

Democracy on Reserved Terms: Gender Quotas, Institutional Power, and Women's Representation in Tanzania (2020–2025)

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Abstract

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1. INTRODUCTION

The rise in using gender quota systems throughout the world over the last thirty years can be seen as a positive sign of the increasing understanding that formal political equality does not necessarily mean substantive political representation. (Aldrich 2025) Even though the suffrage by women and their eligibility to hold a public office has been greatly categorized as constitutional norms, the structural, institutional, and cultural obstacles to effective participation of women in political decision-making have persisted. The reaction to this has been the adoption by many states of positive mechanisms especially gender quotas to hasten the pace at which women are included in the legislative process (Ben Shitrit 2016). One of the most interventionist models among them is reserved seats that ensure a predetermined number of parliamentary seats are held by women. One of the most salient adopters of this system in Africa has been that of Tanzania which constitutionally guarantees special seats since the restoration of multiparty democracy in the early 1990s (Lihiru 2024). Although this structure has propelled the numerical representation of women by a very large margin, there are some underlying issues about its democratic nature, institutional implications and legitimacy of representation.

The period 2020 to 2025 in Tanzania was marked by dramatic political changes that were influenced by governance reforms, constitutional issues, and restructuring of the electoral system and also the changing party dynamics (Osei Afriyie et al. 2021). These developments were in line with the renewed discussions around the world on the ability of quota systems to promote not only descriptive inclusion but substantive political representation and accountability. In Tanzania, women on special seats will always be

institutionally different to those on a constituency-based legislator because they do not go through direct electoral contests but are nominated by their parties. This separation of structure brings about concerns pertaining to accountability, autonomy, legitimacy and policy power (Yoon 2013). Although the special seats system has increased their formal access of women to the parliamentary institutions, it has also created the danger of creating a stronger hierarchical mode of representation, where women gain formal inclusion in the institutions but are marginalized in the substantive forms. Tanzania is thus a crucial example case of studying the paradox of democratic inclusion in the situation of institutional reservation.

Current literature in the topic of scholarships on gender quotas has been structured by three broad discussions; the degree to which they achieve descriptive representation, the extent to which they impact substantive policy outcomes and the consequences of such policies on democratic legitimacy and institutional architecture (Mwendah 2024). The initial research focused on quotas as remedial solutions to historical exclusion, and subsequent research by feminist institutionalists was able to show that formal inclusion fails to end informal power relations that exist in political institutions (Verge 2014). African scholarship has additionally been more concerned with numerical gains, which has mostly been more of a success case of Tanzania. Nonetheless, critical reviews indicate that there is marginalization of women legislators especially those in reserved seats, which is evident in restricting access to leadership, committee representation and legislative influence. In spite of these revelations, some major drawbacks exist. The literature is largely based on cross-national quantitative analysis, fails to take into account political changes in the past years, and has inadequate theorization of the larger democratic implications of the reserved-seat systems (Krook 2007). This gap creates the need to further analyze how the institutional design transforms accountability, political power and democratic legitimacy.

This paper critically analyzes the institutional consequences of the Tanzanian system of special seats to women with regards to political empowerment and democratic representation in the country between 2020 and 2025. Going beyond the idea of numerical inclusion, it questions the ways in which institutional arrangements form political power, accountability and legitimacy. It poses the question of how the special seats system is constructed in such a way that it is more likely to provide women with access to political power, the democratic implications of indirect systems of selection and whether or not reserved seats increase or limit substantive representation.

The originality of this study is that it re-evaluates the concept of reserved seats, not only as inclusionary mechanism but as an institutional organization redefining democratic representation. It cuts across feminist institutionalism, democratic theory and comparative political analysis by foregrounding institutional power. Empirically, it is one of the first systematic studies of the post-2020 politics of Tanzania, presenting the notion of reserved democracy to describe the presence of a formal inclusion and structural constraint.

