen and effectively supported.

KEYWORDS: GBV measurement, immigration related abuse, linguistic barriers, racialized bias, intersectionality

1 INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence (GBV) measurement plays a constitutive role in shaping how violence is recognized, governed, and addressed through policy: what is counted determines which harms become visible, which populations are prioritized, and which interventions receive institutional support (Merry, 2016). Although standardized survey instruments have significantly advanced prevalence estimation and cross-national comparison (WHO, 2021; Sardinha et al., 2022), they are grounded in implicit assumptions that survivors possess legal security, linguistic access, and institutional familiarity, and that violence manifests primarily through discrete interpersonal incidents. Within this paradigm, migration status, language, and ethnicity are typically treated as background characteristics rather than as constitutive dimensions of violence itself. As a result, forms of harm structured through legal precarity, language barriers, and racialized social positioning remain weakly captured—producing not merely statistical omission, but systematic distortions in protection and resource allocation (Menjívar & Salcido, 2011; Hulley et al., 2022). This limitation is particularly salient for Asian migrant women navigating marriage migration, family reunification, or temporary labor regimes marked by dependency and institutional vulnerability, where violence becomes measurable only insofar as it conforms to the assumptions embedded within the instrument.

This paper argues that prevailing GBV measurement approaches require reconsideration not because they exclude particular populations, but because they rely on conceptualizations of violence that presuppose citizenship, linguistic accessibility, and racial neutrality. Drawing on qualitative interviews with Asian migrant women conducted through a community-based research context, the study examines how gendered harm is produced at the intersection of legal precarity, language barriers, and racialized social positioning. In doing so, the paper makes two contributions. First, it identifies three interconnected dimensions of under-measured violence—legal residency vulnerability, language-based exclusion, and racialized stereotyping—through which harm is experienced and sustained among Asian migrant women, yet remains largely absent from dominant GBV indicators. Second, the findings highlight the need for GBV measurement and policy frameworks to move beyond incident-based models toward approaches that incorporate migration-related abuse, linguistic access, and disaggregated racial indicators, in order to improve institutional recognition, resource allocation, and survivor protection.

2 BACKGROUND: LIMITS OF CONTEMPORARY GBV MEASUREMENT

Contemporary global frameworks for measuring gender-based violence (GBV) have played a crucial role in reframing violence against women from a private matter into an issue of public responsibility and international accountability. Over the past decade, international organizations have increasingly converged around standardized definitions of intimate partner violence (IPV) and non-partner sexual violence, enabling systematic monitoring under Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5.2 and facilitating cross-national comparison (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021; United Nations Statistics Division [UNSD], 2022; Sardinha et al., 2022). Large-scale survey infrastructures, including the European Union Gender-Based Violence Survey and the United States National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, have further institutionalized these definitions through harmonized questionnaires and population-level sampling strategies (Leemis et al., 2022; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights [FRA], 2024).

From a measurement perspective, these developments have substantially expanded the statistical visibility of GBV at national and global levels. However, a growing body of research indicates that prevailing measurement models encounter significant challenges in capturing violence as it is experienced by migrant and racially minoritized women. Rather than reflecting the absence of violence, under-reporting among these populations often points to a misalignment between standardized instruments and lived social realities.

A key limitation of contemporary GBV measurement lies in its continued reliance on incident-based operationalization. Most survey instruments conceptualize violence as discrete and observable acts—such as physical assault or forced sexual contact—implicitly assuming that abuse occurs as episodic events within otherwise stable intimate relationships. This approach, while suitable for prevalence estimation, has been widely criticized for its limited capacity to capture the cumulative, relational, and patterned nature of gendered harm (Kelly, 1988; Walby, Towers, & Francis, 2014). Empirical studies involving migrant women demonstrate that violence frequently operates through prolonged dependency and control rather than through isolated incidents. Practices such as threats of deportation, withdrawal of spousal sponsorship, confiscation of identity documents, or manipulation of legal information may not involve physical force, yet they generate sustained fear and constraint (Menjívar & Salcido, 2011; Alsinai, Douglas, & Fitz-Gibbon, 2023). When violence is measured primarily through countable acts tied to specific events, such legally mediated and temporally continuous forms of harm remain weakly captured.

Limitations also arise from how social difference is conceptualized within dominant GBV frameworks. Migration status, ethnicity, and language are typically treated as background demographic variables rather than as constitutive dimensions shaping exposure to violence and access to protection. Intersectional scholarship has long emphasized that vulnerability emerges through the interaction of gender with legal, racial, and institutional hierarchies rather than from identity categories alone (Crenshaw, 1991). Empirical research supports this perspective, showing that migrant women often anticipate heightened scrutiny, disbelief, or immigration-related consequences when engaging with formal institutions. As a result, many strategically limit disclosure or avoid official reporting altogether (Hulley et al., 2022). Such patterned non-disclosure does not simply reduce prevalence estimates; it reshapes what forms of harm become legible within data systems.

Racialized gender norms further influence both survivors' help-seeking practices and institutional interpretations of risk. Studies of Asian women in diasporic contexts highlight the persistence of stereotypes portraying them as compliant, emotionally restrained, or inclined to endure hardship (Pyke & Johnson, 2003; Monterrosa, 2021). These assumptions may lead service providers to interpret silence as cultural preference rather than as a response to fear, dependency, or institutional exclusion. At the same time, survivors themselves may internalize expectations of endurance or fear reinforcing racial stigma through disclosure. When GBV measurement frameworks lack indicators capable of capturing racialized stereotyping or discriminatory institutional encounters, silence is frequently misattributed to individual or cultural traits rather than understood as structurally produced.

These methodological challenges are particularly evident in the measurement of coercive control. Coercive control refers to an ongoing pattern of domination involving surveillance, isolation, intimidation, and dependency, rather than discrete acts of physical violence (Stark, 2007). Although increasingly recognized in legal and policy domains, coercive control remains difficult to operationalize quantitatively. National surveys have been shown to under-detect

non-physical forms of abuse, including digital monitoring, restriction of mobility, and manipulation of bureaucratic processes (Cuomo et al., 2021; Hester et al., 2023). For migrant women whose residency, employment, or access to services depends on intimate relationships, such forms of control are often continuous yet empirically uncountable.

Beyond interpersonal dynamics, GBV measurement frameworks frequently abstract violence from the institutional environments that shape women's capacity for resistance or exit. Insecure residency, exclusion from welfare systems, limited language-accessible services, and fear of immigration enforcement materially constrain survivors' options (Erez & Hartley, 2003; Pittaway & Bartolomei, 2011; Segrave, 2024). Within these contexts, remaining in an abusive relationship may represent a strategy of legal or economic survival rather than acceptance of violence. Yet most quantitative instruments interpret non-disclosure primarily as an individual choice, obscuring how institutional inaccessibility actively suppresses the possibility of reporting.

Taken together, these limitations suggest that contemporary GBV measurement frameworks—while essential for global monitoring—are grounded in assumptions that privilege legally secure and institutionally legible forms of victimization. For Asian migrant women, whose experiences of harm are often legally mediated, linguistically constrained, and racially structured, violence may remain unrecognized not because it is absent, but because existing tools are not designed to detect it. This gap highlights the need for research approaches that foreground survivors' own interpretations of harm and attend to the social conditions shaping disclosure. It is within this context that the present study adopts a qualitative, community-based approach to examine how Asian migrant women experience and conceptualize gender-based violence beyond dominant measurement frameworks.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

This study employs qualitative interviews analyzed through grounded theory to investigate how current GBV measurement frameworks systematically exclude migrant and minority women's experiences. Interviews were chosen because the research question “what forms of violence are unmeasured by existing tools” requires exploratory inquiry that surfaces previously invisible phenomena rather than testing pre-determined hypotheses (Charmaz, 2014). Interviews allow survivors to articulate experiences in their own terms rather than constraining responses within researcher-imposed categories.

Grounded theory is selected because it enables theory development inductively derived from data rather than imposed through existing frameworks (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Traditional GBV tools embody assumptions developed primarily from research with white, citizen women. Grounded theory's iterative process of coding and constant comparison allows migrant women's experiences to generate new conceptual categories (e.g., “visa weaponization,” “linguistic isolation as active violence”) that challenge existing paradigms. As Charmaz (2014) notes, grounded theory is particularly valuable when studying an issue about which current knowledge fails to explain what we observe, precisely the case with GBV measurement's failure to capture immigration-related abuse.

The sample comprised 8 participants purposively selected to represent diverse migration experiences. Semi-structured interviews (40-60-minutes) were conducted in participants' preferred languages by multilingual researchers or trained interpreters. Interview domains

included: 1) experiences of violence, 2) help-seeking patterns, and 3) barriers to accessing services. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and professionally translated into English with instructions to preserve culturally-specific concepts. Table 1 shows the respondents' characteristics.

Table 1 List of Respondents' Characteristics

Participant Code	Location	Nationality / Ethnicity	Status during Abuse	Nature of GBV Experience
B1	Belgium	Vietnamese	Dependent spousal visa	Intimate partner violence, severe linguistic isolation
B2	Belgium	Mandarin Chinese	Dependent spousal visa	Intimate partner violence, language used as a tool of control
US1	USA	Filipina	Marriage migration visa (K-1/CR-1)	Intimate partner violence, with threats related to conditional immigration status
US2	USA	Chinese	Temporary work visa (H-1B)	Intersecting linguistic and cultural stereotyping
US3	USA	Vietnamese	Citizenship	Workplace sexual harassment, with explicit immigration threats
US4	USA	Chinese	Temporary work visa (H-1B)	Workplace discrimination
CN1	PRC	Chinese	Citizenship	Intimate partner violence, struggle with divorce due to economic constraints
CN2	PRC	Chinese	Citizenship	Intimate partner violence, with related risks to child custody

3.3 Data Analysis

Analysis followed Charmaz's (2014) constructivist grounded theory through three stages:

3.3.1 Open coding

Open coding involved a close reading of the interview data to identify words and statements that captured participants' key ideas, experiences, and intentions. Researchers stayed close to

the original wording to preserve participants' meanings, generating first-order codes expressed as words or short phrases. These codes were then grouped by shared concepts to form open codes, with categories named and their attributes and dimensions defined. Coding was conducted in NVivo 14 using free coding based on interview transcripts and field notes. To ensure reliability, three researchers independently coded the same data until no new codes emerged.

3.3.2 Axial and Selective coding

Codes were compared across transcripts to identify patterns. Through constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), three overarching dimensions emerged: (1) Legal residency vulnerabilities, (2) Linguistic barriers, (3) Racialized Violence. By identifying 7 dimensions, selective coding recognizes core theoretical concepts that integrate the relationships among dimensions and organize these relationships into a coherent explanatory narrative. Table 2 exhibits the coding process

Table 2 Coding Process

Category	Dimension	Theoretical Concept
A1 Residency contingent on relationship	B1 Spousal-visa dependency	C1 Legal Residency Vulnerabilities
A2 Abuser controls paperwork and sponsorship		
A3 Perpetrator threatens reporting to immigration	B2 Deportation threats	
A4 Perpetrator withholds or threatens to withdraw legal sponsorship		
A5 Formal visa conditions barring work/benefits exploited as abuse tactic	B3 Family manipulation	
A6 Using custody and jurisdictional complexity across borders as coercion		
A7 Perpetrator deliberately confuses or mis-translate	B4 Cultural Exclusion	C2 Linguistic Barriers
A8 Actively preventing survivor from learning the local language		
A9 Monopolizing role as sole linguistic interpreter with authorities/services		
A10 Hotlines, shelters, and staff lacking necessary language skills	B5 Barrier to Support and Justice	
A11 Protective orders, forms, and critical info only in dominant language		
A12 Service providers assuming competence/self-sufficiency, minimizing need	B6 Positive Stereotype	C3 Racialized Violence
A13 Violence excused or framed as a "cultural difference"		
A14 Survivor reluctance to seek help due to perceived expectations	B7 Inadequacy of segmented categories	
A15 "Asian" category masking intra-group disparities		
A16 Lack of disaggregation by nationality, language, or migration pathway		

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Legal Residency Vulnerabilities

One major dimension of violence missing from current GBV frameworks is how legal residency vulnerability becomes a weapon—especially for women living abroad through marriage migration, partner visas, or family reunification. In many destination countries, women are more likely than men to enter via family-based pathways where residency and access to work, welfare, or services can be contingent on the continuation of an intimate relationship. This dependency is not merely contextual; it restructures the power relations of abuse by making the state’s migration regime an everyday lever of control inside the household. Recent cross-national policy syntheses and empirical work converge on a consistent pattern: precarious or dependent status narrows survivors’ options, suppresses reporting, and increases

the effectiveness of coercive control tactics that rely on legal uncertainty rather than physical force (OECD, 2024; Segrave & Vasil, 2024; Vasil, 2024). For example, a participant on a dependent spousal visa in Belgium described feeling that “my right to stay was not mine—it was his,” explaining that every conflict was accompanied by reminders that her residency “could disappear overnight.” Drawing on existing empirical scholarship and supported by patterns observed across our study population, this section outlines three principal ways in which legal residency vulnerabilities function as a form of gender-based violence: (1) spousal-visa dependency, (2) deportation-related threats, and (3) family manipulation through immigration systems.

4.1.1 Spousal-visa dependency

When a woman’s right to remain in the country is tied to a sponsoring spouse or partner, perpetrators can convert bureaucratic dependency into intimate domination. Economic and “mobility control” indicators used in standard GBV surveys often fail to detect this mechanism because the constraint is partly legal by design: a survivor may be formally barred from work, have restricted access to benefits, or lack independent entitlement to housing and legal aid, making “dependence” look like a neutral visa condition rather than an abuse tactic. Evidence from quantitative policy and economic research shows that when women’s residence permits are contingent on marriage, their risk environment changes in ways consistent with entrapment: for example, a quasi-experimental study using a staggered DID design in Denmark highlights that shifting women from family-reunification dependence to refugee status improves economic integration, increases the probability of divorce, and reduces the probability of intimate partner violence—directly implicating residency dependency as a structural risk factor rather than a background demographic attribute (Hasager, 2024).

This structural vulnerability is then actively exploited by perpetrators. Legal scholarship and applied research on migration-law “family violence provisions” detail how abusers may sabotage documentation, monopolize contact with immigration authorities, withhold critical paperwork, or threaten to withdraw sponsorship—tactics that weaponize institutional complexity and informational asymmetry (Borges Jelinic, 2020). A woman who entered Belgium through spousal sponsorship (B1) recalled that whenever she asked about residency procedures, her partner would end the conversation with, “I’m the sponsor—I decide,” making routine immigration administration an extension of household control. In practice, this produces a form of coercive control that is simultaneously interpersonal and bureaucratic: the abuser’s power is amplified because the survivor cannot easily verify rights, anticipate consequences, or access independent legal advice, especially in early settlement. In large-scale qualitative work with temporary migrants in Australia, the “border regime” itself is shown to function as a compounding layer of harm, where non-citizenship and administrative dependence become part of the machinery that sustains domestic and family violence (Segrave & Vasil, 2024; Borges Jelinic, 2021).

4.1.2 Deportation threats

Deportation-related intimidation is a distinct and highly effective form of psychological abuse because it invokes the state’s coercive power as an extension of the perpetrator’s control. Perpetrators may threaten to report a survivor to immigration enforcement, accuse her of visa fraud, claim that police involvement will automatically trigger removal, or insist that divorce will result in detention or loss of legal status. What makes this mechanism especially invisible in conventional GBV instruments is that many surveys only capture generic “threats of harm” without measuring immigration-specific threats—even though such threats are qualitatively different: they do not merely promise interpersonal retaliation; they threaten administrative

punishment, detention, and forced removal. One participant in the United States who migrated through a marriage visa (US1) described being told after arguments: “If you call the police, they’ll see your papers and you’ll be sent back,” framing help-seeking itself as a pathway to removal rather than protection.

