



A systematic review of barriers to women's participation in traditional leadership roles in Africa

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ABSTRACT

Traditional leadership positions in African nations continue to have very few women despite constitutional advancements and worldwide support for gender equality. The purpose of this systematic review is to synthesize the various obstacles that prevent women from participating in traditional leadership positions in Africa. The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework guided the qualitative synthesis approach to select relevant papers for this review. The review search focused on studies published between 2014 and 2025 in Scopus, JSTOR, SAGE, Web of Science, and Google Scholar databases. The total number of papers assessed for this study reached 20 after applying the inclusion criteria. Thematic analysis of included studies in this systematic review revealed four main themes: patriarchal cultural norms and beliefs, societal perceptions and resistance, institutional resistance within traditional structures, and legal and policy inconsistencies. The research demonstrates how legal systems interact with deeply rooted cultural beliefs to keep women in marginalized positions. Governments must align customary laws with constitutional gender equality provisions to prevent cultural or traditional practices from discriminating against women. Traditional leadership acts need revision to establish mandatory gender inclusion and succession provisions that confirm women's eligibility for traditional positions.

Keywords: Women in traditional leadership, Patriarchy in Africa, cultural resistance, Gender and leadership, and Gender equality.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional leadership functions as a governance system that selects leaders through established customary rules and practices.¹ Traditional leadership positions in Southern Africa exist as a complex system that has evolved throughout many generations because of the region's cultural, social, and political development.² Traditional leadership roles encompass both the distribution of resources and

¹ Noluthando S. Matsiliza, "The Strategic Role of Traditional Leadership in Promoting Good Governance," *Africa's Public Service Delivery and Performance Review* 12, no. 1 (June 10, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.4102/apsdpr.v12i1.825>.

² Andrew Ainslie and Thembela Kepe, "Understanding the Resurgence of Traditional Authorities in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 42, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 19–33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2016.1121714>; Janine

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land allocation, dispute resolution, and cultural preservation responsibilities. Traditional governance systems have had a profound impact on the socio-political framework, especially in African nations, including South Africa and Zimbabwe.³ Traditional leadership systems maintain a vital position in both governance and community unity throughout African nations. Gender inclusivity in leadership stands as a basic element of democratic governance and social justice. Traditional leadership structures face ongoing difficulties regarding gender inclusivity because women face multiple obstacles to joining leadership roles.⁴

The official recognition of traditional leadership in South Africa and Zimbabwe does not prevent patriarchal norms from blocking women from obtaining leadership positions.⁵ Instead, multiple barriers exist that combine historical factors with socio-cultural elements and institutional limitations to create a system that excludes women from traditional authority and decision-making roles. Muleya posits that female exclusion from these positions simultaneously hampers gender equality and reduces the ability of women to enhance community development and governance.⁶ The historical period of colonialism and apartheid in South Africa created gender dynamics that strengthened patriarchal systems, which continue to harm women.⁷

The socio-cultural norms found in South African and Zimbabwean communities create additional challenges by enforcing gender roles that restrict women to domestic work and prevent them from accessing positions of power. Traditional practices together with cultural interpretations serve as justification for male dominance in leadership positions.⁸ The unequal distribution of power and responsibilities creates obstacles for improving livelihood options.⁹ Traditional structures fail to acknowledge women's leadership abilities, which creates a continuous cycle of inequality that blocks their professional growth and prevents them from fighting for their rights.

Similarly, traditional leadership in Southern Africa maintains its connection to pre-colonial times through the lasting impact of customary law and practices.¹⁰ Traditional leaders who serve as chiefs or headmen, or elders, have traditionally wielded substantial power to govern their communities while protecting cultural traditions and resolving disputes, and acting as state intermediaries.¹¹ Traditional leadership functions as a traditional governance framework in Southern Africa, which maintains its foundation in cultural, historical, and social structures.¹² The institution existed before colonial

Ubink and Thiyane Duda, "Traditional Authority in South Africa: Reconstruction and Resistance in the Eastern Cape," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 47, no. 2 (March 4, 2021): 191–208, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2021.1893573>.

³ Kudzayi S Tarisayi, "Traditional Leadership and the Tokwe-Mukosi Induced Displacements: Finding the Missing Link," *Jambá: Journal of Disaster Risk Studies* 10, no. 1 (2018): 1–7; Aaron Chando, "Precarious Discourses: Herstory and the Politics of Re-Articulation in Panashe Chigumadzi's *These Bones Will Rise Again*," *African Identities* 23, no. 2 (April 3, 2025): 301–14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2023.2251701>.

⁴ Gugulethu Sharmaine Nkala, Njabulo Bruce Khumalo, and Charity Baloyi, "Women and Traditional Governance Systems: A Case of Vukuzenzele Village, Mzingwane District, Zimbabwe," *Oral History Journal of South Africa* 6, no. 1 (November 5, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.25159/2309-5792/3880>; L. Nhumburudzi and J. Kurebwa, "Leadership Succession in Zimbabwe's Pentecostal Churches: The Case of Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (ZAOGA) and Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe (AFM)," *Global Journal of Human-Social Science: A Arts & Humanities - Psychology* 18, no. 1 (2018): 45–54.

⁵ A. Muleya and I.D. Mothoagae, "Breaking Barriers: A Comparative Analysis of the Challenges Faced by Women in Traditional Leadership Positions in South Africa and Zimbabwe," *Journal of Ecohumanism* 4, no. 4 (September 4, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.62754/joe.v4i4.6897>.

⁶ Abgirl Muleya, "Representation of Female Academics in Senior Positions in Institutions of Higher Learning in South Africa: The Case of a Semi-Metropolitan University in Limpopo Province" (2023).

⁷ Donna Bridges et al., "Negotiating Gender in the Male-Dominated Skilled Trades: A Systematic Literature Review," *Construction Management and Economics* 38, no. 10 (October 2, 2020): 894–916, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01446193.2020.1762906>.

⁸ Thelma Chanda Chansa and Loveness Ngulube, "Women in Leadership: Examining Barriers to Women's Advancement in Leadership Positions," *Asian Journal of Advanced Research and Reports* 18, no. 6 (2024): 273–90.

⁹ Henry Bikwibili Tantoh et al., "Gender Roles, Implications for Water, Land, and Food Security in a Changing Climate: A Systematic Review," *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems* 5 (July 29, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsufs.2021.707835>.

