



**Ipas**  
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ALLIANCE

Partners for  
Reproductive Justice

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**PATRIARCHY RULES: AN OUTLOOK AND REFLECTION OF WOMEN LEADERSHIP IN MERU COUNTY.**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Kenya has made impressive strides in advancing gender equity through the enactment of laws on domestic violence, sexual offences, establishment of affirmative funds for women-led businesses, and increasing representation of women in public and elective office. Nevertheless in Meru County, the concerning low number of women holding elected positions is reflective of broader challenges related to gender equity. Yet a sufficient representation of women in the highest echelons of leadership is key to addressing gender justice. As demonstrated by the Gubernatorial seat held by H.E Kawira Mwangaza, the challenges faced when vying for elected seats do not end with elections - they only get amplified upon election, inhibiting the emergence and sustenance of women in leadership. Ipas, through the Call for Local Initiatives (CFLI) project funded by Global Affairs Canada, conducted a desk review to understand the status of gender equity in Meru County and identify the gaps, challenges and underlying factors, as a pathway towards enhancing gender justice in the county. This analysis will inform evidence-based recommendations to the county leadership to ensure that the county begins making notable strides towards the realization of the two-thirds gender rule, as stipulated in the 2010 Constitution of Kenya.

Findings include slow progress towards constitutional mandates, hampered by inadequate implementation of laws, weak accountability mechanisms and slow transformation of discriminatory and patriarchal gender norms, attitudes and practices. These findings are supported by statistics on women's

political representation in Meru County, where only one woman was elected to the County Assembly out of the 45 wards. No women were elected to the National Assembly out of the available 9 constituencies, with only 1 woman being nominated to the National Assembly. The other positions with women's representation were the Gubernatorial and women representative positions.

Factors identified limiting women participation in leadership roles identified in this report are:

1. Traditional gender roles that place increased family responsibilities on women and girls
2. Retrogressive and harmful cultural practices (GBV, FGM)
3. Perceived inferiority complex and internalized patriarchy
4. Limited knowledge and empowerment on opportunities for women
5. Limited resources and financial capacity and freedom

### RECOMMENDATIONS IPAS IDENTIFIED DURING THIS REVIEW INCLUDE:

| 01   | 02   | 03  |
|--|--|---|
| Open dialogue with stakeholders (community members, Njuri Ncheke representatives, church and local leaders) on the challenges that women face in their quest to fill leadership positions. | Sensitization of Court Users Committees on the need to tighten the existing loopholes that prevent women from accessing justice whenever their SRH (Sexual and Reproductive Health) rights are denied, which is intricately linked to prevailing socio-cultural norms. | Sensitization and empowerment interventions for women in Meru on the mechanisms in place e.g., laws and policies that protect, guarantee, and incentivize the political participation of women, to address the information gap and internalized patriarchy. |



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# INTRODUCTION



Ipas Africa Alliance (AA) is committed to advancing reproductive justice through an intersectional approach that addresses the complex factors contributing to the denial of sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR). We recognize that both reproductive justice and women's political participation are intrinsically linked to gender equality and autonomy. Recognizing this critical intersection between reproductive justice and women's political participation, Africa Alliance strategically leverages our expertise to address gendered barriers to women's leadership.

In the context of women's political participation, gender-based violence (GBV) manifests as a tool used to intimidate, silence, and discredit women who dare to challenge traditional gender roles and norms. This systemic violence not only deters women from entering politics but also undermines their effectiveness and leadership once elected. By addressing GBV as an intersectional issue within the framework of reproductive justice, AA acknowledges the interconnectedness of GBV with broader systems of oppression, including patriarchy, misogyny, and sexism.