Recent empirical evidence makes clear that immigration threats are not peripheral but common within coercive control trajectories. A study of domestic violence protection orders in Washington State found that victim-survivors described immigration-related threats as part of coercive control, and that legal definitions historically failed to recognize these tactics even when they were central to the survivor’s entrapment (Alsinai et al., 2023). Meanwhile, UK policy evidence documents how fear of immigration enforcement is both “real and justified,” and is frequently exploited by perpetrators through “immigration abuse,” including threats of deportation and separation from children, producing a chilling effect on reporting and disclosure (Domestic Abuse Commissioner, 2023). Together, these findings support a key measurement implication: when surveys do not ask about immigration threats specifically, they undercount coercive control among migrant women by treating legally mediated intimidation as either ordinary “fear” or as a demographic correlates of migration rather than an abuse tactic.

4.1.3 Family manipulation through immigration systems

Legal residency vulnerabilities are also weaponized through family-based immigration systems, where perpetrators leverage survivors’ responsibilities and attachments—children, parents, and extended kin—to deepen entrapment. This includes threatening to block or delay family reunification, refusing sponsorship for children or relatives, and using cross-border legal complexity to intimidate survivors who lack knowledge of jurisdictional rules or access to transnational legal support. While “child custody threats” are sometimes measured in GBV tools, the immigration pathway through which such threats operate—e.g., sponsorship withdrawal, passport control, or threats to take children abroad to a jurisdiction where the survivor lacks standing—typically falls outside standard measurement frameworks. A participant on a dependent spousal visa explained that her partner used sponsorship decisions as leverage over her broader family life, warning that if she “didn’t behave,” he would stop any process that could allow her to “bring family over,” turning reunification itself into a bargaining chip.

Emerging migration–violence scholarship shows that these dynamics should be understood as legally structured coercive control rather than “private family conflict.” In-depth research with women in insecure migration status in Australia documents how precarity is not simply correlated with violence but intersects with it, shaping perpetrators’ tactics and survivors’ constrained choices over time (Vasil, 2024). Complementing this, recent European policy/legal syntheses emphasize that undocumented and precarious-status women face systematic barriers to protection and justice, and that legal precariousness can compound risks including dependency, homelessness, and exclusion from services—conditions that make threats involving children and reunification far more coercive (PICUM, 2025; OECD, 2024). For measurement, the implication is direct: without items that capture immigration-linked family threats (e.g., sponsorship sabotage, threats of removal, cross-border child leverage), prevalence estimates will systematically miss a major pathway by which migrant women are kept in abusive relationships—especially in contexts where family reunification is central to migration trajectories.

4.2 Linguistic barriers

Language, often perceived as a neutral medium of communication, can function as a potent instrument of power and exclusion within contexts of gender-based violence (GBV) (Elizabeth, 2021), particularly for migrant survivors (Marshall & Barrett, 2018). Our research, drawing on in-depth interviews with survivors and service providers, reveals that linguistic differences are frequently weaponized to perpetuate control, amplify vulnerability, and obstruct access to essential support systems. This dimension of violence operates at the intersection of migration, gender, and often race, yet remains under-identified in standard GBV assessment tools. The following analysis, derived from our qualitative findings, outlines two primary mechanisms through which language exacerbates GBV: 1) as a tool of cultural exclusion and as a structural access barrier.

4.2.1 Language as a weaponized tool of cultural exclusion

Perpetrators may strategically manipulate linguistic disparities to isolate and disempower survivors. This form of coercion constitutes a deliberate intersection of psychological abuse and the exploitation of linguistic vulnerability. Tactics reported include the refusal to learn a survivor's native language, actively limiting opportunities for language acquisition (e.g., through discouragement or control over mobility), and intentional miscommunication to foster dependency and confusion.

Current GBV indicators often fail to capture this nuanced violence. For instance, while surveys may inquire about language proficiency or its impact on employment, as indicated by the UN Women (Jansen, 2012)'s guidelines, they rarely treat restricted language learning or weaponized communication as explicit categories of abuse. This gap obscures a critical mechanism of control. A case from AWDPI, a perpetrator in an international marriage, repeatedly dismissed the survivor's need to learn the local language, claiming, "*You don't need it, I'll handle everything.*" This tactic effectively muted the survivor's autonomy. The severity of this isolation was starkly revealed when she attempted to call police; unable to explain her situation in the local language, her plea was dismissed as a potential "miscommunication." Here, language was not merely an attribute, but the very medium through which violence was sustained and institutional response was denied.

4.2.2 Language as a systemic barrier to support and justice

Beyond interpersonal forms of coercion, linguistic barriers constitute systemic obstacles that significantly constrain survivors' ability to seek, access, and sustain support. Interview data from this study illuminate persistent failures in service provision that are grounded in implicit assumptions of monolingual access, revealing how institutional structures can inadvertently exclude those most in need. These failures include the absence of multilingual operators on GBV helplines, limited language proficiency among shelter staff, the availability of critical legal documents such as protective order applications only in the dominant local language, and a broader lack of clear, accessible information about support services in languages spoken by affected communities. Collectively, these conditions not only delay or prevent help-seeking but also exacerbate survivors' isolation, undermine trust in formal institutions, and deepen existing power asymmetries within already precarious migration and gendered contexts.

These systemic shortcomings force survivors to navigate complex legal and medical landscapes without adequate linguistic support, compounding trauma and discouraging formal help-

seeking. As one survivor from a Vietnam international marriage study expressed, *“I wish translation services would be provided.”* Another respondent from the Asian Health Workers Study in the USA noted, *“The first time i came to the states, language is my biggest concern...It makes me unconfident, especially in lawsuits or complicated contexts.”* Their testimonies underscore that linguistic assistance is not a mere convenience but a fundamental component of effective, trauma-informed care that can restore agency and confidence.

4.3 Racialized violence

The intersection of race, migration, and gender-based violence (GBV) reveals a critical paradox: perceived racial privilege can itself become a tool of erasure, rendering violence invisible and hindering help-seeking. Grounded in survivor and service-provider interviews, this research identifies the stereotype of the “model minority”, a structural form of racism disguised as a positive stereotype (Ford, 1996) (Takahashi, 2020), as a significant yet under-measured barrier. This narrative, which homogenizes diverse communities by attaching attributes like high educational attainment and financial stability to entire racial groups, actively distorts the perception of need and justification for violence (Ching et al., 2018).

4.3.1 Positive stereotypes Racialized violence

Structural racism often manifests not only through overt discrimination but also through seemingly benign stereotypes that obscure vulnerability (Chou & Feagin, 2015). In the context of GBV, perpetrators may leverage the “model minority” myth to reframe coercive control as an acceptable cultural difference, while institutional actors may use it to minimize survivors’ needs. As our interview data indicate, service providers may unconsciously assume that East Asian survivors are too *“educated”* or *“financially stable”* to require intervention, leading to dismissive attitudes like, *“they can handle it themselves.”*

This gap is exacerbated by measurement tools that are ill-equipped to detect such nuanced, racialized dynamics. Standard survey instruments, such as Likert scales assessing “perceived discrimination,” often fail to capture how survivors themselves associate racial stereotypes with the normalization and justification of violent behaviors they endure (Poon et al., 2016). The violence becomes entangled with identity, making it harder to name and report.

4.3.2 The Inadequacy of Segmented Racial Categories

While disaggregating data by race is a necessary first step, our research underscores that broad categories like “Asian” are functionally inadequate and can be misleading. Such classifications collapse immense cultural, linguistic, and historical diversity, skewing our understanding of risk factors, help-seeking behaviors, and service needs (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2020) For instance, our findings reveal marked differences between East Asian and Southeast Asian survivors, with the former often reporting greater reluctance to seek help, partly due to internalized pressures of the “model minority” stereotype.

This aggregation creates significant data gaps. As one research participant framed it, *“We know the prevalence of violence among Asian survivors, but we don’t know the proportion by country of origin.”* Consequently, violence patterns within specific ethnic communities remain institutionally invisible, hindering the development of culturally and linguistically tailored support services. Well-intentioned data protection protocols can further entrench this invisibility when they prevent the collection or reporting of finely disaggregated data necessary to reveal these disparities.

5 DISCUSSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The findings presented in this study reveal systematic blind spots in current GBV measurement frameworks that render migrant and minority women statistically, consequently, and politically invisible. Our research with Asian migrant women demonstrates that when immigration status is weaponized, when language barriers are exploited as tools of isolation, and when racialized stereotypes shape both perpetrator tactics and service provider responses, existing measurement tools fail to capture these intersectional realities. This failure is not merely academic. It translates directly into resource misallocation, ineffective interventions, and the perpetuation of violence against the most vulnerable populations.

The practical implications for GBV measurement and its connection to policy-making are therefore clear and urgent: we must redefine GBV measurement by adding questions on migration-related abuse, linguistic barriers, and race-related bias, while generating intersectional variables that capture race-, culture-, and ethnicity-specific struggles. As demonstrated in our analysis, broad racial categories (e.g., "Asian/Pacific Islander") obscure critical variation, yet current frameworks aggregate them as a single "Asian" category with a seemingly low prevalence rate. This methodological shortcoming has profound policy consequences: when specific sub-populations remain invisible in data, they remain absent from budget allocations, service design, and legislative priorities (Shields et al., 2022).

However, methodological refinement alone is insufficient. As an organization operating at the intersection of grassroots research and policy advocacy, AWDPI confronts a persistent challenge: how do we bridge the gap between NGO practice and the enactment of official regulations? Our research with ethnic community organizations yields rich, contextualized data on violence patterns that national statistical offices cannot capture—yet these findings often struggle to influence official data collection protocols or inform government policy. Similarly, our multilingual service pilots demonstrate what works in practice, but scaling these interventions requires navigating bureaucratic inertia, funding constraints, and inter-agency coordination challenges that extend far beyond research methodology.

This challenge raises a central question: how can GBV data collection and policy implementation be aligned to ensure broader reach, appropriate scale, and greater impact? To address this question, the present study proposes three interconnected policy recommendations:

5.1 Establish GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation)-Compliant cross-agency data sharing

High-risk GBV cases often go undetected because relevant information is scattered across agencies. Linking anonymized data from immigration, police, health, and social services can help identify vulnerable women earlier, before violence escalates. Evidence from existing international initiatives shows that when indicators such as dependent visa status, repeated health visits, and prior police contact are viewed together, early intervention becomes possible and repeat victimization can be reduced.

However, the main barriers to such systems are not technical but institutional. While GDPR-compliant models already exist (GDPR.Eu, 2026), data sharing requires legislative authorization and consent and trust (GBVIMS, 2021). Given widespread fears of deportation, any system must include strict legal firewalls that prohibit the use of GBV data for immigration enforcement. Without these protections, data integration risks further deterring survivors from seeking help rather than improving safety.

5.2 Mandate intersectional indicators in national GBV surveys

This recommendation addresses definitional gaps that leave intersectional forms of violence unmeasured. Government-funded GBV prevalence surveys should systematically collect data on immigration pathway, visa dependency, language proficiency, and disaggregated ethnicity, alongside items capturing migration-related abuse, linguistic isolation, and racialized violence.

A key implementation challenge is resistance from statistical offices, often framed in terms of data protection or survey length. Our experience indicates that positioning intersectional measurement as a correction of systematic bias, rather than an expansion of complexity, can facilitate institutional uptake. Demonstrating that existing instruments undercount violence among specific migrant populations, and that similar indicators have been validated in other national contexts, has proven effective in opening space for methodological reform.

5.3 Establish mandatory multilingual service standards with accountability

Even when violence is measured, many migrant women remain unable to access support due to language barriers. Government-funded GBV services should therefore be required to provide meaningful access in the main community languages in their area, including multilingual hotlines, translated materials, and staff trained to recognize immigration-related abuse and provider bias.

To avoid superficial compliance, linguistic access must be paired with accountability. Simple metrics such as response times, service use across language groups, and client outcomes can help assess whether services are genuinely accessible. At the same time, policies must ensure that the burden of multilingual provision does not fall disproportionately on under-resourced community organizations. Dedicated capacity-building support is essential if linguistic access is to be sustainable rather than extractive.

6 LIMITATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings and that point to priorities for future research.

First, the empirical analysis is situated within the country-specific context. While the mechanisms identified, such as immigration-status dependency, linguistic isolation, and racialized forms of abuse, are likely relevant across other European and North American settings, their prevalence and institutional manifestations are shaped by national immigration regimes, welfare systems, and minority histories. Comparative research across different policy environments is therefore necessary to assess the transferability of these findings and to distinguish context-specific dynamics from more generalizable patterns of intersectional vulnerability.

Second, the study does not provide longitudinal evidence on the causal effects of the proposed policy interventions. Although existing international precedents suggest that measures such as multilingual service provision and cross-agency data integration may facilitate earlier help-seeking and reduce violence escalation, evaluating their long-term impact requires sustained,

multi-year research designs. Future studies should embed longitudinal and quasi-experimental approaches within policy pilots to assess changes in service utilization, timing of disclosure, and survivor outcomes over time.

Third, the call for more granular, intersectional data raises important ethical and methodological tensions related to privacy and trust, particularly for small or precarious migrant communities. While disaggregation is necessary to correct systematic undercounting, it also increases the risk of re-identification and may deter participation among undocumented or highly marginalized survivors. Further research is needed to evaluate privacy-preserving analytical techniques and participatory data governance models that balance statistical visibility with survivor safety and informed consent.

7 CONCLUSION

Current GBV measurement frameworks overlook the experiences of migrant and minority women by failing to capture immigration-related abuse, linguistic exclusion, and racialized violence. This invisibility is structural rather than accidental, rooted in measurement tools built around assumptions of citizenship, majority-language access, and racial homogeneity. The gap lies not in underreporting, but in systems that were never designed to recognize their realities. Cross-agency data integration, mandatory intersectional indicators, and multilingual service standards represent a substantive shift in how GBV is measured and addressed. Together, they move the field toward intersectional, culturally grounded, and structurally informed approaches that are technically feasible and legally achievable, but that require sustained political commitment to implement.

No one should disappear in data or in policy. Recognizing this requires a simple but uncomfortable acknowledgment: measurement is never neutral. It either reproduces existing exclusions or actively works to correct them. This study argues for the latter, and for treating visibility not as a by-product of good data, but as a political and ethical choice.

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Changes in Sexist and Gender-Inclusive Language in American English (1990–2019)

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Since the 1970s, forms such as -man nouns and binary pronouns have been criticized as reflecting a male-centered perspective, and gender-inclusive alternatives have been promoted in style guides such as the APA Publication Manual (7th ed., 2020). This study examines how these recommendations are reflected in actual usage.

Using the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), the study traces changes in sexist and gender-inclusive expressions from 1990 to 2019. Expressions identified as sexist in APA guidelines (e.g., -man nouns, housewife, and binary pronouns) and their inclusive counterparts were analyzed to identify longitudinal trends.

Results show a sharp decline in -man nouns ($p < .001$), with overall frequency dropping by more than three quarters during the period. Decreases are evident across most registers, while the increase observed in the Academic section largely reflects metalinguistic discussion rather than renewed sexist usage. Patterns of change vary by term: some show clear replacement (policeman → police officer), others shift toward shorter neutral forms (chairman → chair), and some decline without a single replacement. Both housewife and homemaker decreased significantly, consistent with changing conceptions of domestic roles.

Pronoun usage shows a decline in explicitly gendered forms alongside the continued stability of singular they, suggesting its consolidation as a singular pronoun.

Overall, the findings indicate that the shift toward gender-inclusive language is observable in usage and proceeds through multiple, term-specific pathways rather than a single uniform change.