¹⁰ Ainslie and Kepe, "Understanding the Resurgence of Traditional Authorities in Post-Apartheid South Africa"; Jeffrey Kurebwa, "The Institution of Traditional Leadership and Local Governance in Zimbabwe," *International Journal of Civic Engagement and Social Change* 5, no. 1 (January 1, 2018): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.4018/IJCESC.2018010101>.

¹¹ Ainslie and Kepe, "Understanding the Resurgence of Traditional Authorities in Post-Apartheid South Africa"; Tarisayi, "Traditional Leadership and the Tokwe-Mukosi Induced Displacements: Finding the Missing Link."

¹² Lord Mawuko-Yevugah and Harry Anthony Attipoe, "Chieftaincy and Traditional Authority in Modern Democratic Ghana," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 40, no. 3 (2021): 319–35.

times and maintains substantial power in present-day rural areas.¹³ Traditional leaders, including chiefs, headmen, and kings, function as essential figures who uphold social order while settling disputes and safeguarding cultural traditions. Traditional leadership positions follow hereditary succession patterns that depend on family inheritance and operate under different customary laws and practices between ethnic groups.¹⁴

Previous literature demonstrates that traditional leadership systems functioned as fundamental elements for societal organization throughout history because they base their leadership on established customs and norms. Traditional systems underwent manipulation and codification by colonial forces, which resulted in changes to their organizational structure and power distribution.¹⁵ Post-independence South Africa and Zimbabwe worked to unite traditional leadership with contemporary democratic governance systems. Traditional leaders maintain strong power over rural communities because they protect both land and cultural heritage and administer justice.¹⁶

Traditional leadership systems maintain patriarchal traditions that establish male dominance in succession and leadership roles.¹⁷ Throughout history, women have not received positions of power because leadership has traditionally been perceived as a masculine domain. Male primogeniture, as a system of passing leadership to male heirs, has perpetuated the exclusion of women from leadership roles. The norms are undergoing change because some communities now challenge them while fighting for women's participation. Ramakhula concurs that traditional leadership continues to play an essential role in Southern Africa because it connects the state with rural communities.¹⁸

Traditional leaders in Africa maintain important responsibilities for local governance and land administration, as well as conflict resolution and cultural preservation. They further maintain their authority mainly through cultural recognition and community faith, even though they collaborate with contemporary government institutions.

In South Africa, traditional leaders are formally recognized under the *Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act* of 2003, which attempts to integrate them into the democratic governance system. Similarly, in Zimbabwe, traditional leadership is enshrined in the Constitution and governed by the *Traditional Leaders Act*. However, in both countries, traditional leadership operates within a dual legal system where customary laws coexist with constitutional principles, often leading to tensions between gender equality mandates and cultural practices.

This background sets the stage for the study by explaining the historical, cultural, and socio-political importance of traditional leadership, highlighting the role of gender inclusivity, and identifying the need for a systematic review to address the barriers women face in accessing leadership roles in African societies. The objective of the systematic review is to synthesize the barriers obstructing women in traditional leadership roles. Accordingly, the research question for the study is:

- *What are the Barriers to Women's Participation in Traditional Leadership Roles in Africa?*

¹³ S. Maseko, "Surveillance and Student Repression: A Growing Concern in Higher Education," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 34, no. 2 (2021): 75–90.

¹⁴ Kurebwa, "The Institution of Traditional Leadership and Local Governance in Zimbabwe."

¹⁵ Dineo Skosana and Mbongiseni Buthelezi, *Traditional Leaders in a Democracy: Resources, Respect and Resistance* (The Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection (MISTRA), 2019).

¹⁶ Mojalefa Lehlohonolo J Koenane, "The Role and Significance of Traditional Leadership in the Governance of Modern Democratic South Africa," *Africa Review* 10, no. 1 (2018): 58–71.

¹⁷ Judith Mutangirwa, "Socio-Cultural Challenges to Women's Participation in Leadership Positions in Manicaland" (Midlands State University, 2016); Awinaba Amoah Adongo, Jonathan Mensah Dapaah, and Frances Dufie Azumah, "Gender and Leadership Positions: Understanding Women's Experiences and Challenges in Patriarchal Societies in Northern Ghana," *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 43, no. 11/12 (October 25, 2023): 1114–37, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSSP-02-2023-0028>.

¹⁸ Thabang Ramakhula, "The Impact of Customary Law and Its Constitutional Protection on the Social Status and Political Participation of Women in Lesotho" (University of the Free State, 2022).

METHODOLOGY

In this section, the methodological procedures followed in this study are presented. The major topics are the selection framework, information and data sources, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the coding method. Lastly, the analysis and synthesis of the data are discussed.

Selection Framework

The research design employed a systematic literature review approach. Systematic literature reviews aim to discover the most reliable data through scientific methodology while performing evaluation and compilation tasks. The PRISMA 2009 framework served as the framework to integrate all publications examined in this study.¹⁹ A rapid search of empirical literature about women in traditional leadership roles was conducted for publications between 2014 and 2025. The literature search aimed to identify studies that examined the obstacles that prevent women from participating. The research used the following keywords: “women in traditional leadership,” “gender and chieftaincy,” “patriarchy and leadership,” and “African Countries.”

The literature published from 2014 to 2025 was selected for this review for several reasons. First, articles from 2014 onward highlight contemporary ethnographic, sociological, and policy studies that depict the experiences of women in traditional leadership roles. Also, including literature up to 2025 allowed for the integration of the latest research, case studies, and policy assessments. This broader timeframe ensured that the findings reflected both ongoing challenges and new opportunities in both nations.

Information and Data Sources

A literature search was conducted to access peer-reviewed articles through multiple search engines. The research databases included Scopus, JSTOR, SAGE, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The databases provide coverage of social sciences and their related fields, including women's leadership.²⁰ The search codes were developed by combining key phrases and concepts, which included “women in traditional leadership”, “Gender and Chieftaincy”, “patriarchy and leadership”, “women and leadership”, and “African countries”. Figure 1 illustrates the selection process in a diagram. Two research assistants reviewed each article by examining abstracts and titles to select articles that met the inclusion criteria for full-text review. This process ensured the reliability of the data that was sourced.

