

## Challenges to Women's Participation in Politics: The Case of Female Candidates in the 2024 General Election in Botswana

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### Abstract

Only three women won in the 61 parliamentary constituencies for the thirteenth Parliament. This paper examines gender stereotypes in digital media as one of the factors behind the gender gap in parliamentary representation. Through content analysis, the paper explores challenges faced by women candidates during the 2024 general election; a mixed methodology entailed desk-based research using documented sources, and online sources including social media. The major themes that emerged were patriarchy and stereotyping of female candidates whereby men were viewed as leaders whilst women should stay at home to look after the household. Some of the posts doubted women's capabilities and potential for success once elected to office. Empowerment policies and initiatives were blamed for women's alleged expectations of the reward of political office without having earned it. A minority of online posts were, however, positive; they viewed female candidates as intelligent, hardworking, accountable, and capable of running government. Women's participation in politics is hindered by patriarchy, stereotypes, and unsupportive structures and policies. Cultural patriarchy results in the stereotyping of women candidates, such that men were viewed as leaders in public spheres and women were viewed as best suited for the private domestic sphere in society.

**Keywords:** women's participation, politics, elections, female candidates, social media, developmental theory, structural and cultural factors

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## **Introduction**

In Botswana, women make up more than 50 per cent of the population but are underrepresented when it comes to elected positions in the national parliament and district councils. For this paper, the political gender gap refers to systematic differences between men and women in political attitudes, participation, and representation, in democratic structures. The political gender gap is conceptualised by examining structural and cultural factors that affect women's participation in politics, and this is done in this paper through a documented analysis of social media commentary on women who contested parliamentary seats during the 2024 general election. The low numbers of women in political office in Botswana is well documented. Primary and secondary data analysis is used to interrogate and explore the extent to which women have participated in elections and challenges they face globally, regionally, and in the context of Botswana. The assessment starts by reviewing the status of women's participation in elections as voters and candidates on the African continent and in the context of Botswana. Historical challenges that women have faced when attempting to participate in elections and electoral processes are evaluated; specifically, patriarchy.

## **Background and Literature Review**

According to United Nations (UN) Women (2025), balanced political participation and power-sharing between women and men in decision-making is the internationally agreed target set in the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Women's universal right to vote in national elections has spread throughout the world with only Saudi Arabia and Somalia as the exceptions by the year 2025. According to Chinyepi (2021), women make up 54 per cent of eligible voters in Botswana, but fewer than 10 per cent of parliamentarians in a 67-member national assembly. The political gender gap is a general measure of inequality signifying that, on average, women are unable to access political power and decision-making at the rate of men.

## **Conceptual Framework: The Developmental Theory of Gender Gap**

The developmental theory of gender gap, which was formulated by Inglehart and Norris (2000), explains gendered structural and cultural factors that shape electoral choices from a global perspective. The theory suggests that, as nations develop, they transform peoples' lifestyles and values and change their political party preferences. The theory is based on four dimensions in which gender differences are determined by the level

of socio-economic development. Firstly, traditional societies are characterised by gendered roles that discourage women from working outside the household. Secondly, gender differences exist between generational groups (old, young). Thirdly, gender differences are based on structural and cultural factors. Fourthly, women are conservative in their voting preference or choices, and this is mainly because of structural and cultural factors (Inglehart and Norris 2000). However, the developmental theory suggests that, as societies and nations develop, this behaviour changes.

### **Modernisation and Its Influences on Voting Behaviour**

The developmental theory of the gender gap argues that behaviour is modernised mainly because of transformations in the structural and cultural values of women and men (Table 1). De-alignment and realignment of values results in changes in voting choices from, for example, having conservative views changing to a more liberal political ideology. Voting decisions are influenced by government performance, party politics, lifestyle, particularly, young women and people in general becoming more liberal in their attitudes and voting behaviour. It posits that modernisation has an impact on women’s voting decisions mainly due to their increased participation in formal employment, improved educational status nuclearisation of families over time. The developmental theory of gender gap suggests that in postmodern societies, women’s political behaviour changes as, for example, they become more involved in politics though they are under-represented in leadership positions and high paying jobs.

**Table 1: Structural and cultural factors affecting voting preferences in modern societies**

<b>Structural factors</b>	<b>Cultural factors</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Labour force participation: men and women at work</li> <li>• Change in socio-economic status</li> <li>• Education opportunities</li> <li>• Government performance</li> <li>• Party politics</li> <li>• Liberal democracies</li> <li>• Women’s movements: feminism/abortion/ gender-based violence</li> <li>• Attitudes towards government</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Values of the young generation: freedom, self-expression, gender equality, reproductive choice, safety at work/home</li> <li>• Changing family structure</li> <li>• Smaller family unit</li> <li>• Single-mother-headed households</li> <li>• Men at home/paternity leave</li> <li>• Changes in lifestyle</li> </ul>

*Source:* Inglehart and Norris (2000).