Keywords: gender-inclusive language; sexist language; diachronic corpus analysis

The Power Beneath the Surface: How Attitude, Assumptions, and Expectations™ Shape Women's Leadership

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Abstract

Leadership is often evaluated through visible behaviors, outcomes, and performance metrics. Yet the most powerful forces shaping leadership effectiveness are frequently invisible. This paper examines how three internal dynamics—Attitude, Assumptions, and Expectations™ (the AAE Framework™)—operate beneath the surface of women's leadership, influencing communication, decision-making, relationships, and organizational culture. Drawing on leadership research, relational psychology, and the author's professional framework presented in *3 Silent Relationship Destroyers* and related works, this paper argues that unexamined attitudes, untested assumptions, and unspoken expectations not only undermine trust and culture but also contribute to stress-related health consequences for women leaders. Through a conceptual model, research integration, and applied strategies—including a women-centered leadership vignette in education—this paper invites leaders to engage in reflective awareness as a pathway to healthier leadership, stronger relationships, and more sustainable organizational impact.

Keywords: women's leadership; organizational culture; emotional labor; stress; health; attitude; assumptions; expectations

1. Introduction

Women in leadership continue to navigate complex expectations—organizational performance, relational competence, emotional intelligence, and cultural adaptation—often under heightened scrutiny. While much leadership literature addresses external behaviors and structural barriers, less attention is given to the internal processes that quietly shape leadership presence and relational outcomes. Yet in practice, what leaders believe, assume, and expect powerfully determines how they communicate, how they interpret others, and how they respond under pressure.

This paper advances the thesis that Attitude, Assumptions, and Expectations™ (AAE) operate as “silent shapers” of leadership. When left unexamined, these forces distort meaning, fuel conflict, and erode trust; when brought into awareness, they become tools for clarity, alignment, and relational health. Grounded in the author's AAE Framework™, this paper explores how AAE shapes women's leadership, how these forces contribute to emotional and physical strain, and how leaders can intentionally reclaim agency in their leadership practice.

2. Results

This conceptual and applied paper does not present statistical findings; however, recurring patterns emerged across leadership contexts. When leaders examined internal posture (attitude), tested unspoken narratives (assumptions), and articulated previously implicit standards (expectations), improvements were consistently observed in relational trust, communication clarity, and leader well-being. In the case vignette presented later, shifts in interpretation directly preceded reductions in conflict, improvements in engagement, and self-reported decreases in stress-related symptoms.

3. Discussion

The AAE Framework™ proposes that leadership outcomes are not driven solely by strategy or skill, but by internal meaning-making processes that precede behavior.

Attitude reflects a leader's emotional posture toward people, challenges, and change. It shapes tone, presence, and the emotional climate of teams.

Assumptions are the unspoken conclusions leaders draw about others' motives, competence, or intent. They fill gaps in information, often without verification.

Expectations represent internal standards for behavior, performance, and outcomes—frequently left implicit and unarticulated.

Together, these forces guide interpretation and response. As the author argues in *3 Silent Relationship Destroyers*, when attitudes harden, assumptions go untested, and expectations remain unspoken, relationships deteriorate not through overt conflict but through accumulated misinterpretation and emotional distance. These dynamics form what the author terms the *Culture Cascade™*: what leaders believe internally becomes what teams experience externally. Culture is transmitted through tone, reaction, and response—day after day (Schein, 2010).

Women's Leadership and the Invisible Load

Women leaders frequently operate within relationally dense environments—managing people, navigating power dynamics, and balancing performance with perceptions of likability, competence, and emotional availability. Research on women in leadership notes that women are often expected to lead collaboratively while simultaneously meeting performance standards shaped by traditionally masculine leadership norms. This dual burden intensifies the internal processing of AAE.

Attitudes toward self (“I must not fail”), assumptions about others (“They don't take me seriously”), and expectations about performance (“I must be exceptional to be seen as competent”) can quietly shape daily leadership behavior. These internal narratives influence how feedback is delivered, how conflict is avoided or confronted, and how authority is exercised.

The result is often emotional labor that remains unseen—what sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1983) describes as the management of feeling to meet organizational expectations. Over time, this invisible labor becomes embedded in a leader's internal posture, shaping not only leadership outcomes but also personal well-being.

Health Implications: When Internal Forces Become Physiological

The impact of unexamined AAE extends beyond organizational culture into physical and emotional health. Research consistently links chronic stress to increased risk of cardiovascular disease, immune dysfunction, anxiety, depression, and burnout. The American Psychological Association (APA, 2017) identifies prolonged stress as a significant contributor to sleep disruption, hypertension, and emotional exhaustion.

In relational psychology, Gottman and Silver's (1999) research on conflict demonstrates how negative assumptions and contemptuous attitudes erode relational stability over time. While their work focuses on intimate relationships, the same dynamics operate in professional contexts: unresolved expectations and distorted assumptions increase emotional strain and relational fatigue.

Bradbury and Karney's (2010) vulnerability–stress–adaptation model further explains how internal vulnerabilities (beliefs, expectations) interact with external stressors to shape relational outcomes. When leaders repeatedly carry unspoken expectations or operate from defensive assumptions, stress is not only relational—it becomes physiological. Over time, leaders may experience what the World Health Organization (WHO, 2019) identifies as occupational burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment.

For women leaders, who are statistically more likely to shoulder emotional labor and caregiving roles, this internalization of AAE-driven stress compounds existing pressures. Leadership thus becomes not only a professional challenge but a health risk when awareness and boundary-setting are absent.

Case Vignette: A Woman Leader in Education

Context. A female principal leading a turnaround school was widely respected for her competence and commitment. Test scores were rising. Staff turnover was decreasing. On paper, the school was improving.

Attitude. Internally, she carried a constant pressure to “prove” her leadership. Her emotional posture was urgency. Everything felt high-stakes.

Assumptions. When teachers questioned decisions, she assumed they were resisting her authority rather than seeking clarity. She interpreted hesitation as opposition.

Expectations. She expected staff to anticipate needs without explicit direction. When they did not, she felt disappointed, frustrated, and increasingly isolated.

The Result. Communication became strained. Staff described the environment as tense but could not articulate why. The principal began experiencing insomnia, headaches, and emotional exhaustion.

Intervention through AAE. When introduced to the AAE Framework™, she identified the internal narratives shaping her leadership. She tested assumptions directly with staff. She named expectations explicitly. She softened her attitude from pressure to partnership.

Outcome. Within months, relational trust improved, staff engagement increased, and the leader reported reduced stress and greater emotional clarity. The culture did not change because strategy changed. It changed because interpretation did.

4. Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative, practice-based methodology grounded in professional reflection, applied leadership coaching, and conceptual integration of established psychological and organizational research. Data sources include the author’s longitudinal leadership practice, case-based observation, and synthesis of peer-reviewed literature in organizational culture, relational psychology, stress, and burnout. While not a controlled empirical study, the approach aligns with practitioner scholarship focused on theory-to-practice application.

5. Conclusion

The most influential dimensions of leadership are rarely visible. Attitude, assumptions, and expectations quietly shape every interaction, decision, and relationship. For women leaders navigating complex professional and relational landscapes, these internal forces can either become silent burdens or sources of intentional power.

By bringing the unseen into awareness, leaders reclaim choice: how to interpret, how to respond, and how to build cultures grounded in clarity, trust, and health. Leadership, then, is not merely about what is accomplished—but about who the leader becomes in the process.

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The Power of Her Ledger: Leadership Frequency and Ethical Innovation in Forensic Accounting

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ABSTRACT

Forensic accounting functions as a governance mechanism within financial systems, safeguarding institutional integrity through fraud detection, litigation support, and regulatory compliance. Despite its critical role in mitigating systemic risk, leadership within this field remains demographically narrow. African American women remain underrepresented in the accounting profession, with even smaller representation in investigative and forensic leadership roles. This disparity raises a structural governance question: how does homogeneity in investigative authority influence fraud detection capacity, ethical vigilance, and institutional resilience?

This paper introduces Leadership Frequency as a governance framework for understanding how interpretive capacity operates within forensic oversight environments. Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship in organizational behavior, fraud examination, and leadership studies, the analysis synthesizes demographic trends and professional industry literature to examine how credentialing, entrepreneurial firm formation, and strategic professional affiliation function as mechanisms of institutional legitimacy and governance participation.

Entrepreneurship is reframed as structural intervention rather than career mobility alone. The paper advances four propositions demonstrating how diverse investigative leadership expands anomaly detection bandwidth, strengthens accountability architecture, and enhances anticipatory governance. By positioning inclusion as governance capacity rather than symbolic representation, the study contributes to accounting scholarship and leadership theory while offering a structural lens for strengthening institutional oversight.

KEYWORDS

forensic accounting, governance, leadership frequency, fraud detection, cognitive diversity, entrepreneurship, ethical oversight

1 INTRODUCTION

Governance systems are designed to detect instability, allocate authority, and preserve institutional integrity under conditions of uncertainty. In complex financial environments, oversight mechanisms depend not only on formal rules and regulatory architecture, but also on the interpretive capacity of individuals operating within those systems. Early warning signals of fraud, control failure, and ethical misalignment rarely present themselves as explicit violations at inception. Rather, they emerge as subtle inconsistencies, cultural anomalies, procedural shortcuts, or credibility tensions that require disciplined perception to identify and escalate responsibly.

Traditional governance frameworks emphasize structural design: compliance controls, reporting hierarchies, audit procedures, and enforcement mechanisms (Bovens, 2007; COSO, 2017). While these elements are essential, they do not fully account for how risk is actually recognized within institutions. Organizational research consistently demonstrates that the effectiveness of governance is influenced by who is authorized to speak, who is believed when they do, and how diagnostic insight moves through power structures. Authority distribution and listening practices shape whether weak signals are classified as noise or treated as credible early warnings (Roberts, 2009; Power, 1997).

This paper introduces Leadership Frequency as a governance framework for understanding how diagnostic perception operates within institutional oversight environments. Leadership Frequency refers to the disciplined ability to detect emerging risk, integrate contextual knowledge, communicate insight strategically, and anchor decision-making in ethical accountability. Rather than conceptualizing leadership primarily as positional power, this framework centers leadership as governance functionality. It emphasizes how institutional resilience depends on the quality and diversity of diagnostic perception within oversight roles.

Forensic accounting provides a particularly relevant site for examining this framework. As a field dedicated to fraud detection, internal control evaluation, and financial integrity, forensic accounting functions as a formalized institutional early-warning system within financial governance structures (ACFE, 2022). Professionals within this domain assess documentation irregularities, financial discrepancies, compliance deviations, and behavioral indicators of misconduct. However, the capacity to recognize early-stage instability often extends beyond technical proficiency. It requires pattern recognition, contextual awareness, and the confidence to surface concerns within hierarchical environments where authority and credibility may not be evenly distributed.

Within this context, the representation of Black women in forensic accounting becomes analytically significant. Rather than approaching representation solely as a demographic concern, this paper examines how professionals navigating structural authority asymmetries may develop heightened interpretive sensitivity and strategic communication capacities. Operating within environments where credibility must be consistently earned and defended can sharpen diagnostic discipline and ethical vigilance. These competencies contribute directly to institutional governance outcomes, particularly in high-stakes financial systems.

Drawing on industry research, professional trend analysis, and governance theory, this study applies the Leadership Frequency framework to forensic accounting practice. The objective is not to romanticize marginality nor to essentialize experience, but to examine how diverse leadership trajectories can enhance institutional oversight capacity. By reframing inclusion as governance functionality rather than symbolic presence, this paper argues that expanding leadership representation within forensic accounting strengthens fraud prevention, improves compliance architecture, and increases systemic resilience.

The sections that follow outline the conceptual components of Leadership Frequency, examine their application within forensic accounting environments, and discuss the broader governance implications for financial institutions. Through this analysis, the paper advances a structural understanding of leadership as an institutional safeguard embedded within systems of accountability.

Existing governance and leadership scholarship has examined accountability structures, ethical climate, and authority distribution (Bovens, 2007; Treviño et al., 2006), yet less attention has been given to how interpretive capacity itself functions as a structural safeguard within oversight systems. Leadership Frequency addresses this gap by conceptualizing diagnostic perception as a governance mechanism embedded within institutional architecture.

2 METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a conceptual governance analysis approach. Rather than conducting primary empirical data collection, the paper develops and applies the Leadership Frequency framework through structured theoretical synthesis and professional literature review. Conceptual analysis is appropriate where the objective is to clarify constructs, articulate mechanisms, and examine their implications within institutional systems.

The analysis proceeds in three stages. First, relevant governance scholarship is examined to establish the relationship between authority allocation, institutional listening practices, and early-warning detection within complex organizations. This stage situates the argument within broader conversations concerning risk classification, compliance design, and accountability architecture. Second, literature and professional discourse within forensic accounting are reviewed to identify the formal responsibilities, decision-making pressures, and structural constraints that shape fraud detection environments. This includes examination of credentialing structures, regulatory expectations, and oversight responsibilities within financial institutions.

Third, the Leadership Frequency framework is analytically applied to forensic accounting practice as a governance case. The framework's components—Signal Sensitivity, Contextual Integration, Credibility Navigation, and Ethical Anchoring—are examined as interpretive mechanisms that influence how emerging financial risks are identified and escalated. The objective is not to measure demographic outcomes, but to clarify how diverse leadership trajectories may generate differentiated diagnostic capacities within institutional settings.

This methodological approach prioritizes conceptual clarity and structural explanation. It does not seek to generalize empirically but to clarify theoretical mechanisms. By integrating governance theory with professional oversight contexts, the paper advances a framework designed to inform future empirical inquiry and practical governance reform.

3 LEADERSHIP FREQUENCY AS A GOVERNANCE MODEL

Leadership Frequency can be understood as a governance capacity that enhances institutional clarity, ethical discernment, and early risk detection within complex financial systems. In forensic accounting, where fraud detection, compliance evaluation, and internal control assessment are central, interpretive intelligence often determines whether weak signals are recognized before they escalate into systemic failure. Leadership Frequency provides a structured framework for understanding how certain professionals, particularly those navigating historically uneven authority structures, develop heightened diagnostic capabilities within institutional environments.

Rather than conceptualizing leadership solely as positional authority, Leadership Frequency reframes it as the disciplined ability to perceive instability, interpret emerging patterns, and move insight effectively through governance systems. Within forensic accounting, this capacity becomes especially relevant. Financial misconduct rarely emerges without precursor signals. Inconsistent documentation, ambiguous reporting, accelerated timelines, or cultural resistance to inquiry often precede formalized breaches. The capacity to detect and interpret these weak indicators strengthens fraud prevention and institutional accountability.

Leadership Frequency consists of four interrelated components, illustrated in Figure 1.

Signal Sensitivity refers to the early recognition of subtle indicators of misalignment, control weakness, or ethical risk. Professionals operating in forensic contexts often identify discrepancies before quantitative thresholds trigger formal investigation. This sensitivity enhances anticipatory intervention rather than reactive remediation.

Contextual Integration involves synthesizing professional expertise, lived experience, regulatory awareness, and organizational dynamics into structured governance assessment. Effective forensic leaders do not interpret anomalies in isolation; they situate them within broader institutional patterns. This integration reduces interpretive blind spots and improves risk classification.

Credibility Navigation describes the strategic movement of insight through hierarchical systems. Within financial institutions, authority does not always align with proximity to emerging risk.

Leadership Frequency includes the capacity to communicate diagnostic findings in ways that influence decision-making structures, even when formal authority is limited. Ethical Anchoring ensures that risk identification remains tethered to accountability. Forensic accounting is inherently normative; it evaluates not only technical compliance but ethical integrity. Leadership Frequency emphasizes responsibility in action, reinforcing the alignment between detection, disclosure, and corrective governance measures. Together, these components generate governance outcomes that extend beyond representation. When institutional structures recognize and integrate Leadership Frequency, organizations benefit from enhanced fraud detection, strengthened compliance architecture, increased transparency, and improved systemic resilience. Diverse diagnostic perspectives expand the interpretive bandwidth of financial oversight, reducing the likelihood that early-warning signals will be dismissed or misclassified. In this context, inclusion is not symbolic. It is functional. Broadening leadership representation within forensic accounting increases the probability that weak signals will be surfaced, interpreted accurately, and acted upon responsibly. Leadership Frequency therefore operates not merely as a leadership style, but as a governance innovation capable of strengthening financial systems from within.