¹⁹ Jean-Paul Salameh et al., “Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Diagnostic Test Accuracy Studies (PRISMA-DTA): Explanation, Elaboration, and Checklist,” *BMJ*, August 14, 2020, m2632, <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m2632>.

²⁰ Jesus Palomo, Cristina Figueroa-Domecq, and Pilar Laguna, “Women, Peace and Security State-of-Art: A Bibliometric Analysis in Social Sciences Based on SCOPUS Database,” *Scientometrics* 113, no. 1 (October 4, 2017): 123–48, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11192-017-2484-x>.

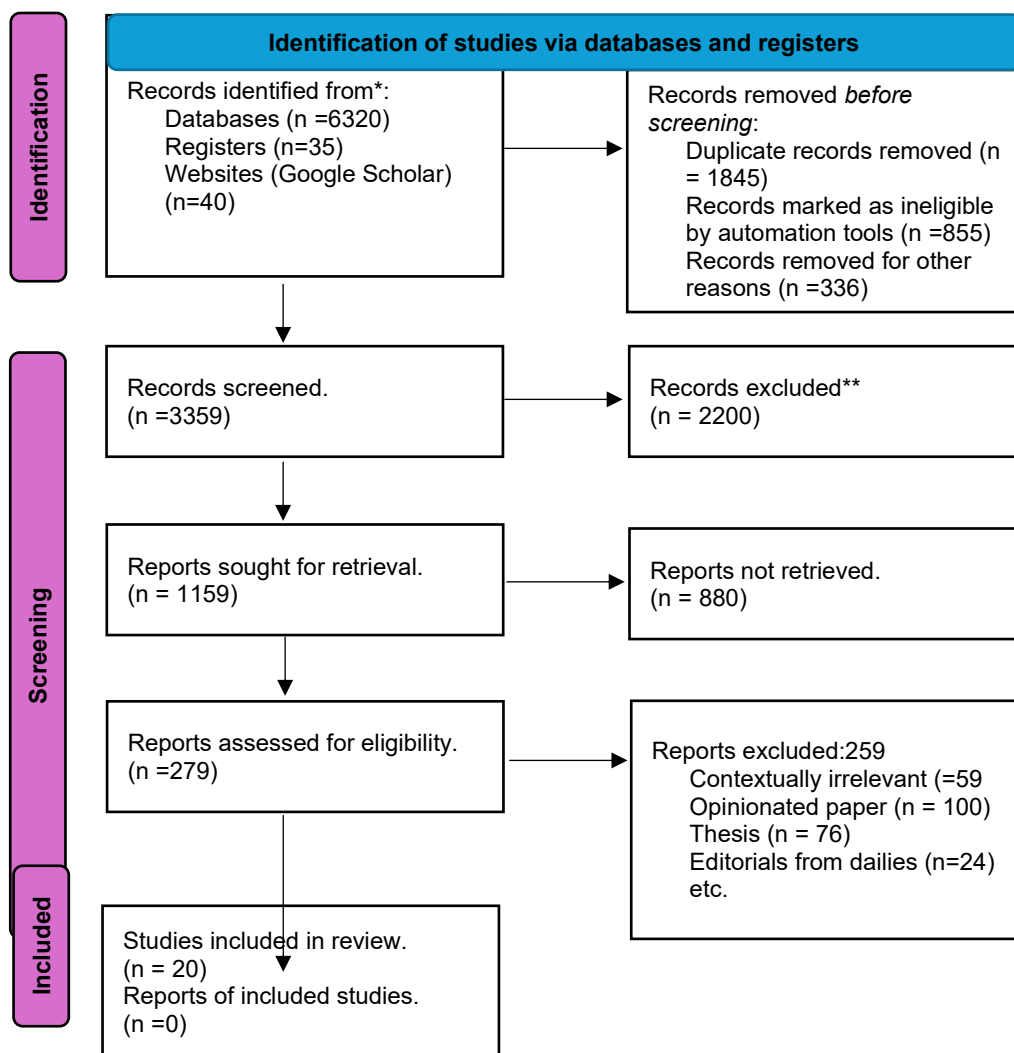


Fig 1: Summary of Selection Process

The database search yielded 6395 articles, which are displayed in Figure 1. The abstracts of these articles contained 3036 duplicate entries, which were eliminated. The total number of articles decreased to 3359 after abstract screening. The remaining articles after screening were a total of 279. The filtering process resulted in 259 articles that were inappropriate for further review. The evaluation of publications against inclusion and exclusion criteria resulted in selecting 20 articles for review. The study selection and search strategy followed the PRISMA methodology for preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses.

Inclusion and Exclusion

The researchers selected a valid study for evaluation to determine if it satisfied the inclusion criteria. The research team selected studies that met all four inclusion criteria, which were: (a) the research analyzed obstacles that women face when seeking traditional leadership roles, (b) the study period spanned from 2014 to 2024, (c) the research focused on African nations, and (d) the study was written in English. The research team excluded papers that studied political leadership instead of traditional leadership, those that studied outside Southern Africa, and those that lacked peer-reviewed publication status. Two research assistants reviewed each article to verify data reliability by examining both abstracts and titles. The research assistants used this information to select publications for full-text review based on the inclusion criteria. The researchers eliminated conference proceedings, dissertations, working papers, and reports from the study sample.

Coding Method

The following stage required the use of a coding system to code comparisons after identifying studies that match the inclusion criteria. The coding system must be both general enough for universal application and specific enough to distinguish between different research types.²¹ The coding process of this study consisted of three main sections and eight total questions. The first segment was named “Study identity”. This section contained five questions. The study identity section included the number of studies, together with authors' names, study year, place and publisher information. The second section of the study content included two questions. The final section of the study was called “Study data”. This part included descriptive statistical data, such as sample size and mean values.

The review included twenty studies, which were mostly qualitative in nature according to the final research results. According to Pollock and Berge, a systematic review does not require combining study results for average estimation when the methodology technique shows extreme heterogeneity.²² The study used narrative synthesis through thematic analysis to synthesize its data.²³ According to Kostere and Kostere, thematic data analysis represents a wide approach for identifying and documenting patterns in data.²⁴

The thematic analysis followed six steps to synthesize the collected data. The researchers started by reading the material multiple times to understand it better while simultaneously developing coding systems. The second step involved generating initial codes from data while following the study's research question as a reference. The systematic classification process of meaningful data related to the main research objectives is known as coding.²⁵ The third step of theme identification required us to determine which data elements were relevant to the research topics. The analysis included all data points that described obstacles that prevent women from achieving traditional leadership roles. The initial analysis provided essential information to begin examining potential codes. It explained the importance of each theme during the theme development process. The researchers examined relevant information during the fourth step to address our research questions. The process allowed them to advance their themes while observing their transformations. The initial themes either transformed into new ones or became more compact during this process. Each theme in the fifth step was named while defining its contents and the collected data.