For Africa Alliance, intervening to address gendered barriers to women's political participation is a strategic priority. Firstly, ensuring women's equal participation in political leadership aligns with our commitment to reproductive justice by promoting gender equality and autonomy. Secondly, by addressing GBV as a barrier to women's political participation, we can contribute to creating safer and more inclusive political environments where women's voices are heard and valued. Finally, advocating for policies and

interventions that address GBV in political settings reinforces Africa Alliance's commitment to challenging systemic injustices and promoting social change

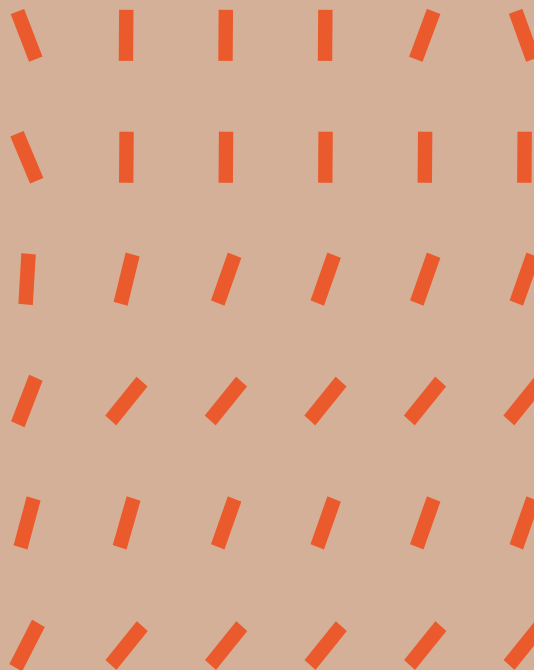


Addressing gender inequalities is essential for sustainable development and as such is prioritized as the 5th Sustainable Development Goal (SGD) by the United Nations. A key manifestation of gender inequality is the disparate participation of women within elected political spaces. Globally, regionally, and nationally, women continue to face persistent barriers to equal political participation. These challenges include lack of financial muscle to fairly compete for elected positions, physical, verbal, and sexual harassment and abuse when campaigning for elected positions, and patriarchal biases within political structures that limit women’s access to political nominations and endorsements.

International and regional standards and mechanisms – such as affirmative action initiatives, constitutional amendments, and legislative reforms - have sought to remedy this through robust women empowerment initiatives that have pushed member states to reform their legislative and policy structures to guarantee women’s political participation. Thus, we are beginning to see improved trends particularly in Africa where at least 5 women have been elected as heads of state, increased participation at national assemblies in countries such as Rwanda (61.3%), Burundi (36.4%), Tanzania (37.2%), and Uganda (34.3%).

Nonetheless, there are still challenges and overarching cultural nuances that continue to hinder women’s equal participation and representation in the political arena, and by extension, hamper the implementation of gender justice initiatives. This report shall spotlight Meru County, in Kenya whose female political representation is quite concerning. It will further explore some of the key contributing factors to this, the challenges that women face in this county when seeking elected positions and finally offer key

recommendations to addressing these challenges and strengthening the capacity, improving the socio-political environment, and empowering women to participate in the Meru political space



## METHODOLOGY

Ipas Africa Alliance conducted a desk review of women leadership in Kenya with a specific focus on Meru County. This literature review involved an in-depth analysis of the available literature on women Leadership and GBV with specific focus on Meru County, including books, journals, articles, and academic publications.





## CONTEXT

### *Women Leadership Globally*

All over the World, women face challenges in political participation, necessitating several major events such as UN World Conference on Women (Mexico, Copenhagen, Nairobi, Beijing) that culminated into the Beijing platform of action. An important aspect of the Beijing platform is the idea that elected bodies should have at least one-third women, if necessary, through special measure like quotas. In Africa, Articles of the protocol to the African Charter of Human and People's Rights (adopted in July 2003) call for the participation of women in elections without discrimination, and the equal representation of men and women. Effective institutions and inclusive decision-making are fundamental principles embedded within the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The agenda focuses on people-centered transformative goals to build just and inclusive societies, with a particular emphasis on leaving no one behind. It makes clear that national parliaments have an essential role to play in promoting inclusive decision-making and ensuring accountability for implementation of commitments.