Figure 1 illustrates the four components of the Leadership Frequency Governance Model and their relationship to institutional outcomes.

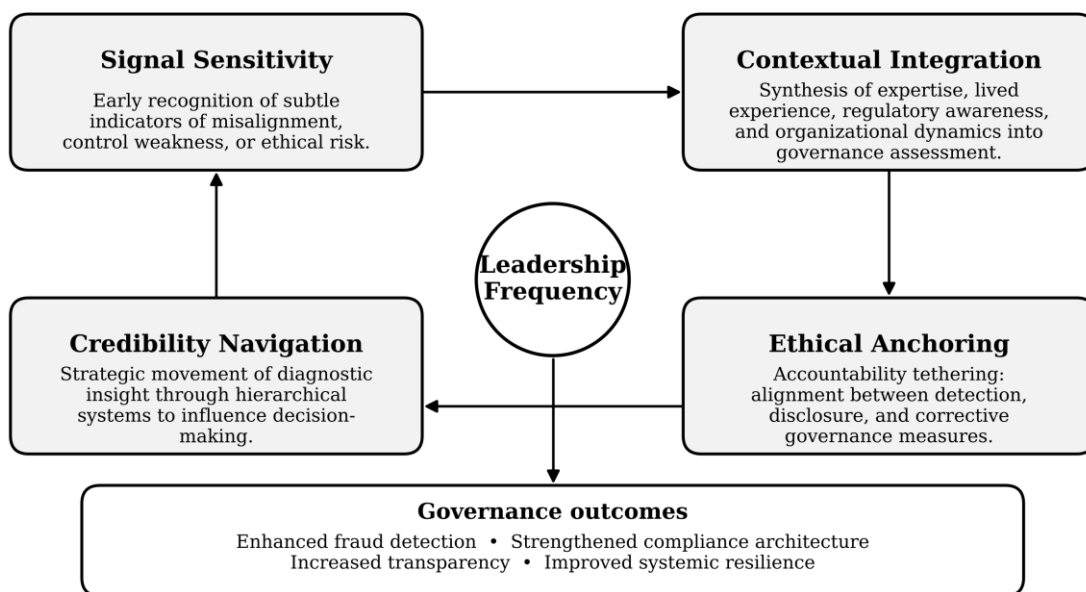


Figure 1. Leadership Frequency Governance Model

4 RESULTS

Applying Leadership Frequency to forensic accounting produces four interrelated governance propositions. These propositions do not function as empirical claims in the statistical sense, but as analytically derived statements clarifying how interpretive capacity influences institutional oversight outcomes.

Proposition 1: Signal Sensitivity enhances anticipatory governance within financial systems.

Fraud and control failures rarely originate as overt violations. Institutional instability more commonly emerges through incremental anomalies—minor ledger discrepancies, informal procedural overrides, reporting inconsistencies, or subtle cultural resistance to inquiry. These

indicators often remain below formal investigative thresholds. Governance breakdown occurs when such weak signals are normalized or misclassified as routine variance.

Signal Sensitivity, as conceptualized within Leadership Frequency, refers to disciplined attentiveness to these early-stage incongruities. Within forensic accounting, this includes recognition of unusual transactional clustering, irregular authorization patterns, ambiguous audit trails, or unexplained shifts in compliance documentation. The significance of these signals lies not in their magnitude, but in their deviation from institutional baseline expectations.

When institutions structurally legitimize early concern—rather than penalizing deviation from consensus—they strengthen anticipatory governance. Signal Sensitivity therefore operates as an institutional safeguard. It expands the interpretive bandwidth of oversight systems and increases the probability that emerging risk is addressed prior to escalation.

Research on organizational misconduct demonstrates that early irregularities are often normalized through internal cultural processes, increasing the likelihood of systemic escalation (Ashforth & Anand, 2003).

Proposition 2: Contextual Integration mitigates interpretive fragmentation in compliance environments.

Governance systems frequently fail not because data is absent, but because it is interpreted in isolation. Financial oversight involves multiple informational streams: regulatory requirements, internal control documentation, operational pressures, performance incentives, and organizational culture. Fragmented interpretation across these domains produces blind spots.

Contextual Integration refers to the capacity to synthesize technical knowledge, regulatory awareness, organizational dynamics, and experiential insight into coherent risk assessment. In forensic accounting, effective analysis requires situating discrete anomalies within broader structural patterns. For example, an isolated reporting discrepancy may reflect routine error; however, when interpreted alongside performance pressures, incentive misalignment, or management override tendencies, it may signal systemic vulnerability.

Leadership Frequency emphasizes this integrative discipline. Rather than privileging singular metrics, it values cross-contextual synthesis. Institutions that encourage multi-dimensional interpretation demonstrate increased resilience against complex financial misconduct. Contextual Integration thus strengthens compliance architecture by reducing interpretive silos.

Proposition 3: Credibility Navigation determines whether diagnostic insight produces corrective action.

Risk identification alone does not guarantee institutional response. Governance outcomes depend upon whether diagnostic findings move effectively through hierarchical decision structures.

Authority within financial institutions is unevenly distributed; proximity to emerging risk does not always align with positional power.

Credibility Navigation describes the strategic communication and escalation of diagnostic insight within such authority landscapes. Forensic professionals often operate within constrained credibility environments where raising concern may be perceived as disruptive or adversarial. Leadership Frequency recognizes that interpretive accuracy must be accompanied by disciplined presentation, documentation, and timing to influence governance decisions.

Institutions that formalize protected channels for escalation and value structured dissent increase the likelihood that early-warning signals translate into corrective intervention. Credibility Navigation therefore functions as a mediating mechanism between detection and institutional action. Without it, even accurate risk identification may fail to alter outcomes.

Proposition 4: Ethical Anchoring reinforces accountability architecture and public trust.

Forensic accounting is not merely technical evaluation; it is inherently normative. It assesses alignment between financial conduct and institutional responsibility. Ethical Anchoring refers to the alignment of detection practices with transparency, disclosure, and corrective integrity.

Within Leadership Frequency, ethical orientation is not treated as abstract virtue but as governance infrastructure. When detection is accompanied by consistent accountability practices—clear documentation, timely reporting, and corrective transparency—institutions reinforce internal

discipline and external trust. Conversely, when risk is identified but suppressed to preserve reputation or internal cohesion, governance fragility increases. Ethical Anchoring therefore stabilizes institutional response mechanisms. It ensures that interpretive vigilance translates into responsible action rather than selective enforcement. In financial systems where credibility underpins public confidence, this alignment is foundational to long-term resilience.

The four propositions outlined above clarify Leadership Frequency as a governance capacity rather than a leadership style. Signal Sensitivity, Contextual Integration, Credibility Navigation, and Ethical Anchoring operate collectively to shape how institutional oversight functions in practice. Together, they describe mechanisms through which interpretive capacity influences whether emerging risk is identified, contextualized, communicated, and addressed responsibly. Importantly, these mechanisms are not confined to individual disposition. They are conditioned by institutional structures. Authority allocation, protected reporting channels, organizational culture, and credibility hierarchies determine whether Leadership Frequency can operate effectively within oversight environments. Where institutions structurally suppress dissent or narrow the range of credible voices, early-warning capacity diminishes. Where systems legitimize disciplined diagnostic vigilance, governance resilience increases.

By situating Leadership Frequency within forensic accounting, this analysis demonstrates how diverse interpretive trajectories can strengthen institutional safeguards. However, the implications extend beyond a single professional domain. The propositions suggest broader questions concerning how organizations design listening practices, allocate authority, and classify risk under uncertainty. The following section examines these wider governance implications and considers how institutional architecture can either constrain or amplify diagnostic capacity within complex systems.

Behavioral ethics scholarship further underscores the importance of ethical decision climates in shaping institutional accountability outcomes (Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006).

Table 1 summarizes the structural relationship between Leadership Frequency components and their corresponding governance functions within forensic oversight systems.

Table 1. Leadership Frequency as Governance Architecture in Forensic Accounting

Leadership Frequency Component	Governance Function and Institutional Impact
Signal Sensitivity	Enhances anticipatory governance by legitimizing early anomaly detection and reducing normalization of minor irregularities.
Contextual Integration	Mitigates interpretive silos through cross-context synthesis of regulatory, organizational, and experiential data.
Credibility Navigation	Translates diagnostic accuracy into institutional response through structured escalation within hierarchical systems.
Ethical Anchoring	Reinforces accountability architecture by aligning detection with transparent corrective action.

5 DISCUSSION

The analysis presented in this paper positions Leadership Frequency as a governance capacity embedded within institutional oversight environments. Through its four components—Signal Sensitivity, Contextual Integration, Credibility Navigation, and Ethical Anchoring—the framework clarifies how interpretive capacity influences fraud detection, compliance integrity, and accountability outcomes within forensic accounting.

The implications extend beyond individual competence. Institutions are not strengthened solely by adding technical expertise; they are strengthened when governance structures legitimize disciplined diagnostic perception. Signal Sensitivity is most effective in environments where early concern is not dismissed as overreaction. Contextual Integration requires organizational cultures that value cross-functional interpretation rather than siloed assessment. Credibility Navigation depends upon formalized escalation pathways that protect dissent and evidence-based challenge. Ethical Anchoring relies upon leadership commitment to transparency and corrective integrity.

Within forensic accounting, expanding leadership representation broadens the interpretive range of oversight systems. Diverse professional trajectories often cultivate heightened attentiveness to misalignment and structural inconsistency. When institutions recognize these capacities as governance assets, they increase resilience against fraud and control breakdown. Conversely, when authority and credibility remain narrowly concentrated, oversight becomes vulnerable to normalization of risk and suppression of early-warning signals.

For leadership practitioners and policymakers, the central insight is structural rather than symbolic. Inclusion strengthens governance when it enhances interpretive diversity within institutional decision-making systems. Adaptive leadership scholarship similarly emphasizes that complex institutional challenges require expanded interpretive capacity rather than singular authority concentration (Heifetz, 1994).

Leadership Frequency reframes representation as institutional capacity. It suggests that strengthening financial governance requires attention not only to compliance architecture, but to who is authorized to surface concern and how those concerns are evaluated.

By situating Leadership Frequency within forensic accounting, this paper contributes to leadership discourse by emphasizing governance design as an essential dimension of ethical leadership. Financial systems do not fail solely because rules are absent. They fail when diagnostic insight is misclassified, marginalized, or disregarded. Strengthening oversight therefore requires deliberate cultivation of environments where disciplined perception, ethical clarity, and accountable escalation are structurally supported.

While this analysis is conceptual and does not provide empirical validation, it establishes a framework for future research examining interpretive diversity within governance systems

5.1 Leadership Frequency in Relation to Governance and Organizational Theory

Leadership Frequency extends existing governance scholarship by reframing interpretive capacity as structural infrastructure rather than individual trait. Traditional accountability frameworks emphasize answerability, enforcement, and transparency mechanisms (Bovens, 2007). Risk management models focus on internal control design, compliance architecture, and monitoring systems (COSO, 2017). While these models articulate how oversight should function procedurally, they devote comparatively less attention to the interpretive agents operating within those systems. Organizational scholarship has long recognized that information alone does not produce institutional learning. Weick's sensemaking theory suggests that individuals actively construct meaning under conditions of ambiguity, shaping whether signals are treated as threats or dismissed as routine variation. Similarly, research on the "audit society" (Power, 1997) demonstrates that verification systems can become ritualized, privileging formal compliance over substantive vigilance. These insights indicate that governance strength depends not only on structural controls but on how actors interpret emerging irregularities.

Leadership Frequency integrates these streams by conceptualizing interpretive vigilance as governance functionality. Rather than assuming that internal controls automatically generate protection, the framework emphasizes the human mediation of risk classification. Signal Sensitivity, Contextual Integration, Credibility Navigation, and Ethical Anchoring collectively describe how institutional actors translate ambiguity into accountable action.

In this respect, Leadership Frequency aligns with adaptive leadership theory (Heifetz, 1994), which argues that complex challenges require disciplined interpretation rather than technical authority

alone. However, Leadership Frequency advances this argument by situating interpretive capacity specifically within financial oversight systems. It provides a domain-specific articulation of how leadership operates as early-warning architecture within forensic accounting.

By embedding interpretive diversity within governance theory, this framework challenges institutions to examine not only their compliance controls but their listening structures. Who is authorized to classify risk? Whose anomaly detection is legitimized? How are dissenting interpretations processed within hierarchical environments? These structural questions extend beyond representation discourse and reposition inclusion as governance infrastructure.

5.2 Institutional Design Implications for Financial Governance

If Leadership Frequency operates as governance capacity, its implications extend to institutional design. Organizations seeking to strengthen fraud prevention and ethical accountability must move beyond demographic metrics toward structural integration of diagnostic diversity.

First, institutions can formalize protected escalation channels that reduce credibility penalties for raising early concern. Research on organizational silence demonstrates that employees often withhold risk-relevant information due to fear of reputational harm or authority retaliation.

Embedding structured dissent mechanisms—such as independent ethics review pathways or documented anomaly reporting systems—amplifies Signal Sensitivity at the system level.

Second, compliance architecture should encourage cross-functional synthesis rather than siloed review. Contextual Integration is strengthened when forensic accounting, internal audit, compliance, and operational leadership engage in structured dialogue regarding emerging patterns. Institutionalizing interdisciplinary review panels or rotating risk assessment forums can reduce interpretive fragmentation.

Third, leadership development programs within financial institutions should emphasize Ethical Anchoring as governance discipline rather than moral abstraction. Training that integrates ethical reasoning with real-world case analysis enhances the probability that detection leads to transparent corrective action rather than reputational containment.

Fourth, recruitment and advancement structures should evaluate interpretive competencies alongside technical credentials. Traditional leadership pipelines often prioritize quantitative expertise and tenure while underweighting pattern recognition, ethical judgment, and strategic communication. Incorporating diagnostic assessment into leadership evaluation broadens governance capacity.

These interventions reposition inclusion as structural reinforcement rather than symbolic representation. By strengthening listening architecture, institutions increase the likelihood that early-stage anomalies are surfaced, validated, and addressed responsibly.

Leadership Frequency therefore offers a blueprint for governance innovation. It suggests that institutional resilience emerges not only from rule enforcement, but from expanding the range of legitimate diagnostic voices within oversight systems.

5.3 Directions for Future Research

Future empirical research may examine how interpretive diversity within forensic accounting teams influences fraud detection timing, escalation patterns, and institutional response outcomes.

Comparative case studies across financial institutions could explore whether organizations with broader leadership representation demonstrate earlier anomaly recognition or reduced normalization of irregularities. Additionally, quantitative modeling of escalation pathways may clarify how Credibility Navigation mediates the relationship between detection and corrective action. Such inquiry would further operationalize Leadership Frequency as a measurable governance construct.

6 CONCLUSION

This paper introduced Leadership Frequency as a governance framework for understanding how interpretive capacity strengthens institutional oversight within forensic accounting. By conceptualizing leadership as a functional governance mechanism rather than solely a positional role, the analysis clarified how Signal Sensitivity, Contextual Integration, Credibility Navigation, and Ethical Anchoring collectively enhance fraud detection, compliance integrity, and accountability architecture.

The findings suggest that institutional resilience depends not only on formal regulatory structures, but also on the range and legitimacy of diagnostic perspectives operating within oversight systems. Expanding leadership representation in forensic accounting broadens interpretive bandwidth and increases the probability that emerging risks are recognized and escalated responsibly. Inclusion, when framed as governance functionality, contributes directly to systemic stability rather than symbolic diversity.