Saldana recommends that working together throughout the process to review and comment on each other's work minimize bias and promotes credibility.²⁶ After completing the thematic analysis on half of the articles individually, we exchanged papers to confirm each other's conclusions and gathered to talk about any areas of disagreement or ambiguity. Table 1 below provides a profile of the 20 papers that were reviewed for this systematic review study.

²¹ Morakinyo Akintolu and Segun Emmanuel Adewoye, “Systematic Review of the Role of Open and Distance Education in Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),” *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research* 23, no. 12 (December 30, 2024): 113–29, <https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.23.12.7>.

²² Alex Pollock and Eivind Berge, “How to Do a Systematic Review,” *International Journal of Stroke* 13, no. 2 (February 17, 2018): 138–56, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1747493017743796>.

²³ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, “Toward Good Practice in Thematic Analysis: Avoiding Common Problems and Be(Com)Ing a Knowing Researcher,” *International Journal of Transgender Health* 24, no. 1 (January 25, 2023): 1–6, <https://doi.org/10.1080/26895269.2022.2129597>.

²⁴ Sandra Kostere and Kim Kostere, *The Generic Qualitative Approach to a Dissertation in the Social Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003195689>.

²⁵ Braun and Clarke, “Toward Good Practice in Thematic Analysis: Avoiding Common Problems and Be(Com)Ing a Knowing Researcher.”

²⁶ Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2015).

Table 1: Profile of studies included in the review

Author	Research Design	Participant and Sample Size	Population Focus	Barriers identified
Mulaudzi & Kriel ²⁷	Descriptive Survey	N= 27	Chiefs, headmen, village heads, elderly women and men, councilors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Male dominance in committees, underrepresentation of women. - Patriarchal society, devaluation of women's labor, gendered power relations. - Patriarchal dominance, lack of participation in choices, diminished social standing. - Male-centric beliefs, structural/systemic bias
Bauer ²⁸	Qualitative interviews	N=6	Chiefs and traditional councilors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Patriarchal systems, interactions with family/state/traditional figures. -Disputes over the chief states - Male supremacy - Social and cultural values - Systemic discrimination
Dodo et al. ²⁹	Content Analysis	Data collected in archival materials and literature	Shona women in traditional leadership positions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Women's authority in conventional roles is diminished. -Absence of direct women leadership positions because of patriarchal ideologies -Formal and informal institutional regulations and traditional laws prevent women from competing for leadership roles. - Restrictive cultural perspectives on women's participation

²⁷ Lufuno J P Mulaudzi and Lize Kriel, "Gendered Ruptures and Continuities in the Venda Traditional Leadership from C. 1990 to 2020," *Southern Journal for Contemporary History* 46, no. 2 (2021): 89–112.

²⁸ Gretchen Bauer, "What Is Wrong with a Woman Being Chief?" Women Chiefs and Symbolic and Substantive Representation in Botswana," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 51, no. 2 (April 21, 2016): 222–37, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909614545700>.

²⁹ Obediah Dodo, Gloria Dodo, and Mitchell Zihanzu, "African Women in Traditional Leadership Role in Zimbabwe: The Case of Shona," *African Journal of Democracy and Governance* 4, no. 1–2 (2017): 47–64.

Nkala et al., ³⁰	Qualitative interviews	N=10	Traditional leaders, headman (Sabuku) Kraal heads and women from Vukuzenzele village in Esigodini	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Women's leadership is seen as a taboo. -Certain taboos have been seen as a way to uphold patriarchal control. -In traditional patrilineal systems, women are typically subordinate to men. - Women are viewed as lesser than men and are left out of group decision-making. - Conventional governance structures are neglecting gender-related concerns. -Cultural perspectives continue to influence gender roles.
Odame ³¹	Qualitative interviews	N=40	Chiefs, queen mothers, market queens, queens and members of council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - structural barriers. - Cultural and social values. -Strongly entrenched male-dominant traditions. -Obstacles related to institutions and politics
Koenane ³²	Qualitative Analysis	N=20	Voices and realities of Zimbabwean women as key informants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - male supremacy and cisgender male rule, traditions and values. -Cultures that restrict women's leadership - Systemic bias
Mwale & Dodo. ³³	Content Analysis	N=27	Chiefs, headmen, village heads, elderly women and men, and councilors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Patriarchy and cis-male control, -Cultural and gender roles, geography, education, sexuality, and gender identity as elements affecting women's political involvement in Zimbabwe.

³⁰ Nkala, Khumalo, and Baloyi, "Women and Traditional Governance Systems: A Case of Vukuzenzele Village, Mzingwane District, Zimbabwe."

³¹ Felicia Safoa Odame, "Ghanaian Traditional Women Leaders and Sustainable Development: The Case of Nadowli Districts in Northern Part of Ghana," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2205435>.

³² Koenane, "The Role and Significance of Traditional Leadership in the Governance of Modern Democratic South Africa."

³³ Christine Mwale and Obediah Dodo, "Sociocultural Beliefs and Women Leadership in Sanyati District," *Journal of Sustainable Social Change* 9, no. 1 (2017): 10.

				- Patriarchy serves as a unifying factor in a large portion of the
Chauke ³⁴	Quantitative Survey	N=230	Traditional leaders, chiefs, Makhadzi and the royal members	-Insufficient support for women to assert their rightful representation in traditional leadership. -Women are not included in conventional leadership. - In traditional patrilineal systems, women typically are
Mohammed et al. ³⁵	Content Analysis	N=55	Chiefs, traditional authorities and community elders	- Patriarchal biases against women leadership - Exclusion of women's participation in traditional leadership -Level of stereotype - Gender sensitive politics - Male dominance
Dawda et al, ³⁶	Qualitative Interviews	N=47	Chiefs, key informants, kingmakers, and councils of elders	Negative attitudes toward women's ability to lead -Preference for male authority - Lack of female chief role models - Socio-cultural attitudes -Marginalisation and women's exclusion
Chigwata ³⁷	Quantitative Analysis	N=60	Women (Vho-makhadzi) traditional council leaders (Vhakoma)	Traditional Gender roles - cultural beliefs and familial duties - Women's views and perspectives - Masculine superiority in conventional leadership roles - Gender stereotype

³⁴ Mkhacani Chauke, "The Role of Women in Traditional Leadership with Special Reference to the Valoyi Tribe," *Studies of Tribes and Tribals* 13 (July 1, 2015): 34–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0972639X.2015.11886709>.