A study by Kibuka-Sebitosi (2013) of key drivers of gender inequality in African political participation decries the paucity of research on voting preferences by gender in African countries. Her study of experiences of gender inequality in 23 African countries,<sup>1</sup> including Botswana, identified key drivers of gender inequality that entail culture, economic status, and fear of intimidation.

1. **Culture:** Traditional African beliefs and patriarchal societies continue to dissuade women from taking up political positions and standing for election through their socialisation as ‘natural’ followers, incapable of communal leadership.
2. **Economic status:** The economic status of women is usually lower than that of men.
3. **Fear of intimidation:** Many men who were interviewed said they would not support their spouses or partners should they decide to stand for election.

### **Women and Men’s Voting Preferences in Botswana**

Gender-disaggregated data in political participation analysis are crucial because such data provide a clearer, more accurate picture of political reality than simple, aggregate statistics do. Gender-disaggregated data reveal disparities between women and men, which are often masked in overall numbers, and lead to more targeted and effective policymaking. In Botswana, women consistently make up the highest number of registered voters in Botswana (Southern African Development Community, SADC, 2024). Their participation in the electoral process, from registration to casting their ballots, is critical to a high overall voter turnout, which makes them a powerful voting bloc.

While both male and female voters in Botswana are crucial to the country’s democracy, they occupy very different spaces within the political system. Women are the democratic foundation, a strong and active electorate, but they are consistently denied a proportionate share of political power. By contrast, men, while also active voters, dominate the

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<sup>1</sup> The countries were Kenya, Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda, Tanzania, Zanzibar, Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Zambia, South Africa, Angola, Mozambique, Seychelles, Mauritius, Cameroon, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone. The analysis was based on the experiences of a sample of election officials who attended the Executive Programme on Democratic Elections in Africa, which is an on-going programme that was initiated in 2011.

political landscape as candidates and elected officials. This imbalance highlights the ongoing struggle for true gender parity in Botswana's political sphere.

Women's representation in Parliament and local councils is very low, and has declined in recent elections (Dube and Lowe Morna 2025). This is a source of concern for gender equality advocates. As an outcome of the 2024 Botswana elections, women's representation in Parliament was the lowest in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region (Dube and Lowe Morna 2025).

Gottlieb *et al.* (2015), using survey data from a set of African countries, posit that women and men have different political preferences. They find that women are more likely to prioritise policies that impact household well-being, such as access to clean water, healthcare, education for children, and social safety nets. Women are more likely to be motivated to vote for candidates with policies that promote financial independence, such as access to credit and support for small businesses. As the primary victims, women are highly motivated to vote for candidates who promise to address the high rates of gender-based violence through legal reforms and social support (*ibid*).

Gottlieb *et al.* (2015) find that men's voting priorities are often more aligned with traditional power structures and large-scale economic development. In the Southern African region, men, who have historically been the primary breadwinners, are often highly motivated by political platforms that promise large-scale job creation, particularly in sectors like mining, construction, and agriculture. Men may show a greater interest in national projects, such as road networks, energy development, and foreign policy, which are often seen as drivers of overall economic growth. In a society with enduring patriarchal norms, men may be more inclined to support candidates who reinforce existing power structures and their own traditional positions of authority.

### **The Political Gender Gap in Botswana**

According to a World Economic Forum report (2025), Botswana has performed exceptionally well regarding economic participation and opportunities for women. Botswana is ranked number one globally out of 148 countries, with an index of 0.873 or 87.3 per cent in economic participation by and opportunities for women. Furthermore, Botswana has performed exceptionally well in educational attainment and is ranked first with a score of 1.00 or 100 per cent gender parity. However, despite socio-economic progress that has led to Botswana's positive performance in economic opportunities and educational attainment for women, Botswana

continues to perform poorly when it comes to participation in politics by women.

The average gender political participation score for Botswana from 1960 to 2024 is 0.583 index points. The minimum value, 0.185 index points, was reached in 1960 while the maximum of 0.754 index points was recorded in 1999. Botswana has since performed very poorly with a current score of 0.079, ranking it number 129 out of 148 countries (World Economic Forum 2025: 125). This therefore suggests that improvements in economic and educational attainment have not translated to political gains for women. Using the classification of factors generated by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), the Botswana voter apathy study (Democracy Research Project 2022) identifies the key factors that affect national voter turnout as socio-economic, political, institutional, and individual. A significant challenge for all voters is a growing sense of disillusionment with the political process. This is fuelled by high unemployment rates, persistent poverty, and a perception that the government is not responsive to their needs (Gaobolae *et al.* 2025). Literature on voter apathy in Botswana indicate that many people feel their vote ‘does not matter’ or will not bring about tangible change (Mfundisi 2006; Democracy Research Project 2022; Shabani 2024; *Sunday Standard* 2024; Gaobolae *et al.* 2025).