Leadership Frequency therefore offers a structural lens for examining how institutions classify risk, allocate authority, and respond to early-warning signals. Strengthening financial governance requires attention to both technical controls and the interpretive environments in which those controls are applied. Institutions that cultivate disciplined perception and ethical accountability within leadership structures are better positioned to preserve integrity and public trust in complex financial systems.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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The Reflective Recovery & Reintegration (R³) Framework

A trauma-informed, gender-responsive model for recovery, identity reconstruction, and reintegration

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Abstract

Globally, women experience disproportionate rates of trauma, anxiety, depression, and stress-related conditions, often shaped by gendered social roles, caregiving responsibilities, economic vulnerability, and exposure to interpersonal and systemic harm. While mental health and recovery frameworks have expanded significantly over the past two decades, many approaches remain fragmented - focusing narrowly on symptom reduction, individual pathology, or short-term stabilisation without adequately addressing identity, meaning, and social reintegration.

For women navigating recovery, healing is rarely linear or confined to the clinical space. Trauma frequently disrupts a woman's sense of self, safety, agency, and belonging, requiring approaches that extend beyond treatment toward reflective meaning-making and sustainable reintegration into personal, professional, and community life. Yet existing models often separate therapeutic recovery from identity reconstruction, community participation, and leadership development, limiting their relevance for women seeking not only relief, but restoration and growth.

In response to these gaps, this paper introduces the Reflective Recovery & Reintegration (R³) Framework, a trauma-informed, gender-responsive model designed to support women through a holistic recovery process that integrates reflection, healing, and reintegration. The framework positions recovery as both an internal and relational process, recognising the interplay between psychological regulation, personal identity, and social participation.

The development of the R³ Framework has been informed by the author's lived experience and professional practice of trauma recovery, alongside community-based application. The framework has been applied within women-centred, community-based therapeutic services delivered through the Women's Resource Centre (WRC) in Bermuda, informing programme design and practice across individual and group interventions.

Developed through practice-based application within community settings, the R³ Framework draws on principles of trauma-informed care, reflective practice, recovery-oriented models, and strengths-based engagement. Rather than viewing recovery as an endpoint, R³ conceptualises it as a dynamic, evolving process that enables women to rebuild self-understanding, reclaim agency, and re-enter their lives with greater clarity, confidence, and sustainability.

This paper outlines the conceptual foundations of the R³ Framework, explains its core components, explores its application in practice, and considers implications for community interventions and future research. In doing so, it contributes an emerging integrative model for women's recovery that bridges therapeutic insight with real-world reintegration.

Keywords: Trauma-informed care; Gender-responsive practice; Women's recovery; Identity reconstruction; Reintegration; Reflective practice

1. Introduction

Globally, women experience disproportionate rates of trauma, anxiety, depression, and stress-related conditions, often shaped by gendered social roles, caregiving responsibilities, economic vulnerability, and exposure to interpersonal and systemic harm. These realities are not incidental; they are embedded within social structures that shape women's experiences across the lifespan. While mental health and recovery frameworks have expanded significantly over the past two decades, many approaches remain fragmented—focusing narrowly on symptom reduction, individual pathology, or short-term stabilisation without adequately addressing identity, meaning, and social reintegration.

For women navigating recovery, healing is rarely linear or confined to the clinical space. Trauma frequently disrupts a woman's sense of self, safety, agency, and belonging. It alters narrative identity, reshapes relational dynamics, and can compromise confidence in leadership, parenting, partnership, and professional functioning. As such, recovery requires approaches that extend beyond treatment toward reflective meaning-making and sustainable reintegration into personal, professional, and community life.

Yet existing models often separate therapeutic recovery from leadership development, community participation, and identity reconstruction. This separation limits their relevance for women seeking not only relief, but restoration and growth. Stabilisation without reintegration risks leaving women emotionally regulated yet existentially disoriented. Insight without identity reconstruction may produce awareness without sustainable change.

In response to these gaps, this paper introduces the Reflective Recovery & Reintegration (R³) Framework, a trauma-informed, gender-responsive model designed to support women through a holistic recovery process that integrates reflection, healing, and reintegration. The framework positions recovery as both an internal and relational process, recognising the interplay between psychological regulation, personal identity, and social participation.

The development of the R³ Framework has been informed by the author's lived experience and professional practice of trauma recovery, alongside sustained community-based application. The framework has been implemented within women-centred therapeutic services delivered through the Women's Resource Centre (WRC) in Bermuda, informing programme design and practice across individual counselling, group interventions, and psychoeducational programming.

Rather than viewing recovery as an endpoint, R³ conceptualises it as a dynamic and iterative process that enables women to rebuild self-understanding, reclaim agency, and re-enter their lives with greater clarity, confidence, and sustainability. This paper outlines the conceptual foundations of the R³ Framework, articulates its core components, examines its applied implementation, and explores implications for leadership development, community programming, and research.

2. Methodology (Practice-Based Application)

The Reflective Recovery & Reintegration (R³) Framework has been applied within women-centred, community-based therapeutic services delivered through the Women's Resource Centre (WRC) in Bermuda. Over a twelve-month period (April 1, 2024 – March 31, 2025), the framework informed programme design, counselling approaches, and group-based interventions supporting women navigating trauma, grief, parenting stress, transitional life stages, and identity disruption.

This application did not occur within a controlled experimental design, nor was the framework introduced as a rigid protocol. Instead, R³ functioned as an integrative conceptual model guiding practitioner orientation, service sequencing, and therapeutic emphasis. In this sense, the methodology underpinning the current paper is practice-based and reflective in nature, drawing upon aggregated service data, structured client feedback, and practitioner observation within an established community setting.

During the reporting period, WRC provided a total of 529 individual counselling sessions to 97 women. In addition to one-to-one counselling, services included therapeutic workshops, structured psychoeducational programmes, and facilitated support groups. The diversity of service modalities allowed the R³ Framework to be implemented across varying levels of engagement intensity, from brief interventions to sustained therapeutic relationships.

Importantly, the R³ Framework functioned as an organising lens rather than a prescriptive sequence. Practitioners were not required to “complete” one stage before entering another; rather, the components of Reflective, Recovery, and Reintegration informed clinical judgement regarding pacing, focus, and intervention style. This flexibility reflects the framework’s underlying assumption that recovery is non-linear and context-dependent.

Embedding R³ Across Therapeutic Interventions

Across WRC’s therapeutic services, the R³ Framework shaped both micro-level interactions and macro-level programme design. Individual counselling sessions prioritised reflective processes and emotional regulation, aligning primarily with the Reflective and Recovery components of the model. Clients were supported in identifying patterns of thought, internalised beliefs, relational dynamics, and emotional triggers. Reflection was not framed as intellectual analysis alone, but as embodied awareness supporting narrative coherence and self-trust.

Therapeutic workshops and psychoeducational programmes reinforced practical recovery skills, including coping strategies, boundary-setting, emotional literacy, and communication skills. These sessions often served as bridges between insight and application, enabling women to translate reflective awareness into behavioural change.

Structured initiatives, such as therapeutic writing programmes, explicitly supported narrative reconstruction and meaning-making. Writing functioned as a reflective container through which women could revisit experiences, reorganise internal narratives, and articulate emerging identities. Support groups, meanwhile, facilitated relational reintegration by fostering shared identity, mutual recognition, and community belonging. Through collective dialogue, participants experienced not only validation but also expanded perspectives on agency and possibility.

In this way, R³ shaped not only practitioner approach, but the sequencing and integration of services across the therapeutic continuum. Reflection supported regulation; regulation supported agency; agency supported reintegration. The model functioned as connective tissue across modalities.

Trauma-Informed Engagement and Reflective Practice

Application of the R³ Framework prioritised trauma-informed engagement, with particular emphasis on safety, trust, and client agency. Reflective processes were introduced at a pace appropriate to each woman’s readiness, ensuring that insight did not precede stabilisation. Women were not

pressured toward disclosure or resolution; rather, reflection was framed as curiosity-based exploration within a contained and collaborative environment.

Reflection was facilitated through guided dialogue, values exploration, pattern identification, and structured exercises designed to strengthen emotional literacy. Clients were encouraged to examine not only what had happened to them, but how those experiences shaped current beliefs, boundaries, and behavioural responses. This emphasis aligns with the framework's understanding that trauma disrupts narrative coherence, and that restoration of narrative integrity is foundational to recovery.

3. Results

Programme feedback collected during the reporting period indicates that 92.3% of participants reported increased ability to recognise, name, and express their emotions. An equal percentage (92.3%) reported gaining greater understanding or clarity about aspects of their lives through engagement in counselling services.

These indicators suggest that reflective engagement, as conceptualised within R³, supported women in developing insight and emotional articulation—core elements of the Reflective component of the framework. Enhanced emotional literacy contributes to improved regulation and decision-making capacity, reinforcing the model's sequencing logic.

Within applied settings, the Recovery component of R³ focused on strengthening emotional regulation, coping capacity, and personal agency. Aggregated client feedback demonstrates that 92.3% of participants reported learning strategies to better cope with or solve problems. Furthermore, 61.6% reported moderate to high improvement in their mental health during the period of engagement.

Additionally, 53.9% of respondents indicated that the issue prompting counselling had either improved or been fully resolved, while others reported improved coping even where external circumstances remained unchanged. This distinction is significant: the R³ Framework conceptualises recovery not as the elimination of adversity, but as increased capacity to respond rather than react.

Qualitative feedback further highlights shifts in confidence, self-trust, and perceived control over life circumstances. Participants frequently described feeling “lighter,” more emotionally regulated, and better equipped to navigate relationships and future goals. High levels of perceived safety within the therapeutic relationship were reported, with 85.7% of respondents strongly agreeing that they felt safe sharing their thoughts with their counsellor, and 85.7% indicating they would recommend or return to the service if needed.

These findings align with the Reintegration component of the framework, suggesting that increased insight and regulation translated into improved relational confidence and re-engagement with life roles.

While the data collected during this period does not constitute a formal experimental evaluation of efficacy, these aggregated indicators provide early practice-based evidence of the R³ Framework's practical relevance and applicability. The explicit integration of reflection, recovery, and reintegration appears to support not only emotional stabilisation, but identity reconstruction and sustained engagement in personal and community life.

4. Discussion

4.1 Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations

The Reflective Recovery & Reintegration (R³) Framework is grounded in an integrative body of theory that recognises recovery as a multidimensional process shaped by psychological, relational, and social factors. Rather than privileging a single theoretical lineage, the framework synthesises trauma-informed practice, gender-responsive recovery theory, reflective practice traditions, recovery-oriented models, and strengths-based approaches. Together, these perspectives inform a model that extends beyond symptom management toward identity reconstruction and sustainable reintegration.

Gendered Trauma and Recovery

Women's experiences of trauma are often embedded within gendered social structures, including caregiving roles, economic inequity, interpersonal violence, and systemic marginalisation. Research consistently demonstrates that women are more likely to experience chronic and cumulative forms of trauma, as well as higher rates of anxiety and depression, which are frequently compounded by social expectations to remain functional, resilient, and emotionally available to others (World Health Organization [WHO], 2023; Kessler et al., 2017).

These social expectations are not neutral. They shape how distress is expressed, how help is sought, and how recovery is interpreted. Women may internalise narratives of responsibility and self-blame, particularly in contexts of relational trauma. They may prioritise caregiving over self-regulation, or professional competence over emotional processing. Consequently, trauma recovery for women cannot be understood purely as an intrapsychic process; it is relational and contextual.

Traditional recovery models have often prioritised clinical stabilisation or pathology-focused outcomes. While stabilisation is essential, such models may inadequately address the broader social and identity-based impacts of trauma on women's lives. Gender-responsive approaches emphasise safety, relational trust, empowerment, and contextual awareness, recognising that recovery must account for both internal healing and external realities (Covington, 2008; Bloom, Owen, & Covington, 2003).

The R³ Framework is situated within this gender-responsive perspective. It acknowledges that women's recovery is inseparable from their social positioning, lived experiences, and roles within families, workplaces, and communities. Reintegration is therefore not optional; it is intrinsic to recovery.

Trauma-Informed Practice

Trauma-informed practice provides a foundational lens for the R³ Framework. Rather than asking "what is wrong," trauma-informed approaches centre the question of "what has happened," emphasising safety, choice, collaboration, trustworthiness, and empowerment (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014).

These principles are particularly relevant for women who may have experienced repeated breaches of safety or autonomy. Trauma often disrupts an individual's sense of control and predictability. In response, R³ embeds safety and agency not only as environmental conditions, but as developmental outcomes.

Within the framework, trauma-informed practice informs both the process and pacing of recovery. Reflection is encouraged without retraumatisation. Recovery is supported through regulation and agency-building. Reintegration is approached with sensitivity to ongoing triggers, systemic barriers, and relational complexities. This orientation aligns with contemporary understandings of trauma recovery that emphasise regulation, connection, and meaning rather than exposure or symptom suppression alone (Herman, 2015; van der Kolk, 2014).

Reflective Practice and Meaning-Making

Reflection functions as the central organising mechanism within R³. Drawing from reflective practice traditions (Schön, 1983) and transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2000), the framework positions self-examination as both stabilising and generative.

Trauma frequently disrupts narrative coherence. Experiences may be fragmented, internalised as shame, or interpreted through distorted beliefs about worth and safety. Without reflective processing, survival strategies may solidify into rigid identity narratives. Reflective processes enable women to contextualise their experiences, challenge internalised assumptions, and reconstruct meaning.

Within R³, reflection is not abstract rumination. It is structured inquiry that supports identity reconstruction. It enables women to differentiate between trauma-driven responses and values-aligned choices. It invites examination of relational patterns, boundaries, and leadership behaviours. It serves as the bridge between past experience and future orientation.

This reflective emphasis distinguishes R³ from models that prioritise skill acquisition without narrative integration. Insight is not positioned as an end in itself, but as the foundation for intentional reintegration.

Recovery-Oriented and Strengths-Based Approaches

Recovery-oriented models emphasise hope, autonomy, and personal meaning (Anthony, 1993; Slade, 2009). They recognise that recovery is defined by the individual rather than imposed by external benchmarks. Strengths-based approaches similarly foreground resilience, capacity, and existing resources (Saleebey, 2013).

R³ integrates these principles by viewing women as active agents in their recovery. Rather than positioning support services as corrective or prescriptive, the framework centres collaboration and co-creation. Women are not treated as passive recipients of intervention; they are partners in identity reconstruction.

This orientation is particularly relevant in community-based settings, where women often navigate recovery alongside employment, caregiving, and leadership responsibilities. The framework's flexibility supports engagement without withdrawal from life roles.

Reintegration and Identity Reconstruction

Reintegration is often underdeveloped in recovery literature, despite its central importance. Healing does not occur in isolation; women must ultimately re-engage with relationships, work, leadership roles, and community participation.

Trauma can fracture identity, disrupt confidence, and erode belonging (Herman, 2015). Women may question their competence, their boundaries, or their relational worth. Without explicit attention to reintegration, recovery may stabilise symptoms while leaving identity unresolved.

R³ explicitly incorporates reintegration as a distinct and necessary component of recovery. Reintegration is conceptualised not as a return to a previous self, but as the development of an integrated identity reflecting insight, agency, and alignment. This perspective aligns with post-traumatic growth and identity-based recovery models, which emphasise meaning-making, agency, and future orientation following adversity (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

In this way, the R³ Framework extends beyond therapy. It engages with leadership, relational participation, and community belonging as expressions of sustained recovery.

4.2 The Reflective Recovery & Reintegration (R³) Framework

The R³ Framework conceptualises recovery as a dynamic, non-linear journey guided by three interconnected components: Reflective, Recovery, and Reintegration. These components are mutually reinforcing rather than sequential. Women may move between them at different stages, revisiting reflection after reintegration experiences, or strengthening regulation following new stressors.

Guiding Principles

The framework is underpinned by several core principles:

- Trauma-informed and gender-responsive practice
- Safety, agency, and choice
- Strengths-based engagement
- Holistic recovery across psychological, relational, and social domains
- Sustainability through identity alignment and reintegration

These principles ensure adaptability across settings while maintaining conceptual coherence.