³⁵ Yakubu Mohammed, Eliasu Alhassan, and Mahama Seth Sayibu, "Female Chiefs in Dagbon Traditional Area: Role and Challenges in the Northern Region of Ghana," *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology Research* 8, no. 2 (2022): 57–81.

³⁶ Tanko Daniel Dawda, Robert Yakubu Adjuik, and Joseph Kwabena Manboah-Rockson, "Ghana's Traditional Women Chiefs: Role and Challenges of 'the Wuriche' within the Gonja Social Organization," *International Journal of Development and Sustainability* 11, no. 2 (2022): 44–61.

³⁷ Tinashe Chigwata, "The Role of Traditional Leaders in Zimbabwe: Are They Still Relevant?," *Law, Democracy & Development* 20, no. 1 (2016): 69–90.

Sabogu & Puorideme ³⁸	Qualitative Analysis	N=19	Chiefs and Pogname women chiefs, officials of the Upper West Regional House of Chiefs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Systemic disparities - Financial limitations - The custom of male primogeniture - Opposition to conventional women leaders - Devaluation of female leadership - Power struggle and resistance
Klaas-Makolomakwe & Raniga ³⁹	Qualitative Interviews	N=21	Senior women leaders in traditional leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Political cultures - Politics that consider gender differences - Patriarchal limitations and discrimination - Views on women's leadership in different cultures
Boakye & Béland ⁴⁰	Qualitative interviews	N=15	Royal members, Chiefs, Makhadzi and uncles, individuals from Ghanaian society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Violence rooted in patriarchy - Voting procedure - Gender bias - Preference for male leadership in Chief-state roles
Shoko ⁴¹	Qualitative interviews	N=37	Paramount Chief, Headman, Ward councilors and members of parliament	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Gender norms and cultural prejudices - Social and cultural influences - Ambiguity in legal and institutional frameworks - Insufficient backing from other women
Adongo et al. ⁴²	Quantitative social survey	N=250	Men and women in the traditional council, women in leadership policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Patriarchal cultural values and convictions - Cultural values and belief

³⁸ Adams Sabogu and Dennis Puorideme, "The Making of Pognaa (Woman Chief) in the Waala Traditional Political System: Implications for Women's Involvement in Community Governance," *Ghana Journal of Development Studies* 21, no. 1 (June 28, 2024): 24–43, <https://doi.org/10.4314/gjds.v21i1.2>.

³⁹ Gladys N Klaas-Makolomakwe and Tanusha Raniga, "Leadership Challenges Experienced by Senior Women Traditional Leaders in Addressing Abuse of Women in South Africa," *Journal of Public Administration* 60, no. 4 (December 1, 2025): 1325–41, <https://doi.org/10.53973/jopa.2025.60.4.a8>.

⁴⁰ Paul Acheampong Boakye and Daniel Béland, "Explaining Chieftaincy Conflict Using Historical Institutionalism: A Case Study of the Ga Mashie Chieftaincy Conflict in Ghana," *African Studies* 78, no. 3 (July 3, 2019): 403–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00020184.2018.1540531>.

⁴¹ Collen Shoko, "The Role of the Traditional Leadership Institution in the Democratisation Process in Zimbabwe: A Case Study of Goromonzi District Traditional Leadership," 2014.

⁴² Adongo, Dapaah, and Azumah, "Gender and Leadership Positions: Understanding Women's Experiences and Challenges in Patriarchal Societies in Northern Ghana."

	research design			- Male-dominated leadership societies -Gender stereotypes
Chemutai ⁴³	Qualitative approach	N= 422	Women participating in leadership	- Cultural Perspectives - Women stereotyping -Political Obstacles -Discrimination - Financial Considerations
Kalumanga et al. ⁴⁴	Mixed Method	N=80	Women and men in a traditional family	-Stereotyping and Prejudice -Cultural standards - Political context - Absence of guidance - Presence of Patriarchal structures
Opoku et al. ⁴⁵	Qualitative interview	N=30	Royal council, men and women	- Procuring Candidates / Voting Method -Preconception of a woman in leadership - Normes culturelles et traditionnelles -Prejudice related to gender and deficiency from assistance by other women -Traditional leadership is characterized by male authority roles

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The thematic analysis of the included studies revealed four main themes about the challenges women encounter in traditional leadership positions/roles. The four identified themes consist of 1) Patriarchal cultural norms and beliefs, 2) Societal Perceptions and Resistance, 3) Institutional Resistance Within Traditional Structure, and 4) Legal and Policy Inconsistencies.

Theme 1: Patriarchal cultural norms and beliefs

The strong and lasting impact of patriarchal cultural norms poses as the main obstacle.⁴⁶ Traditional leadership systems in African countries function as male-dominated institutions that pass leadership through male lineage under customary beliefs.⁴⁷ According to Adongo et al., Patriarchal traditions in

⁴³ Some Josephine Chemutai, "Interrogating Impediments to Women Participation in Political Leadership among the Abagusii in Post-Colonial Kenya," *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences* 7, no. 2 (November 8, 2024): 217–27, <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.7.2.2389>.

⁴⁴ Venance E Kalumanga et al., "Status of Gender and Top Leadership Positions: Influencing Impediments in Zanzibar, Tanzania," *Journal of Policy and Development Studies* 14, no. 1 (2023): 112–35.

⁴⁵ Maxwell Pephrah Opoku, Beatrice Anyango, and Beatrice Atim Alupo, "Women in Politics in Kenya: An Analysis of Participation and Barriers," *Multidisciplinary Journal of Gender Studies* 7, no. 1 (February 25, 2018): 1506, <https://doi.org/10.17583/generos.2018.3179>.