Communities look to their parliaments to address issues that impact their lives and livelihoods. People want to have a say by contributing their views and suggestions. Since parliaments derive their legitimacy from the people, public disenchantment threatens their authority. As representative institutions, parliaments are duty-bound to listen to the community and to meet public

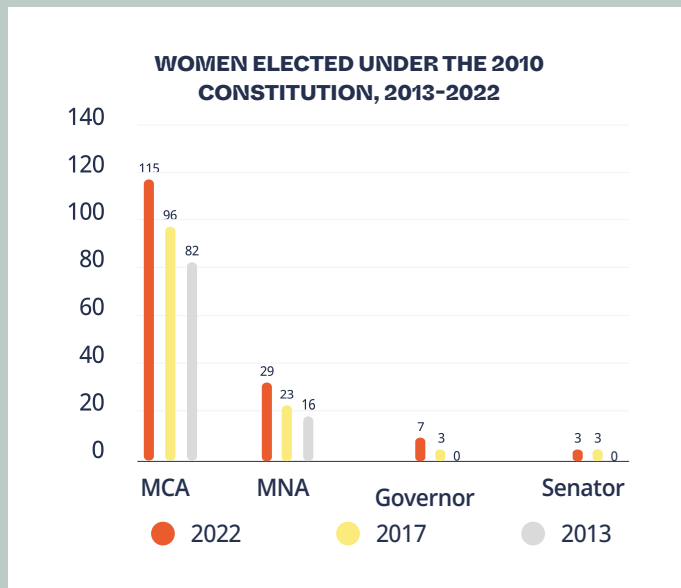
expectations when making laws, investigating public policy issues and holding the government to account. This means that for this to be achieved, fair representation of all genders at the table of decision making is crucial on all fronts.

The gender gap in power and leadership is a critical component of the persistent lag in gender equality. Globally, women hold just 26.7% of parliamentary seats, 35.5% of local government seats and 28.2% of the management positions.

### *Kenyan Landscape*

The promulgation of the 2010 Constitution of Kenya was a major milestone on the road towards gender equity. It opened up space for the participation of women in decision-making processes. A decade and a half later, Kenyan women continue to suffer setbacks whenever they seek not only elective but also appointed positions. In the two parliamentary chambers, few women have shown interest in contesting for parliamentary seats. For example, during the 2013 general elections, out of 1,908 aspirants who contested for the 349 National Assembly seats, only 197 were women out of which 69 were elected. Although the 2022 general election showed improvement from 2013 and 2017 (figure 1), these gains do not satisfy the constitutional threshold to improve social justice and equality.

In 2022, the number of female gubernatorial candidates increased to 22 from nine in 2017. Out of these, seven were elected as county governors, representing a 32% success rate. Seven women were also appointed as Cabinet Secretaries positions out the 22 slots available.



In 2022 the Political Parties Act Amendment (2011) was passed with a specific view to make elections more equitable for women candidates and other marginalized groups. Political party funding criteria were reviewed in the amendments, and 15 per cent of their funding is now dependent on the ratio of special interest groups included on party nomination lists. Political parties are now competing to bring women onto their lists.

In addition to legislative strengthening, there has been a focus on political education for aspirants, party organs and the general public to support and elect women to political leadership positions. This has resulted in improvement in women leadership in Parliament. Even with the notable strides made so far, there remains a lack of social support systems in Kenya where most women lack the financial power to fairly compete for public offices. Democracy in Africa is not cheap; it requires significant financial investment before individuals can even be nominated to represent political parties, let alone campaign and get elected. Without sound financial support, women aspiring for political candidacy are likely to lose out to the highest bidders who are likely to be males. Further, the confinement of women to household and care work, gives them little opportunity to be nurtured for public office, and women's parental and marital roles present a conflict for with regard to political careers. Consequently, leadership in Africa is typified by its exemplary masculinity as decision-making is consistently monopolized.

### *Findings in Meru County*

Meru County is one of the forty-seven counties located in the eastern region of Kenya. The county's economy relies mostly on agriculture, with subsistence farming predominant. Its administrative structure comprises of (11) sub counties, 28 divisions, 133 locations and 351 sub-locations. It comprises of nine parliamentary constituencies and 45 electoral wards, representing 54 electoral positions available for both men and women residing in the County.