Reflective

The Reflective component focuses on awareness, insight, and meaning-making. Trauma often shapes beliefs about self, safety, and worth beneath conscious awareness. Reflection supports women in identifying internalised narratives, relational patterns, and survival strategies that may no longer serve them.

This process encourages curiosity rather than judgement. It strengthens emotional literacy and narrative coherence. It builds decision-making capacity by differentiating trauma-driven responses from intentional choices.

Recovery

Recovery centres on regulation, agency, and stabilisation. Building on reflective insight, women develop practical strategies to manage emotional responses, establish boundaries, and restore internal safety.

Recovery is conceptualised as capacity restoration. It is the ability to respond rather than react, to choose rather than endure, and to engage life from increased stability. It integrates therapeutic tools, psychoeducation, and relational support.

Reintegration

Reintegration represents the outward expression of recovery and the consolidation of identity. It focuses on re-engagement with roles, relationships, leadership, and community participation.

Women redefine who they are beyond trauma and survival. They clarify values. They pursue alignment. Reintegration may involve renegotiating relational boundaries, re-entering leadership spaces, pursuing professional growth, or reshaping personal aspirations.

By explicitly addressing reintegration, the R³ Framework bridges internal healing with external functioning, positioning recovery as a foundation for sustainable engagement.

5. Implications and Future Directions

The Reflective Recovery & Reintegration (R³) Framework offers important implications for women's mental health practice, leadership development, and community-based service delivery. By explicitly integrating reflection, recovery, and reintegration, the framework addresses a persistent gap within trauma-informed approaches that prioritise stabilisation without sufficiently engaging identity reconstruction and sustained participation in personal and social life.

Implications for Women's Recovery

For women navigating trauma and transition, R³ reframes recovery as a process extending beyond symptom reduction toward clarity, agency, and alignment. This reframing is significant. When recovery is narrowly defined as emotional stabilisation, women may experience improvement in distress while remaining disconnected from purpose, leadership capacity, or relational confidence. R³ positions recovery as developmental rather than merely corrective.

The framework's gender-responsive orientation acknowledges that women's lives often include simultaneous responsibilities across caregiving, professional, relational, and community domains. Rather than requiring withdrawal from these roles in order to heal, R³ supports healing alongside engagement. This approach reduces the false dichotomy between "functioning" and "recovering," recognising that many women are high-functioning externally while internally dysregulated.

By foregrounding reflection and identity reconstruction, the framework encourages women to examine internalised narratives shaped by trauma and social conditioning. In doing so, it supports long-term shifts in self-concept rather than short-term behavioural adjustment. Reintegration ensures that recovery is visible not only in emotional regulation but in boundary-setting, decision-making, relational dynamics, and professional engagement.

Implications for Leadership Development

The explicit focus on reintegration has particular relevance for women in leadership and professional contexts. Trauma does not disappear when women occupy positions of responsibility. Indeed, leadership visibility may amplify internalised narratives of inadequacy, hyper-responsibility, or relational overextension.

By supporting women to reflect on internalised narratives, strengthen regulation, and intentionally re-engage with leadership roles, R³ positions recovery as foundational to sustainable leadership. It reframes vulnerability not as weakness but as insight-driven strength. This orientation challenges deficit-based narratives that frame mental health intervention as remedial rather than developmental.

Organisations and institutions seeking to support women's wellbeing may benefit from integrating reflective and identity-based frameworks into professional development initiatives. Rather than separating mental health from leadership, R³ demonstrates their interdependence.

Implications for Community-Based and Systems-Level Practice

The application of R³ within community-based therapeutic services demonstrates its adaptability across individual, group, and programme-level interventions. Its flexibility allows practitioners to respond to diverse needs while maintaining conceptual coherence. This makes it particularly suited to hybrid settings where rigid clinical protocols may not be feasible or culturally aligned.

Beyond community services, the framework holds potential relevance for broader systems, including education, workforce development, and justice-involved or reintegration-focused contexts. Its emphasis on identity reconstruction and participation aligns with systems seeking to promote long-term engagement, resilience, and social inclusion.

Importantly, R³ does not require highly specialised infrastructure. Its core components—reflection, regulation, reintegration—can be adapted across disciplines with appropriate training and fidelity to trauma-informed principles. This scalability strengthens its potential for cross-sector application.

Research and Validation Pathways

While early practice-based indicators suggest the relevance and applicability of the R³ Framework, formal evaluation is necessary to establish empirical validity. Future research could explore outcomes related to:

- Emotional regulation capacity
- Narrative coherence
- Identity clarity
- Agency and decision-making confidence
- Sustained leadership engagement
- Relational boundary-setting

Mixed-methods approaches would be particularly valuable, combining quantitative outcome measures with qualitative narrative analysis to capture identity reconstruction processes.

Longitudinal research could examine whether integration of reintegration-focused interventions produces more sustained wellbeing compared to stabilisation-only approaches. Comparative studies across settings could assess adaptability and cultural responsiveness.

The framework's practice-based development and preliminary indicators position it well for structured research inquiry, including doctoral-level investigation and cross-contextual adaptation. Formal validation would strengthen its contribution to trauma-informed and gender-responsive scholarship.

6. Conclusion

The Reflective Recovery & Reintegration (R³) Framework contributes an emerging, practice-informed model that bridges therapeutic insight with real-world reintegration for women navigating trauma and transition. By centring reflection, recovery, and reintegration as interconnected and mutually reinforcing processes, the framework offers a holistic approach that supports not only emotional stabilisation, but identity reconstruction and sustainable engagement in life beyond survival.

R³ challenges the fragmentation often present in mental health and leadership discourse. It resists the separation of therapy from purpose, and regulation from participation. Instead, it proposes that meaningful recovery must include both internal coherence and external alignment.

As women's mental health and leadership continue to receive global attention, frameworks that honour complexity, context, and identity will be increasingly essential. The R³ Framework represents one such contribution—grounded in practice, theoretically informed, and positioned for continued refinement, validation, and application.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Women's Political Marginalization: Institutional Subordination and Reform

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ABSTRACT

Zanzibar, as one of the developing countries and traditional society, suffered years of women's marginalization in politics despite international and regional efforts. It was not until the 1980s, when the wave of the women's movement reached Zanzibar, that remedial actions began to be taken to rectify the situation. Forty years down the road, women have been incorporated into decision-making organs, albeit in small numbers. Less pronounced, however, is the issue of VAW, to which women are subjected across levels and with impunity.

The central challenge remains the absence of gender-sensitive institutional mechanisms within political parties and relevant actors, including election management bodies. This perpetuates exclusion, intimidation, and unequal opportunities. Against this backdrop, the paper examines the institutional framework within the ecosystem of political actors, considering both the gaps and gains in addressing women representation in leadership under existing international and national commitments. By engaging literature and perspectives from women and key actors within and beyond the country, the paper explores potential mechanisms such as customized gender policies and functional gender desks within political parties that could strengthen accountability and inclusivity.

The contribution of the paper is twofold: first, advancing scholarly debates on gender and politics in fragile democracies; and second, offering practical frameworks that political actors may employ to operationalize gender equity, indispensable for a meaningful shift in women's political participation.

Key words; politics, leadership, women, policy, political parties

1.0. INTRODUCTION

Despite decades of international, regional, and national commitments to gender equality, women in many developing and traditionally structured societies remain marginalized from political leadership.

This study argues that the core challenge is not simply the absence of women in political office, but the weakness of gender-sensitive institutional mechanisms within political parties, electoral bodies, and governance structures. The lack of enforceable gender policies, accountability mechanisms, and accessible reporting systems allows exclusionary practices, intimidation, and violence to persist with limited consequences. As a result, women's participation remains fragile, uneven, and highly vulnerable to political and social pressures.

Against this backdrop, the paper examines the institutional and policy environment shaping women's political participation in Zanzibar. It analyses both the legal and normative frameworks governing political life and the lived experiences of women leaders, aspirants, and political actors. Through a qualitative exploratory approach, the study identifies gaps in law, policy, institutional practice, and political culture that continue to constrain women's leadership.

The paper seeks to contribute to both scholarly and policy debates in three ways. First, it deepens understanding of how institutional arrangements and political cultures interact to reproduce gender inequality in fragile democratic contexts. Second, it documents how political violence and weak accountability mechanisms shape women's political trajectories in Zanzibar. Third, it proposes practical institutional reforms including enforceable gender policies, functional gender desks, and stronger accountability and reporting mechanisms that could support a more inclusive and equitable political system.

By focusing on institutions rather than individual deficits, this study advances the argument that sustainable gender equality in politics depends not only on increasing the number of women in leadership, but on transforming the rules, norms, and practices that govern political life itself.

1.1. BACKGROUND

The Historical and Policy Trajectory of Women's Political Leadership in Zanzibar

The historical evolution of Women's Political Leadership (WPL) in Zanzibar demonstrates a persistent pattern of structural exclusion despite women's significant contributions to political mobilization, social reform, and nation-building. From the pre-independence period to the present, women have been integral to grassroots movements and advocacy efforts, yet they were excluded in the mainstream politics. A landmark example is the appointment of Christabel Majaliwa who was appointed in the Legislative Council in 1960, albeit to serve as an unofficial member (Fair, 1994, p. 69). The Council which was established in 1914 had included 67 members illustrating male-dominated assembly and cosmetic corrections.

Following independence, state institutions and governance structures largely perpetuated this imbalance. A turning point emerged with the 1985 Nairobi Conference on Women, which galvanized global and regional commitments to gender equality and women's empowerment. Zanzibar undertook a series of policy responses including the introduction of quota system for women in the House of Representatives (HOR) in 1985, the establishment of a Ministry for Women and Children (1992), and the formulation of the Women Development Policy (2001). Despite these notable milestones, women's participation in leadership remained largely symbolic. Until 2013, for example, all seven members of the Zanzibar Electoral Commission (ZEC) were men, and the number of women serving as ministers or permanent secretaries ranged from 1 to three.

The introduction of affirmative action measures in 2010, providing a 40% quota for women in decision-making organs, represented a major step forward. Currently, women occupy 29 out of 80 seats (36%) in the HoR progress that, while notable, remains largely dependent on quota allocations rather than equitable electoral competition. Similarly, women's representation at ministerial level stands at approximately 33% (HoR, 2025). This phenomenon aligns with feminist critiques of symbolic or tokenistic representation, where women's inclusion in leadership is not matched by substantive empowerment or structural transformation (Meena, 2003b p 149).

The legislative reforms of 2024 mark a potentially transformative phase in Zanzibar's gender governance landscape. The Presidential, Parliamentary and Councilors' Elections Act (2024), particularly Section 135, explicitly criminalizes sexual harassment and gender-based violence (GBV) within electoral processes, an unprecedented step toward ensuring safer and more inclusive political participation. In tandem, the Political Parties Affairs Laws Amendment (2024), under Section 10C-(1)(b), mandates all political parties to establish gender policy and desk in their governance frameworks.

The Proposed Gender Policy of Political Parties and Gender Desk emerges represents not only a continuation of past reforms but also a paradigm shift toward embedding gender equity as a core principle of democratic governance in Zanzibar.

2.0. Literature review and International / Regional Frameworks

This part presents literature review and International Regional Frameworks regarding WPL in Zanzibar.

2.1: Literature review:

Global research on women's political representation reveals that progress toward gender parity remains slow and uneven. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (2016) reported persistently low levels of women in decision-making bodies worldwide and recommended that parliaments establish institutional frameworks for women's advancement in leadership positions, policies, and practices to increase the impact of women parliamentarians, encourage other institutions to follow suit, and inspire more women to enter politics. This underscores the importance of institutions in achieving gender equality.

Similarly, International IDEA (2024), in its Africa Barometer 2024, observed that women occupy only 25% of parliamentary seats across Africa two points behind the global average, despite decades of advocacy with the African figure represents only a one percentage-point increase since 2021. At this pace, the continent would not reach gender parity until approximately the year 2100 (International IDEA, 2024, p. 2). This highlights the urgency of intensified efforts to advance women's political empowerment.

The Tanzanian context reflects a similar pattern. Meena (2003) argues that although women played a major role in mobilizing support during the independence struggle, they were excluded from postcolonial power structures and incorporated only symbolically through token appointments (p. 149). Despite quota mechanisms, women currently constitute only 37.4% of Tanzania's Union Parliament. This demonstrates the persistence of male-dominated political control.

Meena's analysis builds on earlier work by Fair (1994), who documented the extensive role played by women in Zanzibar during the colonial period. Women mobilised communities' door-to-door, composed songs and poems, used khanga messages for political communication, donated property such as houses and land to political parties, and fundraised through selling party cards, khangas, and food. Despite these contributions, women were excluded from formal power after independence and did not obtain a single seat in the 14-member Revolutionary Council.

UN Women's (2022) evaluation of the Women's Leadership and Political Participation (WLPP) programme finds that while legal reforms and quotas have expanded access, patriarchal norms, political violence, weak accountability, economic constraints, and domestic burdens continue to limit women's participation. The report emphasizes that without enforceable institutional mechanisms, numerical gains risk remaining symbolic.

NDI-TAMWA ZNZ (2024) in their study "No Party to Violence: Analyzing Violence Against Women in Political Parties in Zanzibar", reports that women politicians experience high levels of psychological (45%) and economic (41%) violence, as well as threats (27%), physical assault (25%), and sexual violence (22%). The study highlights the absence of functional complaint and redress mechanisms, which sustains impunity and discourages reporting. This reinforces the argument that increasing women's representation requires institutional reform, not quotas alone.

2.2: International / Regional Frameworks:

The Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) from 1979, as the Magna Carta of gender equality, defines different forms of discrimination and prohibits

discrimination against women in all spheres of society. CEDAW obliges the States parties to take all appropriate measures to ensure the principle of gender equality, and measures to ensure equal participation of women in elections, formulation and implementation of government policy and performing leading and public functions at all levels of government.

Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) as the most comprehensive global agenda for gender equality adopted 12 key areas to reach the envisioned goal. It provided concrete guidance for political parties and call on them to consider examining party structures and procedures to remove all barriers that discriminate against the participation of women and develop initiatives that allow women to participate fully and incorporate gender issues in their political agenda. It has been replaced by Gender Equality Forum in 2021 extended the actions up to 2026.

The Council of Europe also defines international standards for equal representation of women and men. Recommendation Rec (2003)3 of the Committee of Ministers of Council of Europe to member states on balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision-making provides that balanced participation of women and men is taken to mean that the representation of either women or men in any decision-making body in political or public life should not fall below 40%.

UNSCR 1325 on Peace and Security for Women: In 2000, the Women Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda was launched and adopted through United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, with 108 countries, including Tanzania, developing National Action Plans (NAPs) to boost women's roles in peace and security.

Agenda 2063 of the Africa we want lays down seven aspirations to be reached across the continent. This includes aspiration number 4 which talks about peace and security and is very emphatic about women. It states “A peaceful and secure Africa shall have an entrenched and flourishing culture of human rights, democracy, gender equality, inclusion and peace insisting on mechanisms towards its implementation.

the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa commonly referred to as Maputo Protocol of 2003 which insists on 50/50 representation of women in decision making organs.

Under chapter 5 particularly Section 5.2, Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) delves into the challenges faced by women in political representation. It discusses existing mechanisms, such as constitutions, manifestos and policies, which can support political parties in fulfilling gender equality commitments.

Theoretical Framework: Institutional Framing Theory

This study is anchored in Institutional Theory and Framing Theory which together explain how gender inequality and Violence Against Women in Politics (VAW-P) persist, and how

they can be addressed through both structural reform and discursive change. The framework recognizes that sustainable gender equality in political leadership requires not only formal institutional arrangements but also shifts in political culture, norms, and media narratives.

Institutional Theory (March & Olsen, 1989; North, 1990) posits that political behavior is shaped by formal rules and informal norms embedded within institutions such as constitutions, policies and rules of operandi. These institutions if left unchecked they frequently reproduce patriarchal power relations that marginalize women and normalize exclusionary practices. In political situation and in traditional communities such as Zanzibar, it is even worse because for years, politics has been considered as the male practical sphere.