2. METHOD

The study methodologically uses the qualitative institutional analysis, researching the constitutional provisions, electoral laws, parliamentary regulations, and party rules to be supported by the parliamentary records, policy documents, and secondary academic literature. Comparative analysis places Tanzania in the context of the debates in the region and the world. The combination of legal analysis and political institutional theory offers the study a multidimensional evaluation of the impact of reserved-seats systems on democracy outside of the number-inclusion dimension of representation.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Institutional Architecture and the Logic of Reserved Representation

The results of this paper show that the special seats system in Tanzania has a highly institutionalized structure that on the one hand empowers women into parliament, and on the other hand limits their political power in a structuralized manner (Yoon 2016). Constant entrenchment of the reserved seats in the constitution is an outright effort to make right what was actually wrong historically; to ensure that women have numbers in legislative bodies. Nevertheless, the logic of representation, implemented in the system, is a parallel logic, in the sense that it creates a distinction between constituency-based and party-nominated legislators that dramatically influence political agency, accountability, and legitimacy (Koch 2005).

The proportional party representation of special seats, which is not based on actual electoral contest, constitutes women legislators so as to make them answerable to party elites, instead of constitutional districts (Umoh 2023). This set-up reforms the representative relationship that lies at the core of the democratic theory, in which the electoral accountability is customarily imagined to run in the direction of the voters to their elected officials. The system causes the locus of accountability to be held higher and by the modality of legislative access by women, through party nomination, this strengthens the hierarchical relationships undermining female autonomy. Such a dynamic in structure constrains the ability of women to act freely in parliamentary debates, especially on measures that are politically sensitive that threaten the mainstream party stands or existing patriarchal practices (Indigay et al.2024).

the distance created by the institutional detachment between special seat and constituency MPs creates a stratified parliamentary order. It is the political endorsement through direct election that gives the constituency legislators greater bargaining power in the party structures, parliamentary committee and leadership hierarchies, thus creating better bargaining power (Raymond 2019). However, when women sit in reserved seats, they tend to have symbolic inclusion but no substantive power. They are seen to have a dual era, their legislative status both apparent and peripheral, and a dual-tier system that reinstates gendered political hierarchies is strengthened. This division weakens the integrative logic of the democratic representation, of which all legislators should be equal actors in institutions of deliberation.

The Tanzanian model makes institutional sense in its view of how inclusionary mechanisms are perversely enacted by exclusionary ones. Even though the constitutionalizing of the reserved seats indicates the adherence to the idea of gender equality, its implementation creates reliance and subservience patterns (Msoka 2018). These dynamics highlight the weaknesses of formal equality measures out of context of institutional reforms in general that seek to redistribute political power. The results, therefore, question the celebratory accounts on the adoption of the quota perspective, emphasizing the need to question the underlying institutional implications that representational engineering may have (Jabali et al. 2025).

Democratic Legitimacy and the Problem of Indirect Accountability

One of the key analytical conclusions is related to the special seats system of female representation as a democratic issue. Traditionally, democratic legitimacy is based on the aspect of electoral approval, political accountability and participatory inclusion. The design of the reserved-seat MPs means that they are not directly elected to the House and that the basic tenet of their representation legitimacy and political independence is put into question

(Liang & Ma 2021). The lack of direct voter sanction despite constitutional recognition creates an imbalance in representation which is felt along the whole practice of parliament.

This deficit is exhibited in various institutional domains. In the parliament, women elected under special seats tend to face overt yet not overt challenges to their leadership especially when they express themselves in a manner that challenges the major policy agendas or even the culture of men in which women are supposed to be viewed as subordinate (Castanho Silva et al. 2025). Their actions can often be seen as a symbolic contribution as opposed to an actual legislative input because of widespread societal distrust towards non-elected officials. This relationship restricts the discursive space and the transformative capabilities of the presence of women in parliament.

Moreover, political vulnerability is promoted through indirect responsibility to political structures. The possibility of re-nomination is an effective disciplinary tool, that influences the behavior of legislators based on the perception of future compliance (André et al. 2015). Women MPs can censor their own policy in line to party orthodoxy especially on matters of gender equality, sexual and reproductive rights, and law reform. This trend can be compared to feminist institutionalist studies that highlight the influence of informal power relations and party gatekeeping structures in determining the political outcomes with greater effectiveness than formal rules (Raychaudhury, 2023).

The political consequences are tremendous. Democratic participation is limited and citizen participation is weakened when the representatives are structurally reliant on the process of elite nomination instead of popular approval (Steger 2008). The representation of women poses danger of being a technocrat zed endeavor as opposed to a participatory democratic process. This system creates some kind of a controlled inclusivity, in which visibility replaces empowerment, and presence replaces agency. These results question the normative principles of a democratic representation especially the theories of participatory equality, political autonomy, and deliberative inclusion.