Presently in Meru County, women hold 2 (3.5%) out of 56 electoral positions, way below the constitution’s aspirations. Moreover, the proportion of elected women leaders lags behind the national average of 23.4%.

| Positions                                  | Gender           |                |
|--|------------------|----------------|
|  | M                | F              |
| Number of MCAs (Member of County Assembly) | 44               | 1              |
| CECMs                                      | 7                | 3              |
| Number of MPs (Members of Parliament)      | 9                | 0              |
| Senator                                    | 1                | 0              |
| Governor                                   | 0                | 1              |
| Deputy Governor                            | 1                | 0              |
| <b>Total</b>                               | <b>62(92.5%)</b> | <b>5(7.5%)</b> |

*Women Leadership in Meru County*

An assessment conducted in the Mount Kenya Region in 2016, of which Meru County comprises reported that there is limited involvement of women in leadership positions due in part to minimal knowledge on available positions for women contestation. Most women knew that they could contest for MCA (Member of County Assembly) and MP (Member of Parliament) positions but less than a third of them were not aware that Governor and Senator positions were also available for women contestation . This report validated the assumption that deeply rooted patriarchal nuances as well internalized patriarchy by women themselves has contributed significantly to the glaring shortfall in

women’s political participation in Meru and calls to question the quality and effectiveness of voter education conducted in the county.

**“WOMEN HOLD 2 (3.5%) OUT OF 56 ELECTORAL POSITIONS, WAY BELOW THE CONSTITUTION’S ASPIRATIONS.”**

The hurdles to political participation do not end with defying the odds and getting elected. If anything, as is the case of H.E Kawira Mwangaza, it only worsens with victory. The challenges a patriarchal society still haunts Governor Kawira Mwangaza after she shocked the Ameru community by flooring two seasoned politicians in the 2022 gubernatorial race. Ms. Mwangaza defeated two influential men: her predecessor Kiraitu Murungi and the Agriculture Cabinet Secretary, Mithika Linturi, in the August 9, 2022, poll. Just three months into office, she survived an impeachment attempt at the Senate. The county assembly had voted to impeach her over claims that she was overstepping her mandate. A second attempt at her impeachment fell flat when a majority of the 47 Senators failed to uphold any of the seven charges leveled against her by the County Assembly of Meru that voted unanimously to eject her from office .

Ms. Mwangaza's experience rekindles memories of Meru's first female MP Annrita Karimi, who was hounded out of office by then political bigwigs. After winning the Meru South seat in 1975, Ms. Karimi was jailed in 1978 for 18 months, over trumped-up charges levelled against her by competitors. After she was released, she quit politics. It was only after the advent of devolution that brought in the Woman Representative position that a female was elected to parliament. Currently, while there is no elected woman MP, only one-woman MCA (Jennifer Morocho, Kiirua/Naari) was elected to the 69-member county assembly in Meru County where 45 are elected and 24 nominated.

### *Gender based violence (GBV) in Meru*

GBV is a common phenomenon against women and girls and is a major human rights violation not only in Kenya but across the globe. We found that that in Meru, women are disproportionately affected by GBV. GBV is prevalent in the county. Recent data by the National Crimes Centre indicates that women have a 65% chance of experiencing GBV from an intimate partner in their lifetime. Approximately 88% of women in Meru have experienced GBV, nearly half of those ending in death. This review considered among other things, common forms of GBV investigated. The data collected from Meru County revealed high rates of GBV with hitting/battering/ beating scoring 88%, killings/murders of GBV victims scoring 34.9% and a further 66.7 % of women indicating having experienced GBV in the preceding 12 months.

In Meru, there is evidence that inaction and inadequate response by public authorities mandated to respond to GBV has continued to complicate GBV survivor's ability to access services and justice.