⁴⁶ Christie Dhesi, "The Influence of Patriarchal Culture on Women's Participation in Local Politics," *Journal of Social, Culture & Humanitarian Research* 1, no. 1 (2025): 1–9.

⁴⁷ Nkareng Klaas-Makolomakwe and Tanusha Raniga, "A Critical Review of the Roles and Functions of Traditional Leaders," *The Thinker* 87, no. 2 (June 10, 2021): 53–60, <https://doi.org/10.36615/thethinker.v87i2.534>; Chansa and Ngulube, "Women in Leadership: Examining Barriers to Women's Advancement in Leadership Positions."

Africa have maintained their dominance in defining leadership as a male-only right.⁴⁸ Research findings demonstrate that patriarchal norms link leadership to masculine characteristics, which supports stereotypes that women lack the ability or qualifications to lead.⁴⁹ Cultural values establish gender roles that keep women confined to home duties while leadership remains a male-dominated public sphere.⁵⁰ Most of the reviewed studies show that women maintain cultural responsibilities in domestic and social areas, yet lack eligibility for political and spiritual leadership positions. The succession rules of patrilineal chieftaincy and kingship systems in many societies prevent women from becoming eligible for these positions.

South African traditional communities maintain male primogeniture inheritance practices for leadership despite constitutional court decisions that have established these practices as discriminatory.⁵¹ Traditional authority in Zimbabwe follows a father-to-son inheritance pattern, which excludes women from chief positions according to Shona and Ndebele communities.⁵² Traditional leadership systems based on chieftaincy and kingship use patrilineal succession rules to bar women from becoming eligible candidates. Traditional leaders maintain gendered cultural scripts that community members from both genders accept through internalization. The barrier exists beyond legal and structural limitations because it has deep social and ideological roots.

Theme 2: Societal Perceptions and Resistance

Social resistance to female traditional leaders stands as one of the most harmful barriers, according to Musitha.⁵³ Traditional councils, together with royal families, tend to oppose the selection of female chiefs and headwomen.⁵⁴ Male elders maintain control over the process of selecting successors. The research shows that women chiefs encounter skepticism about their legitimacy and capabilities, which hinders their ability to gain support and execute change. Women leaders experience co-option by patriarchal forces, which restricts their ability to create transformative change. The resistance continues because religious leaders and elders, along with other women, maintain internalized gender norms.⁵⁵ The opposition to female traditional leaders persists at a high level in communities. Women leaders frequently experience marginalization through disrespect and exclusion from essential decision-making meetings. Female chiefs and headwomen in both African nations faced social sanctions, including isolation and verbal abuse, because they were labeled as culturally deviant.⁵⁶

Overall, the research shows women handle most unpaid care responsibilities, including taking care of children and managing household duties. The existing social expectations force women to allocate their time and energy away from leadership pursuits, thus blocking their professional growth.⁵⁷

Theme 3: Institutional Resistance Within Traditional Structure

Reports from the studies reviewed show that traditional institutions pose the primary barrier that prevents women from assuming leadership roles throughout Africa.⁵⁸ The system of male

⁴⁸ Adongo, Dapaah, and Azumah, "Gender and Leadership Positions: Understanding Women's Experiences and Challenges in Patriarchal Societies in Northern Ghana."

⁴⁹ Adongo, Dapaah, and Azumah, "Gender and Leadership Positions: Understanding Women's Experiences and Challenges in Patriarchal Societies in Northern Ghana"; Chansa and Ngulube, "Women in Leadership: Examining Barriers to Women's Advancement in Leadership Positions."

⁵⁰ Dhesi, "The Influence of Patriarchal Culture on Women's Participation in Local Politics."

⁵¹ Chansa and Ngulube, "Women in Leadership: Examining Barriers to Women's Advancement in Leadership Positions."

⁵² Adongo, Dapaah, and Azumah, "Gender and Leadership Positions: Understanding Women's Experiences and Challenges in Patriarchal Societies in Northern Ghana."

⁵³ Mavhungu Elias Musitha, "Perceptions of South Africans on Traditional Leadership: A Case of Limpopo Province," *African Identities* 18, no. 4 (October 1, 2020): 450–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2020.1777840>.

⁵⁴ Chansa and Ngulube, "Women in Leadership: Examining Barriers to Women's Advancement in Leadership Positions."

⁵⁵ Bridges et al., "Negotiating Gender in the Male-Dominated Skilled Trades: A Systematic Literature Review."

⁵⁶ Mwale and Dodo, "Sociocultural Beliefs and Women Leadership in Sanyati District"; Musitha, "Perceptions of South Africans on Traditional Leadership: A Case of Limpopo Province."

⁵⁷ Adongo, Dapaah, and Azumah, "Gender and Leadership Positions: Understanding Women's Experiences and Challenges in Patriarchal Societies in Northern Ghana."

⁵⁸ Mwale and Dodo, "Sociocultural Beliefs and Women Leadership in Sanyati District"; Sonakshi Singh, "Women in Politics: Barriers to Participation and Strategies for Inclusion," *International Journal of Social Science Research (IJSSR)* 1, no. 2 (2024): 19–28.

dominance exists deeply within cultural, legal, and political frameworks. Traditional councils, together with royal families, demonstrate resistance against choosing female chiefs and headwomen for leadership roles. Traditional councils and royal families consist mainly of men who function as gatekeepers.⁵⁹ Male elders exercise authority to decide who will succeed. The implementation of female leadership rights in countries with constitutional provisions (e.g., South Africa's Section 9) remains weak because of customary autonomy. The Balobedu succession case stands as evidence that legal frameworks face difficulties in overcoming institutional resistance, which stems from customary claims, according to most research findings.⁶⁰ The recognition of queen mothers differs from one nation to another, while they commonly face exclusion from official political discussions.

Traditional leadership frameworks across Africa face persistent institutional resistance, which makes it difficult to establish gender equality in customary governance systems. Traditional institutions operate as strong patriarchal systems that employ customary law to preserve male leadership succession and practices that exclude others.⁶¹ The resistance exists beyond personal attitudes because it constitutes an essential part of the institutional structure, legal framework and ideological framework.

Lastly, the majority of analyzed research demonstrates that institutional resistance runs deep, yet new approaches are developing to fight against and reshape traditional leadership systems. The strategies unite legal frameworks that mandate gender representation in traditional councils and leadership positions with particular enforcement mechanisms. The strategies include legal support, along with financial backing and psychosocial assistance for women who lead or wish to lead positions.