Comparative experiences illustrate this logic. In Scandinavian countries, South Africa and Rwanda, mandatory gender quotas within political parties and governance structures have normalized women's leadership and embedded gender equality within political culture. In both cases women leadership positions is more than 40% (International IDEA,2024, p 59).

Applied to Zanzibar, Institutional Theory underscores the need to embed gender equality within constitutional provisions, electoral laws, and political party's regulations visible in the political parties' laws, policies and procedures. Contrary to this VAWP/E persists without redress which continues to subordinate women to the low ranked posts. Guided by their gender policies, political parties can list down list of goals, statements and strategies towards implementation. This is supported by enforceable compliance mechanisms, including sanctions and conditional public funding.

However, institutional reforms are not adequate to transform political behavior and social acceptance. This limitation is addressed through Framing Theory (Goffman, 1974; Entman, 1993), which explains how meanings and legitimacy are constructed through media and political discourse.

Framing Theory posits that the way issues are presented influences how they are understood, gaps which exist, who is blamed, and which actions are required to the wider audience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and or treatment recommendation (Entman, 1993, p. 52). In the women leadership, media framing assesses the position of women in the decision-making positions, identify gaps, challenges, best practices, information about women position, VAWP/E and pathways for optimum gender balance. As Wanyande,P (1996, p. 31) put it media is by nature public oriented and information comes out from the media is taken as a gospel truth. This will encourage people to demand equality and accountability in the leadership sphere.

3.1. Methodology

This part explains the methodology followed to capture both primary and secondary data.

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative exploratory design allowing for an in-depth analysis of both formal and informal mechanisms that sustain women's subordination and limits their

participation in political spaces.

3.2 Study Area and Scope

The research was conducted in Zanzibar, focusing on Unguja and Pemba Islands, where women's political participation has evolved through local governance, national elections, and party structures. The study targets institutions such as: Political parties (both ruling and opposition), HoR, The Zanzibar Electoral Commission (ZEC), Gender and Children's Department and Civil society organizations (CSOs).

3.3. Data Collection Methods

Three major ways of data collection were conducted including Desk Review, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs).

Desk Review; A desk-based review was conducted analyzing key legal and policy documents from international to national level in comparative style.

3.4 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

A total of 10 key Informants were consulted in the study including Women Members of the House of Representatives, male politicians, councilors, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), journalists and community activists. These interviews have explored experiences, perceptions, and institutional practices related to WPL; barriers and pathways.

3.5 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

The study conducted FGD to 30 women politicians from eight political parties collected insights on gendered political culture and violence patterns. FGDs provided collective insights into the social, cultural, and political dynamics that sustain institutional subordination and violence.

3.6 Data Analysis

Data collected from interviews, FGDs, and documents were analyzed through thematic analysis and content analysis. were coded with the aid of qualitative analysis software (e.g., NVivo) to cluster findings under key themes such as *institutional subordination*, *gendered political norms*, *accountability mechanisms*, and *pathways to reform*.

FINDINGS;

This section presents and analyses the study's findings on the institutional, normative, and discursive conditions shaping women's political participation and experiences of violence in Zanzibar. The findings are organized around six interrelated thematic areas: (1) the comparative legal framework, (2) the policy framework and the disjuncture between policy and practice, (3) sensitization of women aspirants and candidates, (4) institutional support mechanisms, (5) violence against women in politics (VAW-P), and (6) the role of media,

alongside the emerging need for enforcement of gender policies and establishment of functional gender desks.

4.1: Comparative Legal Framework:

International /Regional Protocols versus Zanzibar Legal Framework:

Despite the international and regional framework and best practices, the Zanzibar framework leaves so much to be desired.

The constitutional amendments of 2010 raised the percentage of special seats in the House of Representatives from 30 percent to 40 % of the total number of Constituency seats in Zanzibar, this is seen under section 64(c) (read together with Article 67 on women members) of the 1984 Constitution of Zanzibar, as amended in 2010. The Zanzibar Local Government Authority Act no 7 of 2014 also provide 40% of councilors shall be women, mainly through special-seat councilors nominated proportionally by political parties, similar to the arrangement used in the House of Representatives after the 2010 constitutional amendment. With these quota arrangements, one could expect the number of women in decision making organs be elevated to 50/50. However, Zanzibar still sails below 40% overall in the political posts. This is because women can still not compete with men in the mainstream politics to fatten its number in the House of Representatives.

The law is also narrow in scope; it provides for only members in the House of Representatives and councilors leaving alone other positions which are equally important. This includes the Cabinet, Presidential appointees, Members of Parliament and the grass root positions such as Shehas which is the basis of the political ladder. For example, women Shehas constitute only 19 % (Ministry of Local Government and Special Forces 2024 p9). Political parties are also not obliged to observe 50/50 in their constitutions and bi laws reinforcing therefore the survival for the fittest rule. Due to this lacuna, the 50/50 agenda have not been reached and the 2010 legal piece stood like a post hanging on air alone without a cover up from the other parts. Using The Council of Europe for example requested the organ itself to have more than 40% which means all established organs are forced to include sex by 40%. In Africa like in some most of the countries adopted Proportional Representation (PR) system which allowed either multiple votes or party list in election instead of the First Past the Post (FPTP) applied in Tanzania which is a more of survival for the fittest. International IDEA. (2024 p 46 held that eight out of the top ten women ranking high in women political participation in Africa follows the PR system.

At the continental level, evidence shows that electoral-system design plays a significant role in women's political participation. For example, International IDEA (2024, p. 46) observes that eight of the top ten African countries with high levels of women's parliamentary representation use proportional-representation electoral systems, which tend to facilitate gender inclusion through party lists and quota mechanisms. These include Rwanda, Namibia, Mozambique, South Africa, Cabo Verde, Burundi, Cameroon and Angola. The Zanzibar Electoral Law should leverage these examples to increase women in the political positions. Conversely, 10 countries with the lowest levels of WPP six at the national level and four at the local level used the FPTP system. The PR system allows the zebra or zipper style where women and men are lined up together in the list on equal chance.

The laws have also not included strong provisions to curb VAWP/E much as the issue is quite rampant at the present time. The only legal pieces to date are those that come from the United Republic of Tanzania whose jurisdiction is limited to the union matter. In this regard, the laws can only be applied to the Parliament election and the political parties due to the Registrar's mandate extended up to Zanzibar. Women can also leverage on the Zanzibar Anti-Corruption and Economic Crimes Authority (ZAECA) Act No. 5 of 2023 which accommodated among others sex-torsion and security of the witness & the plaintiff among other progressive provisions. It also demands accountability from the officials who abused his/her position in handling claims and were empowered to instruct authority instead of suggesting as it was previously. Albeit this law has not been tested to the fullest due to lack of mechanism to report, awareness and trust.

4.2 Zanzibar Policy Framework:

Key policies worth examine here. This include Zanzibar gender and inclusion policy of 2015, Zanzibar gender policy of 2016 and Zanzibar gender and National Plan of Actions,2024.

Zanzibar gender and inclusion policy of 2015: Zanzibar Electoral Commission (ZEC) adopted an ideal gender and inclusion policy in 2015 among other things intended to be preventing and mitigating electoral violence, including violence against women, youths and PWDs in elections (Section 4.3 of the Policy). The policy asserts itself to ensure gender balance in elections and insist on systematic data collection about women inclusion. The policy indicates the establishment of The Ethic Committee whose mandate is to promote ethical standards during elections. However, this policy does not mandate the enforcement of systematic collection of data in observer reports. Moreover, the ethics committees ZEC appoints are temporary (operating from August to October of the election year), closed to the public, and not accessible to survivors of VAW-PP. The ethical issues accepted must come from the political party not individual women. Lack of the legal provision above, this policy could have filled the gap but again it is fruition.

Unlike some national gender frameworks that explicitly provide numerical quotas for women's representation, the Zanzibar Gender Policy, 2016 does not expressly stipulate a 50/50 parity principle or a mandatory 40% threshold for women's representation in national decision-making bodies. Rather, the Policy adopts a broader equality and mainstreaming approach reiterating the promotion of gender equality in political and public life and calls for increased participation of women in decision-making processes at all levels.

The National Plans of Action 2024 (NPAs 2024), particularly the NPA-VAWC II (2024/25–2028/29), demonstrate a strong commitment to addressing violence against women and children through strengthened legal frameworks, improved service delivery systems, institutional coordination, and community awareness. However, despite this progressive orientation, the plans reveal a significant structural limitation: the absence of explicit gender representation targets in political and governance leadership. This omission reflects a narrow interpretation of gender equality one that prioritizes protection and service provision over structural transformation in leadership and power distribution. By treating women primarily as beneficiaries of protection rather than equal actors in governance and policy formulation, the plan limits its transformative potential.

4.3 Sensitization Efforts

Sensitization to encourage women to contest in the general election was undertaken primarily through the *Support Women in Leadership (SWIL)* initiative, championed by the Tanzania Media Women's Association – Zanzibar (TAMWA-ZNZ), in partnership with the Union for Women with Disabilities Zanzibar (JUWAUZA), the Zanzibar Female Lawyers Association (ZAFELA), and the Pemba Environmental and Gender Advocacy Organization (PEGAO), with financial support from the Royal Norwegian Embassy (RNE). Sensitization activities were organized into three main components: awareness-raising, capacity-building for women aspirants, and training for journalists. The numbers of women who contested and the electoral outcomes were documented and analysed comparatively.

4.3.1: Awareness-raising

Awareness-raising was undertaken through public meetings, community dialogues, and engagements with political parties reaching directly 8,898 people since 2020. These activities aimed to increase public acceptance of women in leadership, sensitize political actors to gender equality commitments, and contribute to a more enabling social and political environment for women's participation in politics. This is in line with social theory anticipating changes when the relevant actors act towards a new direction rather than remaining stuck on the old path and pattern (Molyneux (1985, Haferkamp, 1992, Mosedale 2005). In the context of women's political participation in Zanzibar, the key actors include local institutions, religious leaders, political parties, and community members including men and women. As Haferkamp (1992, p. 36) puts it, the conceptualization of social change must also consider the fact that different structures do not simply exert influence independent of one another; they also exert influence on one another. Awareness among women community itself is without overstating critical. Molyneux (1985, p. 234) states that even the lowest common denominator of interests, example complete equality with men, control over reproduction and greater personal autonomy and independence from men, are not readily accepted by all women. She contends that changes realised in a piecemeal fashion can threaten women's short-term goals, or can entail losses which cannot be compensated for, and are therefore likely to be resisted by women themselves.

4.3.2: Capacity-building

Capacity-building is essential for women's passage to political representation. As explained by Molyneux (1985, p. 234), the relationship between what we have called strategic gender interests and women's recognition of them and the desire to realise them cannot be assumed without a clear capacity-building strategy.

Women aspirants and candidates were capacity-built, anchored in political knowledge, public policies, gender equality, and confidence to engage in electoral processes. In 2024, a total of 199 women aspirants were reached (100 from Unguja and 99 from Pemba) making a total of 3,429 women and girls were capacity built since 2010. "We have been training women since 2010, but unfortunately due to the uneven ground the majority lose, and some choose to vie through special seats to avoid the constituency rigor.", said TAMWA, ZNZ Coordinator on SWIL project.

4.3.3: Journalists' training

Gender framing requires strong conceptual and analytical capacity on the part of journalists to articulate political realities accurately, critically, and persuasively. As Gitlin (1980, p. 7) posits, frames refer to the persistent patterns of selection, emphasis, and presentation through which certain aspects of reality are made more salient than others. These framing processes are often unspoken and unacknowledged, yet they play a decisive role in shaping how journalists interpret events and how audiences understand political issues. In this sense, media framing does not merely reflect reality; it actively organizes and constructs it.

Within the context of women's political participation, weak or biased framing can reproduce gender stereotypes, normalize exclusion, and render women's political struggles invisible. Conversely, gender-sensitive framing has the potential to challenge dominant narratives, expose structural inequalities, and legitimize women's leadership in the public sphere.

It is within this logic that journalists' training under the SWIL initiative addressed the role of the media in shaping public perceptions of women leaders and candidates. Approximately 167 journalists were trained on women's leadership and political participation ahead of the election, with the objective of strengthening their capacity to report responsibly, challenge gender stereotypes, and amplify women's voices in political discourse alongside other relevant actors.

4.3.4: Women's participation and electoral outcomes

As a result of these sensitization efforts, women contested in the general election for positions including President, Vice President, Member of Parliament, Member of the House of Representatives, and Councilors. However, the electoral process revealed a clear *gendered attrition pattern* across the political pipeline. While women constituted 28.2% of all aspirants (796 women) and a comparable 28.6% of candidates (253 women), their representation dropped sharply at the level of electoral success, with only 16.6% (35 women) emerging as winners, compared to 83.4% (175 men) (TAMWA, ZNZ 202, p 9).

The transition from aspirant to candidate already filters out women who lack financial resources, party backing, and access to political networks dominated by men. The further decline from candidate to winner reflects deeper systemic disadvantages, including unequal access to campaign financing, gender-biased party nomination practices, limited media visibility, exposure to harassment and political violence, and persistent social norms that frame leadership as male (Dahlerup, 2006; Ibid UNWOMen 2022 & International IDEA, 2024).

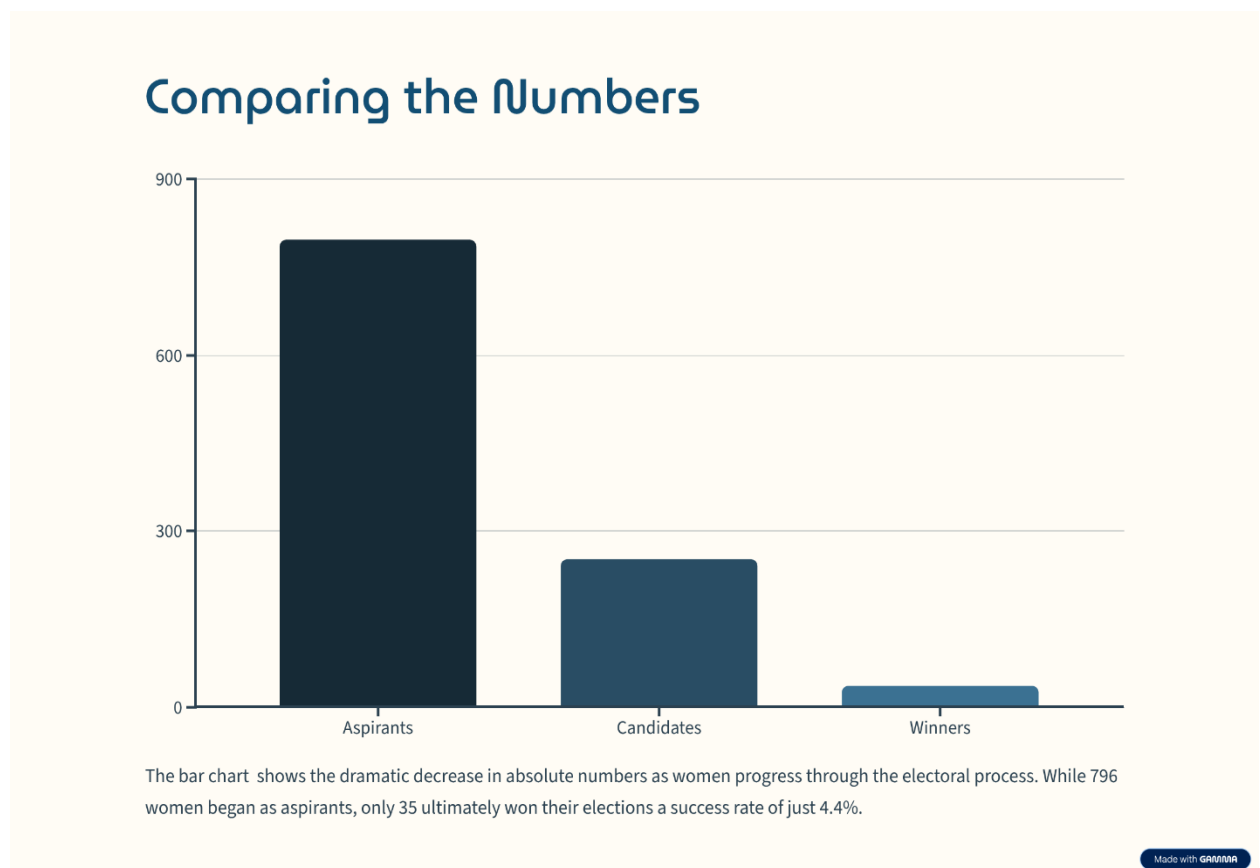
As one-woman contestant from an opposition party explained:

“I ran the campaign without any funds, and I was unfortunate that our presidential candidate did not come to our constituency, which would have helped to leverage support. Because I had no funds, it was difficult to organize public meetings.”