# 65%

Chance of experiencing GBV from an intimate partner



# 88%

women in Meru have experienced GBV

This was noted in a landmark ruling of the High Court in Meru in a case (Petition No. 8 of 2012, High Court of Meru, C.K. (A Child) & 11 Others v. Commissioner of Police/Inspector-General of the National Police Service & 2 Others [2012] eKLR) concerning sexual abuse of 11 girls. The Court found that the police had “unlawfully, inexcusably, and unjustifiably neglected, omitted and/or otherwise failed to conduct prompt, effective, proper, and professional investigations into the girls' complaints. The facts of the case reinforced that “In all eleven cases, the Police failed to visit scenes of crime to gather evidence that is vital in corroboration of a case, did not interview witnesses/victims, samples were not taken and even those produced by victims were never forwarded to the Government analysts' for examination.

While GBV health infrastructure is well developed in referral and national hospitals, it is poorly developed in lower-level health facilities where most GBV cases are recorded. The lower-level centers lack basic facilities and equipment and have a shortage of trained staff to manage the high number of GBV cases referred to them. Due to this lack of capacity, case management is still poor in the lower-level health facilities, thus compromising their ability to offer quality services to survivors.



### *Explaining the dearth of women leaders in Meru County*

These concerning scenarios lead us to further interrogate the factors that limit women participation in Meru County. Some of the factors limiting women participation include

1. Culture and traditional gender roles that prioritize family responsibilities on women and girls
2. Retrogressive and harmful cultural practices (GBV, FGM)
3. Perceived inferiority complex and internalized patriarchy by women.
4. Limited knowledge and empowerment on opportunities for women
5. Limited resources and financial capacity and freedom

Negative social norms and cultural beliefs that place women and girls as subordinate to men and boys is one of the key factors that limit women participation. Women who played important roles in Kenya's decolonization struggle are poorly identified as role models to strengthen women's resolve in politics. For instance, women who pioneered the struggle for social emancipation in the early days of independence, such as Mekatilili wa Menza, do not feature in discussions on encouraging women's political participation. This is also mirrored in the Meru culture where the cultural administrative unit 'Njuri Ncheke' does not allow for women representation in their unit. This is further manifested in politics where for any person to contend for political and elective seats in Meru, they must have the blessing of the Njuri Ncheke - an institution that is deeply patriarchal and that advocates for retrogressive and harmful cultural practices, is ironically the first point of call when one has any political ambition.

Moreover, women in the Meru community are disaggregated based on their marital status: regardless of her age, an unmarried or childless woman will be regarded as a girl, thus lacking in credibility. To illustrate this, in the last Impeachment case against Governor Kawira Mwangaza, a member of parliament verbally attacked the governor for not having children with her current husband. He was seen making a charged address while rubbing a stick between his palms as he spoke in Meru's vernacular. Asked by her advocate to translate what the MP was saying, Governor Kawira said:

*"He is saying he has given me 9 months to be pregnant and if that is not done, he will do it via what he is holding,"* Kawira said before shedding tears.

This shows the extent of Meru's harmful and retrogressive cultural practices that go as far as casually threatening sexual violence against a sitting governor. In practice, and in most parts of the country, this would have attracted a weighted legal response against the Member of Parliament. It would have seen investigations by law enforcement, subsequent uptake by the office of the public prosecution and eventually find its way to courts. However, no action was taken in response to the threats made against the governor, further illustrating the casualness in which GBV/SGBV is perceived in the county. If such public threats can be made with impunity towards a sitting governor, one can only imagine the violence meted out to ordinary women and girls in Meru County.



A report by UN Women found that violence against women during the electoral cycle, was manifested in various forms, from sexual harassment, online/cyberbullying, threats of arson, to violent campaign environments. There was a constant fear of getting raped while on the campaign trail or during strategic meetings, some of which would run late into the night. Women had to pay attention to their dress code, not to give anyone any excuse to assault them, even as they acknowledged that no one is safe even when modestly dressed. However, these violations of fundamental rights against women in Meru, have captured the attention of the judicial arm of government. Robust civil society interventions highlighting statistics from the courts in Meru led to the establishment of a specialized GBV court registry in Meru County. Even so, the specialized court is ineffective as a result of reluctance to report GBV cases by the victims, laxity and negligence in investigating the reports by the police, and low GBV case uptake by the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions (ODPP); all of whom form part of the court users' committees (CUCs). As such, although all the necessary systems and infrastructures to curb the prevalent cases of GBV exist, the statistics see little to no change.