On a bigger scale, the Tanzanian case points out the conflict between corrective justice and democratic proceduralism. Although the idea of reserved seats is aimed at correcting the historical exclusion, the structure of the procedure is detrimental to the fundamental values of democracy (Darhour 2020). This contradiction shows that there is a structural dilemma of quota systems: a need to strike a balance between compensatory inclusion and participatory legitimacy. The results imply that, absent the mechanisms that will secure direct electoral accountability, quota-based representation will recreate democratic failure despite the formal expansion of the process of inclusion (“Do Women Represent Women? Rethinking the ‘Critical Mass’ Debate,” 2006).

Gendered Power Relations and Parliamentary Hierarchies

Over and above the institutional design which is visible on the surface, the research indicates that gendered power relations are very well entrenched in ways which determine parliamentary hierarchies. Although the number of women has grown substantially, they still lack access to influential committees, agenda-setting positions, as well as other strategic leadership roles. Parliamentary leadership formations, committee placement, and unofficial decision and making bodies remain dominated by males and this strengthens gendered allocations of political power. (Alieva 2025)

Structural obstacles to career leadership are common among the reserved-seat MPs. Their modes of indirect selection undermine their arguments to political power, and restrict their chances of holding prime leadership positions. In addition, the informal political cultures celebrate electoral victory as a legitimacy measure, further marginalizing women who have been appointed using party lists (Astudillo 2022). The effect of this political

relationship is that it maintains a political hierarchy in which the constituency MPs hold positions of substantive power whilst special seat MPs are left with the peripheral positions.

Such stratification has a serious implication on legislative results. The concentration in the social sector committees, i.e., education, health and community development, is also often reported by women legislators and underrepresented among powerful committees that deal with finance, defense, constitutional affairs and foreign policy (Coffé et al 2019). Although it is necessary to be involved in social policy areas, its gendered focus strengthens stereotypes that restrict political participation of women to traditionally feminized policy areas. These trends curtail the ability of women to shape macroeconomic policy, national security and constitutional reform and restrict the transformational possibilities of women in their members of parliament. (Krogstrup 2011)

According to feminist institutionalists, such consequences can be attributed to the continuity of informal gender standards, which determine institutional practices. The inclusion of women in a formal, quota-based way fails to obliterate patriarchal political cultures as they are still associated with a masculinized way of leadership, power and legitimacy. The case of Tanzania therefore depicts how strong informal institutions can be in mediating the impacts of formal reform. Unless there are similar efforts in confronting gendered power relations in political parties and parliamentary practices, quotas become merely a symbolic inclusion component, as opposed to substantive change (Mhando, 2018).

Substantive Representation and Policy Influence

The enhancement of substantive representation, the increase in the influence of women in policies and the promotion of gender responsive regulations are one of the main goals of gender quotas. The results, though, demonstrate a problematic and contradictory connection between descriptive representation and substantive results (Clayton, 2021). Although women parliamentarians have been participating in policy discussion on education, health, women care, and child welfare, their ability to influence the legislative agenda is institutionalized.

The system of special seats restricts the initiative of women as legislators by relying on the structure of dependency on party hierarchies. Laws on gender-based violence, changes in the family law, reproductive health and labor laws can face opposition among conservative political forces and patriarchal customs (Osborn 2012). Women MPs working in indirect accountability systems are at more risks of political persecution upholding transformational agendas especially in politically sensitive sectors. This weakness deters long term legislative activism resulting in incremental instead of structural change.

In addition, women legislators tend to have fewer avenues of access to informal spaces of decision-making where policy concerns are bargained due to institutional marginalization. Formal debate is not the only way of exercising parliamentary influence, but it is done through backstage negotiations, party caucuses and networks of the elite (Goyal 2025). Their policy influence of these informal arenas is also limited due to the fact that women have been minimally integrated in these arenas. This leads to a fragmented, episodic and extremely contingent substantive representation due to a strong dependence on political opportunity structures over institutionalized empowerment.

These results put instrumentalist beliefs to the test that a numerical rise in women will automatically produce progressive policy results into practice. Rather, they emphasize the need to explore the role of institutional structures in mediating the process of translating descriptive representation into substantial power (Goyal 2020). In Tanzania, the special seats system enables women to enter parliament but does not impart redistribution of political power in such a manner that promotes long term policy change. Substantive

representation is still limited by structural dependencies, political cultures of patriarchy and institutional hierarchies.