Theme 4: Legal and Policy Inconsistencies

The majority of studies evaluated demonstrate that inconsistent legal frameworks and policies act as a fundamental obstacle that prevents women from achieving full traditional leadership participation in Africa. The dual existence of plural legal systems between customary law and statutory law and national gender equality policies weakens African constitutional commitments to gender equality and discrimination prohibition.⁶² The dual legal framework produces an environment where women's rights exist under conditions that are both ambiguous and variable, based on local interpretation and political priorities. Research findings from most studies demonstrate that many African nations follow legal pluralism because statutory and constitutional laws operate together with customary laws.^{63, 64} The human rights declared in constitutions, including gender equality, are frequently restricted by customary law systems, which use traditional norms to establish leadership and inheritance rules that exclude women.

Progressive constitutional principles face opposition from traditional practices, which maintain conservative customs. The constitutions of South Africa, Zimbabwe and Ghana, together with several other African nations, affirm gender equality, but customary law operates independently of these principles.⁶⁵ Traditional inheritance systems based on male succession traditions maintain women's exclusion from leadership positions because state-approved traditional councils enforce these customary norms. The two legal systems create a situation where women can exercise their rights only according to the specific legal context.

⁵⁹ B. Essilfie, "Women in Traditional Leadership: The Status and Roles of Female Chiefs and Queen Mothers in the Asebu Traditional Area" (University of Cape Coast, 2021).

⁶⁰ Tracey C. Muradzikwa, "Women, State Law, and the Crisis of Chieftaincy: The Case of Nswazi Village in Zimbabwe" (University of the Witwatersrand, 2024).

⁶¹ Mawuko-Yevugah and Attipoe, "Chieftaincy and Traditional Authority in Modern Democratic Ghana."

⁶² Annamaria Milazzo and Markus Goldstein, "Governance and Women's Economic and Political Participation: Power Inequalities, Formal Constraints and Norms," *The World Bank Research Observer* 34, no. 1 (February 1, 2019): 34–64, <https://doi.org/10.1093/wbro/lky006>.

⁶³ Nkala, Khumalo, and Baloyi, "Women and Traditional Governance Systems: A Case of Vukuzenzele Village, Mzingwane District, Zimbabwe"; Ramakhula, "The Impact of Customary Law and Its Constitutional Protection on the Social Status and Political Participation of Women in Lesotho."

⁶⁴ Ramakhula, "The Impact of Customary Law and Its Constitutional Protection on the Social Status and Political Participation of Women in Lesotho."

⁶⁵ Teboho Jeffrey September, "Constitutional Framework for Traditional Leaders in South Africa," 2023.

The majority of research studies demonstrate that inconsistent legal frameworks, together with policy disparities, create major obstacles for women to take traditional leadership positions in Africa. Constitutional guarantees about equality face challenges because traditional practices remain active despite claims of cultural protection.⁶⁶ The path to genuine reform requires addressing fundamental legal issues that create exclusionary systems. The potential for women to become traditional leaders remains unfulfilled because there is no harmonized legal framework with enforcement power and community-based support.

DISCUSSION

Several studies in the literature reviewed, conducted throughout various geographic regions, have identified obstacles preventing women from taking traditional leadership roles in African nations, regardless of possessing the necessary capabilities. The systematic review reveals that patriarchal cultural beliefs and norms function as deep-rooted barriers that prevent women from entering traditional leadership positions throughout Africa.⁶⁷ The historical, religious and social development of gender roles created a system that established men as leaders while women received domestic and ceremonial responsibilities.⁶⁸ The review shows that patriarchy functions as an active system that controls both values and behaviors, institutions and leadership succession within traditional African societies. Mulaudzi & Kriel support this study's findings by showing that many African societies consider leadership as a masculine right, which follows patrilineal inheritance and remains under male control through councils or clans.⁶⁹ The review demonstrates that patriarchal norms receive support from both male and female members of society. Some older women, together with matriarchal figures, maintain these beliefs, which leads to the continuation of exclusionary practices. Women in certain situations actively teach girls to accept lower social positions while discouraging them from opposing male authority because they believe such challenges would lead to community instability and shame.⁷⁰ The social system of patriarchy operates beyond individual bias, which makes it harder to transform.

The pattern demonstrates how gendered power exists within both formal and informal institutions according to feminist institutionalist analysis. The gender-neutral appearance of statutory laws and constitutional provisions does not prevent customary norms from establishing male dominance in leadership positions and decision-making roles. The belief that leadership belongs to men operates as a hidden rule that restricts the ability of formal reforms to create lasting change. The gendered nature of institutions becomes evident through feminist institutionalism because these spaces maintain systems of inequality through their built-in structures, established traditions, and power dynamics.

The thematic analysis of twenty unique papers revealed societal perceptions and resistance as essential sociocultural barriers that prevent women from entering traditional leadership positions in Africa. The review demonstrates that public attitudes, together with community-level resistance, determine who qualifies as a leader within traditional systems.⁷¹ People and communities, together with local leaders, actively build and defend these perceptions, which they view as threats to social order, heritage, and identity.

The research shows that traditional leadership frameworks across Africa continue to resist institutional changes, which makes gender equity in customary governance systems challenging to achieve. Traditional institutions function as strong patriarchal systems that maintain male

⁶⁶ Mohammed, Alhassan, and Sayibu, "Female Chiefs in Dagbon Traditional Area: Role and Challenges in the Northern Region of Ghana."

⁶⁷ Klaas-Makolomakwe and Raniga, "A Critical Review of the Roles and Functions of Traditional Leaders"; Chansa and Ngulube, "Women in Leadership: Examining Barriers to Women's Advancement in Leadership Positions."

⁶⁸ Essilfie, "Women in Traditional Leadership: The Status and Roles of Female Chiefs and Queen Mothers in the Asebu Traditional Area"; Musitha, "Perceptions of South Africans on Traditional Leadership: A Case of Limpopo Province."

⁶⁹ Mulaudzi and Kriel, "Gendered Ruptures and Continuities in the Venda Traditional Leadership from C. 1990 to 2020."

⁷⁰ Peter Delius, "Chiefly Succession and Democracy in South Africa: Why History Matters," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 47, no. 2 (March 4, 2021): 209–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2021.1855042>.