These trends, supported by reports reviewed in the development of this report, indicate that:

1. There is a significant and detrimental gap in information about the existence and purpose of the specialized court registries.
2. There is a fear and reluctance in reporting cases of GBV by the victims out of fear of the repercussions of reporting the matter.
3. There are detrimental gaps in mandate and service delivery by the CUCs in Meru in addressing GBV cases resulting in administrative bottlenecks, lack of proper or compromised evidence collection.

Finances remain one of the major constraints affecting women in their pursuit for leadership positions. Women have limited control and ownership of finances and property even if they have contributed to it through labor, care work, or financially. For instance, women constitute only 23 percent of members of Kenya cooperative societies even though women are the driving force behind these cooperative economic activities. The cost of electoral politics has increased exponentially over the years. Yet women without property to use as collateral have no leverage for financial backing.



**WOMEN CONSTITUTE ONLY  
23 % OF MEMBERS OF  
KENYA COOPERATIVE  
SOCIETIES**

Meru women are financially disempowered, contributing to low political participation and a heightened risk of SGBV. Financially dependent women are less likely to report incidents of violence instigated by an intimate partner out of fear of loss of income and financial support to the family. The reporting apathy, lack of access to information, and inadequate response by public authority is detrimental to the systemic and administrative infrastructure that has been established to mitigate SGBV in Meru.

## CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS



Patriarchy and harmful socio-cultural practices in Meru society remain a major obstacle to the participation of women in politics and leadership. Economic constraints for women seeking leadership positions are evident and there is need for protection of women against violence which is often manifested during electoral periods. Sexual exploitation of women candidates has also become more pronounced as more women candidates seek political party nominations. The use of vulgar, threatening, and demeaning language on women candidates aims to intimidating those seeking leadership and those who have been rightfully elected.

This situation is symptomatic of the deep gender challenges facing Meru County. The demonstrated gap in women's political participation is rooted in the failure to protect and empower women and girls, seen in the staggering statistics on SGBV. Therefore, tackling the gender gap in leadership requires addressing the root causes and building upwards to a level where women and girls in Meru have an equal chance and opportunity at leadership.

Ipas Africa Alliance therefore makes the following recommendations to mitigate and address the gender gap in Meru County:

1. Access to information as an essential tool for the empowerment of women and girls in Meru, calling for capacity

building initiatives through direct engagement with women and girls to sensitize them on the rights and freedoms guaranteed to them by law.

2. Capacity strengthening and women empowerment interventions for women in Meru on the rights and infrastructures put in place by laws and policies that protect, guarantee, and incentivize the political participation of women in Meru County, to address the information gap and internalized patriarchy. This may include cross-learning initiatives and solidarity building for women with political aspirations.
3. Establishment of strong accountability and collaborative mechanisms with key stakeholders, with a very specific focus on CUCs, to bridge the gap of access to justice for women and girls who have experienced GBV and tighten the existing loopholes that prevent women from accessing justice whenever they are violated and their SRH rights are denied, to address the SGBV issue which is somehow connected to the socio-cultural norms
4. Establishment of strong partnerships with health care providers to respond to the GBV and SGBV cases with a gender specific and sensitized lenses to ensure that women not only have access to SRH services but also proper collection and documentation of evidence to support the prosecution of GBV *and* SGBV cases.

5. Open dialogue with key stakeholders (community members, Njuri Ncheke representatives, church leaders, local leaders) on the challenges that women face in their plight to fill leadership positions, to address the socio-cultural norms and patriarchal challenges faced by women in Meru County.



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