She added that although her party received public subsidies from the government, these resources did not reach women contestants. Other women who contested through parties that did not receive subsidies reported that neither their individual campaigns nor their parties had sufficient funds to afford publicity or political rallies at constituency level.

As the campaign moves from internal party processes to highly competitive public contests, women face increasing pressure to withdraw, are sidelined by party elites, or are placed in unwinnable constituencies reinforcing a system in which women's political ambition is systematically converted into political attrition rather than political representation.

Figure 1: A bar chart comparing the numbers from aspirants to winners.



4.4 VAWP/E:

One of the barriers to women political leadership is violence; both within and outside the political party. Women need to be ensured of their security to be able to confidently participate in elections especially in the fragile areas like Zanzibar.

Zanzibar has been marred by political violence and tension ever since the reintroduction of pluralism democracy in 1992. In the 2010 and 2020 election it was alleged that more than 50 and 21 people were killed and several others injured, amputated and fled the country (ACT 2020; p3).

There is no such a piece of law that protect women and girls against this external violence. In other countries prone to violence, such as Nigeria and Kenya electoral bodies are empowered to supervise the police force about the security of the people. Nigeria's Electoral Act of 2010, as amended in 2015, under Section 29(3), outlines the functions of the special police units during elections and their role in working with the Electoral Commission. Similarly, Kenya's Elections Act No. 24 of 2011, under Section 17, grants the Commission the authority to establish peace committees at the county level in order to monitor, document, and participate in the investigation of allegations of breaches of peace.

In the FGD it was established that external violence therefore affected mostly women from the opposition party. The internal violence was mainly engineered from within the party and unfortunately, no political party has had a functioning gender desk. The acts were therefore committed with impunity.

a) Sexual violence

FGDs found that sexual encounters are often viewed as consensual and not to be discussed in public. Therefore, it is hard to argue and prove cases of abuse, allowing power dynamics between victim and perpetrator to play out behind closed doors. Limited reporting of sexual violence may also be attributed to the fact that sex is considered a taboo topic in the traditional society of Zanzibar, lack of awareness to the existing law such as the ZAECA Act, lack of trust and transparency. So, the incentive to report such violence is curtailed. Sexual violence is said to be more prevalent during internal party nomination and election periods, where in certain instances leaders may demand sexual favors in exchange for a leadership position.

NDI-TAMWA ZNZ (2024) in their study "No Party to Violence: Analyzing Violence Against Women in Political Parties in Zanzibar", reports that women politicians experience high levels of psychological (45%) and economic (41%) violence, as well as threats (27%), physical assault (25%), and sexual violence (22%). Despite the ZAECA law in 2023, women have not had the courage yet to report VAWP/E within and outside.

Much as women are the primary victims of patriarchal political practices, they are also sometimes perceived as reinforcing these same practices, particularly when they participate in mudslinging and public attacks against fellow women politicians. The persistence of male dominance in internal party elections, despite the numerical presence of women, is often framed as evidence that, at best, women do not support one another and, at worst, that they are hostile toward each other.

However, this behaviour is better understood in relation to critical mass theory, introduced by Dahlerup (1988), which asserts that a threshold number of women in political institutions is necessary before they can exercise meaningful influence. Building on Kanter's (1977) analysis of minorities in male-dominated institutions, both Dahlerup and later scholars recognise that when women remain numerically small, they face strong pressures to conform to dominant norms and may at times distance themselves from one another rather than mobilise collectively. Dahlerup (2006) therefore refocused the debate away from numerical thresholds toward the agency of women themselves, emphasising coalition-building and

collective action what she terms critical acts as the key mechanisms for overcoming minority constraints and advancing gender-responsive change.

4.5 Institutional support mechanism:

General Recommendation No. 35 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) it has put clearly the 50/50 threshold instead of 30% women in decision making positions. Although not legally binding like a treaty, it carries high interpretive authority and influences how States design laws and policies to comply with CEDAW. It strongly encourages mechanisms that lead to de facto equality. Do the Zanzibar institutions strong enough to safeguard this requirement? Which shows the way and through which tool?

4.4.1: Electoral Bodies; ZEC and Registrar of NGOs, Zanzibar:

Electoral Bodies are required to lead the way in enforcing WPP. Currently, the law stipulates the requirement of gender policy and gender desk within the political parties. To date only eight political parties have fulfilled the requirement. The ruling party instead of being example it shows the example of incompliance. In the 2025 general election, ZEC enacted a code of conduct which reduced the candidate's fees for women by half. Article 13 (5) states: "Women candidates for the positions of President, Member of the House of Representatives, or Councillors shall pay the nomination form fee at a fifty percent discount, except for women candidates for special seats."

This is a positive move as stated earlier due to years of marginalization, women income is low compared to their male counterparts. The World Bank (2022 p.) established that men earn two times and a half than women. gain 2everal African countries have implemented financing provisions tied to gender quotas. Approximately 30 countries (17%) have gender-targeted (specific) public financing, including Albania, Brazil, Costa Rica, France, Georgia, Kenya and South Korea (International IDEA p. 117).

Several African countries have linked public funding to compliance with gender quotas. Electoral bodies in these contexts have been empowered to enforce compliance by combining incentives and sanctions ("carrots and sticks"). Burkina Faso penalises parties not meeting quotas by cutting public funding while rewarding those that exceed the 30% quota. Cabo Verde awards public funding to parties with at least 25% women candidates. Guinea distributes 5% of state funding to parties with elected women MPs and council members. Kenya restricts funding if the registered office bearers are predominantly one gender. In Mali, 10% of public funding is shared among parties with women deputies or councillors. (Ibid International IDEA,p. 119).

In Zanzibar, however, there are no special percent budget for women political activities as a result women suffer defeat even prematurely. "FGD noted that majority of women are poor and therefore are not even expected to run in the constituencies shoulder to shoulder with men not alone those who appear rich. "They even mock you, are you serious you want to run against so and so, do you have even a clue of how rich he is'? said one of the women politicians.

Within ZEC, there is limited capacity for data disaggregation which provides the disjuncture between the gender policy and implementation. The policy for example vows to distinguish maximum protection to women during elections, but there is no such data within ZEC reports. Generally, data disaggregated is missing from girls, women and persons with disabilities.

4.4:2: Political parties:

Political parties around the world design their own voluntary quota system. This includes all the green parties evolved over time. In Zanzibar, this is a far reached dream. FGD shows that despite the requirement of the law, most political parties operate without a gender policy, including the ruling party, which has been in power for over six decades. Only seven political parties have adopted gender policies in recent years, and even among these, implementation remains largely aspirational rather than operational. Almost all political parties did not have gender desks they were only relying with the ethical committees whose goal is not necessarily cover gender equality. This gap between formal commitment and actual practice continues to undermine women’s political participation across the electoral cycle.

The limited institutionalization of gender equality within political parties is reflected in the distribution of women across the electoral pipeline from aspirants to candidates, to elected representatives and across political parties. While women are increasingly willing to contest elections, their ability to advance within party structures and succeed electorally remains highly uneven and deeply shaped by party-level resources, sensitization, power, and protection.

The data shows that majority of women who enter electoral competition do so through Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM), followed by ACT-Wazalendo at a much lower level while other political parties held the rest and with no winners as describe in table 1 below.

Table 1: Women aspirants, candidates and winners through CCM and ACT

WOMEN	CCM	%	ACT	%
ASPIRTANTS	481	60	40	5
CANDIDATES	39	15.4	18	7.11
WINNERS	34	97.1	1	2.8

This pattern can be interpreted, first and foremost, as evidence of relatively greater gender sensitivity within CCM. At the same time, it also reflects the structural dominance of the ruling party within Zanzibar’s political system. CCM is the oldest political party in Tanzania and Zanzibar and has governed for over sixty years. It therefore enjoys disproportionate access to financial resources, organizational infrastructure, state-linked networks, and media visibility. It also has a long-established women’s wing the Union for Women in Tanzania (UWT) which provides women with platforms for mobilization, political socialization, and internal advancement that are largely unavailable in newer and less resourced parties. By

contrast, opposition parties are relatively young, financially constrained, and often operate under politically hostile conditions. Women number in the House of Representatives, the Zanzibar specifically law-making bodies have increased from the mercy of special seats. They are currently 25 out of 78 equal to 32.5 %. However, special seats do not exhibit balance of power between men and women, and they are accused of weakening the women movement rather than strengthening it. Makulilo (2014, p.24) called these special seats 'reinforcers of the patriarchy system' because the selection process within the political parties is often dominated by men and the procedure is neither transparent nor institutionalised.

These findings reinforce the argument that voluntary party-based gender commitments are insufficient in contexts of unequal power and resources. Attesting to this concern, one male politician stated: "It would generate significant controversy if we were to allocate funds exclusively to women while their male counterparts are in similar need".

4.5 Media role:

The media intervention generated a total of 448 outputs through various platforms as elaborated in figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Media coverage on women leadership in 2025



Source: TAMWA ZNZ (2026).

The stories enabled information about women leadership to reach wide and heterogeneous audiences, including rural communities, urban youth, political actors, and opinion leaders.

In line with Framing Theory media coverage helped define nomination fees, party gatekeeping, and violence against women in politics as systemic barriers requiring institutional reform rather than private adaptation by women.

A particularly influential example was a radio programme produced by Huwaida Nassor on Radio Assalam, which focused on nomination fees as a gendered barrier to political participation which was aired four times in the month of September 2024. Interviewed in this study, Huwaida noted: “High nomination fees have been a recurring barrier for women politicians... This has warranted affirmative measures, as the country seeks to increase women’s participation in the political race.” Following sustained public debate, the Zanzibar Electoral Commission reduced nomination fees for women candidates by 50 percent. This policy shift represents a concrete institutional response linked to media-driven advocacy and demonstrates the capacity of strategic journalism to translate public discourse into regulatory change.

Overall, the media intervention contributed to both normative and institutional change by reshaping public understanding of women’s political underrepresentation and by informing electoral policy processes. This represents a significant shift from the 2020 electoral context, in which women’s voices in election coverage were largely marginal and skewed toward a narrow group of elite actors, particularly businesswomen and male politicians (Media Council of Tanzania, 2021; University of Dar es Salaam, 2022; TAMWA Zanzibar, 2022).

To put this into perspective, TAMWA Zanzibar (2022, p. 11) found that women constituted only 23% of sources in election-related media coverage just one percentage point above the regional average of 22% reported by Afro barometer (2024, p. 145). While recent interventions have helped to improve this imbalance, sustaining these gains remains a significant challenge, particularly given that much of the increased coverage was driven by the Strengthening Women in Leadership (SWIL) project, a time-bound and donor-funded initiative.

4.6: The Role of Gender Policy and Gender desks in WPL:

Gender policy in Zanzibar must be repositioned from a symbolic statement of intent into a binding institutional instrument that actively restructures political power relations. While existing gender policies articulate commitments to inclusion, they have not sufficiently altered political party behavior or electoral outcomes because they lack enforcement, monitoring, and sanctioning mechanisms and are left largely to the discretion of political parties. As Domingo et al. (2015, p. 26) argue, stronger democratic institutions create greater opportunities for women’s political representation, whereas weak institutions render gender equality aspirational rather than operational.

To fast-track implementation, the Zanzibar Electoral Commission (ZEC) and the Registrar of Political Parties must treat gender policy as a regulatory compliance requirement rather than a voluntary commitment. This requires two key institutional shifts.

First, gender policy must become a mandatory condition for party registration and continued legal recognition. Every political party should be required to submit and implement a gender and inclusion policy that meets minimum standards including parity targets, prevention and response mechanisms for violence against women in politics and elections (VAWP/E), internal accountability structures, women's databases, and reporting obligations as a precondition for registration, re-registration, and participation in elections. Non-compliant parties should face graduated sanctions, including suspension of registration, exclusion from public funding, or disqualification from presenting candidates, alongside incentives for parties demonstrating good practice.

Second, ZEC must integrate gender compliance into the electoral integrity framework by embedding gender equality indicators into election codes of conduct, party audits, and observer reporting tools. Political parties should be required to demonstrate how their candidate selection procedures, internal governance, campaign practices, and capacity-building programmes comply with gender standards before being cleared to participate in electoral processes.

Within this regulatory architecture, gender desks become the operational arm of enforcement and accountability. Rather than functioning as symbolic units, gender desks should be legally mandated, resourced, and institutionalized within all registered political parties as a condition of compliance. Their core functions can be streamlined into four interlinked roles:

1. **Monitoring and Reporting:** Collecting and submitting gender-disaggregated data on aspirants, candidates, leadership positions, campaign practices, and incidents of violence, using standardized templates developed by ZEC and the Registrar.
2. **Prevention and Response to VAWP/E:** Providing confidential reporting mechanisms, first-response support, and referral pathways for survivors within party structures.
3. **Capacity-Building and Internal Reform:** Leading internal training, mentorship, and gender audits to transform party culture and practices.
4. **Strategic Coordination:** Acting as institutional bridges between political parties, civil society, electoral bodies, and development partners.

6.0: Conclusions and Recommendations:

This section synthesizes the main findings of the study and draws out their implications for policy, institutional reform, and political practice. It first presents the overall conclusions before outlining targeted recommendations to address the identified structural barriers.

6.1 Conclusion

This study finds that women limited and fragile political participation in Zanzibar is not due to a lack of interest, capacity, or ambition, but to weak, gender-insensitive institutional arrangements within political parties, electoral bodies, and governance systems. Although legal reforms, quotas, and gender policies exist, they have not produced substantive equality because they are weakly enforced, poorly monitored, and largely symbolic.

Women continue to face structural exclusion across the electoral process, including limited access to party support, exposure to political violence, marginalization in candidate selection,

and ineffective reporting and protection mechanisms. As a result, women's participation remains precarious and dependent on political goodwill rather than institutional obligation.

The study concludes that sustainable gender equality in Zanzibar's political system requires a shift from voluntary commitments to enforceable institutional rules. Gender equality must be embedded into the regulatory, administrative, and political infrastructure governing political life so that women's representation becomes normalized, secure, and transformative rather than exceptional.

6.2 Recommendations

The study recommends a shift toward institutional accountability through the following actions:

1. Make gender policy towards 50/50 a legal requirement for political party registration and continued recognition, with sanctions for non-compliance.
2. Strengthen ZEC's regulatory role by integrating gender indicators into electoral audits, codes of conduct, and observer tools, and by publishing gender-disaggregated compliance reports.
3. Mandate functional gender desks within political parties, with clear mandates, trained staff, procedures, and budgets.
4. Establish safe reporting mechanisms for violence against women in politics, ensuring survivor-centered, confidential, and enforceable responses.
5. Link public funding to gender compliance, including parity targets, leadership balance, and operational gender desks.
6. Support media and civil society oversight to sustain public scrutiny, accountability, and pressure for reform.

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