Reserved Democracy and the Paradox of Inclusion

One of the key conceptual contributions of the paper is the definition of the term of a reserved democracy as an analytical form of conceptualizing the paradox of quota-based representation. Reserved democracy refers to a political state that includes but institutionally restricts it, creating a hybrid model of representational form that both extends the access and restricts agency (Aspinall et al., 2021). Democratic participation in this model is enforced formally, but political power is hierarchically shared.

This paradox can be traced in the Tanzanian special seats system. On the one hand, it has dramatically brought out women in the parliament and it is an indication of a constitutional obligation of gender equality (Babeiya, 2025). Conversely, it has formalized the materialized modes of representation that serve to entrench stratification of politics. This is the duality that poses a challenge to the traditional democratic theory that postulates that the inclusion into politics must take care of the democratic legitimacy and responsiveness.

Reserved democracy then calls to question a critical rethinking of inclusionary institutional design (André et al., 2016). It implies that, when hierarchically implemented to bring about inclusion, it might only recreate structural inequalities instead of eradicating them. This observation has wider implications on comparative democratic governance especially in the postcolonial and transitional states where quota systems have become more of a political engineering mechanism. The Tanzanian experience shows that in the absence of consideration of the institutional power relations, quota systems can produce democratic trade-offs, which negate their emancipatory possibility (Samoff, 2019).

Political Parties as Gatekeepers of Representation

The paper also emphasizes on the leading position of political parties as institutional gatekeepers in the mediation of political empowerment of women. Party formations regulate the selection of candidates, nomination, legislative progress and access to leadership making them critical decision makers in influencing representational results (Ringkjøb 2007). The special seats system creates political space, whereby, party elites have a disproportionate control over the politics of women and this strengthens vertical accountability frameworks undermining democratic participation (Babeiya 2022).

This gatekeeping role exists both in formal and informal means. Nomination of parties can be formally done by the party nomination committees, which tend to favor loyalty, political alignment, and elite ties over activism based on the grassroots movement or policy skills (Itzkovitch-Malka & Hazan, 2017). Informally, patronages, factional interests, and gender norms influence the results of selection, which further limits the independence of women. Such relations strengthen the political reliance and prevent dissent, hindering the ability of women to become the independent legislative actors.

It has serious implications to democratic governance. In the case when party elites seize the representational pathways, political participation gets mediated by hierarchical forms which block the impact of citizens. The danger of the representation of women is that it would turn into the project of elites instead of the participatory democracy (Fernández & Valiente, 2021). The need to reformulate parties is a primary focus of this dynamic because gender-inclusive institutions design is incomprehensible without party reform. Quota systems can also potentially increase existing power asymmetries instead of destabilizing them without democratization of internal party structures.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to analyze the question of whether the system of special seats in Tanzania supports or replicates limited models of democracy inclusiveness. The results reveal that though the system has been able to boost women descriptive representation, it has not been matched by commensurate improvement in substantive political power, democratic legitimacy as well as institutional authority. The main hypothesis that structural inclusion can be achieved and at the same time limit political agency through the use of reserved-seat mechanisms is highly upheld. The hierarchical types of representation created by the system due to the absence of direct electoral accountability by parties instead of nomination have resulted in the undermining of women autonomy, strengthening of political dependence, and marginalization of the legislative power of women. As a result, the role of women is still more symbolic and they work within the institutional constraints that restrict their ability to influence policy agendas and decision-making processes.

The empirical and theoretical contributions to the study are in the revelation of the mediating role of institutional design on the relationship between inclusion and empowerment. The analysis has shown that the idea of conceptualizing the experience of Tanzania as a type of reserved democracy proves that measures of formal equality, when deep-rooted in structures of accountability, may only further entrench, instead of eliminating, political inequality. This set of results undermines instrumentalist beliefs on the need to increase the quality of democracy through the numerical inclusion, but rather, focuses on the prominence of the redistribution of power in political institutions.

Considering these findings, the research suggests the redesign of quota to be more focused on the principle of constituency based electoral integration, in-house democratization and institutionalization to enhance access to leadership positions and legislative autonomy among women. These efforts become necessary to make symbolic inclusion substantive, so that women political participation will make a difference in terms of democratic legitimacy, institutional responsiveness and gender-just governance.

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