⁷¹ Chansa and Ngulube, "Women in Leadership: Examining Barriers to Women's Advancement in Leadership Positions."

hereditary leadership and use customary law to justify practices that exclude others.⁷² The resistance exists at three levels: structural, legal and ideological, as well as individual and attitudinal.

Lastly, the systematic review demonstrates that legal and policy inconsistencies serve as a fundamental obstacle that prevents women from effectively leading traditional positions throughout Africa. The main source of these inconsistencies stems from the complicated relationship between constitutional gender equality provisions and national gender policies and the ongoing legal acceptance of patriarchal customary law.⁷³ The intended protection of cultural autonomy through legal pluralism frequently works against women's rights because customary law dominates governance in rural and traditional areas. The limited participation of women in traditional leadership positions reveals two main issues, which stem from institutional discrimination against women and from colonial control of knowledge systems. The theoretical framework of feminist institutionalist and decolonial gender analysis enables researchers to study existing power systems and develop new governance systems that promote gender equality and cultural sustainability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The review results indicate that women's traditional leadership participation barriers need to be dismantled through an integrated strategy that targets legal frameworks, institutional structures, and cultural beliefs, as well as societal norms. Traditional governance that includes women is essential for democratic progress, social unity, and the complete women's rights in Africa. The research outcomes recommend that governments should match customary laws with constitutional gender equality provisions to prevent any traditional or cultural practice from discriminating against women.

Traditional leadership acts need revision to establish mandatory gender inclusion and succession provisions that confirm female eligibility for traditional positions. The state should provide recognition and support to traditional authorities only when they follow gender equality principles while promoting public awareness about documented historical female leadership examples, such as queen mothers and Vho Makhadzi (Aunt of the royal family), to fight against patriarchal stereotypes. The research shows patriarchy functions as a major obstacle to women obtaining traditional leadership positions, including the role of Musanda, so it becomes essential to work with men and boys as allies who will help challenge patriarchal norms while supporting shared leadership.

Furthermore, the government needs to establish specific laws that will resolve the existing conflicts between traditional laws and constitutional regulations. The following suggestions demonstrate how to achieve this goal: South Africa needs to modify the Traditional and Khoi-San Leadership Act (2019) to establish specific gender representation requirements for traditional councils based on the Balobedu precedent. On the other hand, the Traditional Leaders Act of Zimbabwe requires a constitutional review to match its provisions with the gender equality section of the 2013 Constitution, which prevents gender-based discrimination in succession procedures.

Lastly, the African government should create national and regional networks of female traditional leaders who can unite for solidarity and mentorship while advocating for policy changes. Meaningful transformation requires simultaneous efforts to change public perceptions and fight against generational prejudices, and support community discussions which link gender equality to cultural traditions. The effectiveness of legal and policy interventions in traditional leadership systems remains restricted because they fail to address fundamental societal perceptions.

CONCLUSION

This literature review explored multiple obstacles that prevent African women from taking leadership positions in traditional settings. The study revealed four primary barriers, which include Patriarchal cultural norms and beliefs, together with institutional resistance within traditional structures, legal and policy inconsistencies and societal perception and resistance. The barriers work together as a

⁷² Mawuko-Yevugah and Attipoe, "Chieftaincy and Traditional Authority in Modern Democratic Ghana."

⁷³ Adongo, Dapaah, and Azumah, "Gender and Leadership Positions: Understanding Women's Experiences and Challenges in Patriarchal Societies in Northern Ghana."

deeply rooted system to prevent women from obtaining decision-making authority within essential cultural and governance systems that many African communities use. The ongoing existence of gender-based social structures and power systems violates the constitutional promise of equality between men and women. The review demonstrates that women face ongoing structural and ideological barriers that stem from historical patriarchal systems and colonial administrative practices.

The review demonstrates that patriarchy exists throughout both personal beliefs and traditional laws and institutional frameworks, as well as public communication systems, which prevent women from entering traditional leadership roles. It was observed that African countries maintain constitutional frameworks and gender equality policies, yet their plural legal systems enable discriminatory customary laws to operate freely. The perception of female authority as a cultural and social disruption intensifies the resistance against women taking leadership positions.

The review also reveals multiple opportunities for transformative change to occur. Traditional leadership systems throughout Africa show potential for change because emerging legal cases and historical female leadership traditions, and shifting public attitudes among younger generations, indicate that women can join these systems without compromising cultural heritage. Such opportunities need deliberate actions along with continuous support and understanding of cultural practices.

The findings from a feminist institutionalist analysis show how formal and informal institutional rules work together to maintain male dominance in established leadership positions. The advancement of gender equality through formal laws faces opposition from cultural practices, kinship systems, and traditional councils, which maintain their informal exclusionary norms. The main principle of feminist institutionalism demonstrates that institutions contain gender biases that need to be challenged through efforts that transform both explicit and implicit rules that block women from reaching positions of power.

The research adds theoretical value to gender and governance studies through its integration of feminist institutionalism with decolonial feminism. The research shows that women's leadership access needs both structural changes to power systems and a process of deconstructing gender beliefs based on colonial knowledge. The combination of these frameworks enables researchers to develop complete methods for transforming current leadership systems into inclusive systems that respect cultural diversity and promote social equality.

Limitation

The systematic review provides critical insights into the obstacles that prevent African women from taking traditional leadership positions, yet several study limitations affect the research scope and depth and overall generalizability of the findings. The authors performed an electronic database search to identify all relevant studies about traditional leadership barriers for women. The search method excluded certain studies from other databases that met the inclusion criteria. The small number of omitted studies would not have impacted the current study findings because the Scopus literature research yielded a large number of research results. The authors conducted a supplementary search on Google Scholar to address this potential limitation and discovered that new sources were scarce. The study reviewed only papers published from 2014 to 2024, which could limit their generalizability because of the selected period.

Suggestion for future researchers

Future researchers should use multi-dimensional, context-sensitive, and participatory approaches to study traditional leadership systems and gender dynamics across Africa because of their complex and evolving nature. Specifically, future research should prioritize community-based and intersectional studies that explore women's lived experiences within traditional leadership systems across diverse ethnic, regional, and linguistic contexts. Future research should conduct comparative case studies across multiple African countries and regions to identify best practices and policy innovations and culturally rooted pathways for achieving more inclusive traditional governance systems.

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