The disparity between women’s voting power and their political representation in Botswana is attributed to several barriers, including cultural and social norms that discourage women from running for office, a lack of financial resources for campaigning, and the male-dominated nature of political parties. While men face fewer systemic barriers to running for office, they are not immune to challenges. Economic hardship and a sense of political stagnation can lead to voter apathy, a challenge that affects both genders but may manifest differently.

The following comment summarises Botswana men’s sentiments regarding gender equality efforts: ‘This is democracy, why should women be given positions on a silver platter, they must go out and compete with men. They demand equality, so they must fight for it like men. They have been given special nomination and special election at both Council and Parliament respectively’ (Dube and Lowe Morna 2025: 19). This comment was aired during a radio panel discussion on Gabz FM in 2020 (*ibid.*)<sup>2</sup>

The following section outlines the methodology applied in this research.

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<sup>2</sup> The debates were held by Gender Links on different days to general listenership. They included a diverse group of people whose contributions made the discussions lively and interactive.

## **Research Methodology**

Social media offers key opportunities for political action by enabling politicians to speak directly to voters and serving as an effective platform for activism and targeted outreach. Despite these advantages, the platform can have significant drawbacks, including the spread of widespread, unchecked misinformation, and the reinforcement of (biased) partisan views.

Studies have argued that social media platforms are at best regarded as a double-edged sword for women's candidacy (Nkoa *et al.* 2023; International IDEA 2024; Gakahu 2024). A study of 39 countries across the five continents by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU n.d.) reported that, in Africa, respondents believed that social media comments focused on stereotypical perceptions about their appearance, how they express themselves and behave, and the social roles they should play. More generally, their gender, rather than their credentials is a subject of regular and widespread comment, attacks and derision. The same is true of their marital status, emotions, sexuality and family life, whether imagined or real.

### *Documented Analysis of Social Media Posts From the 2024 Botswana Elections*

This paper used secondary data collected from various social media platforms, such as posts about women candidates who contested in the 2024 Botswana general election. Secondary data were collected from online pages of newspapers, namely *The Argus Online* (n.d.), *Mmegi Online* (n.d.), *The Botswana Gazette* (n.d.), and *The Patriot* (n.d.). In addition, Facebook posts from the Gabz FM radio station were visited. Furthermore, official websites and Facebook pages of the three biggest political parties were visited, being the Botswana Congress Party (BCP), the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP), and the Umbrella for Democratic Change (UDC). This study used social media commentary posted before the October 2024 general election, after political parties had primary elections, and when parliamentary candidates were launched and introduced to the public. Hence, selection criteria restricted comments in the study to comments made after primary elections, during the launch and introduction of female candidates by their political parties, and before the October 2024 general election, at the height of campaigning. Social media posts and commentary made about all the 28 parliamentary candidates who were women, across all political parties that contested in the 2024 general election (see Table 2), were clustered and assessed according to themes that emerged.

The candidates consisted of seven women from the BDP, six from the BCP, six from the Botswana Patriotic Front (BPF), three from the UDC, which includes the Botswana National Front (BNF), Alliance for Progressives (AP), and Botswana Peoples Party (BPP), four independent candidates, one woman from the Botswana Movement for Democracy (BMD), and one from the Botswana Republican Party (BRP). The premises of the analysis were that women as candidates get more negative comments than men do, that social biases are changing, and that both men and women are biased against women.

**Table 2: Female candidates in the 2024 general election**

<b>Political Party</b>	<b>Number of Female Candidates</b>
Botswana Democratic Party	7
Botswana Congress Party	6
Botswana Patriotic Front	6
Umbrella for Democratic Change	3
Botswana Movement of Democracy	1
Botswana Republican Party	1
Independent Candidates	4
TOTAL	28

*Source: The Argus Online 2024.*

The research focused on social media posts and commentary about the women candidates, specifically the sentiments expressed in comments posted on social media by the public. Furthermore, general debates on the Botswana Television (BTV n.d.) and comments about women were reviewed, including comments posted on social media when these candidates were launched. The research also explored the effect of gender dynamics at intra-party level. It investigated factors that explain the low numbers of women candidates for parliamentary seats in the 2024 general election.

### **Characteristics of Female Parliamentary Candidates**

The traits of female candidates that participated in the 2024 general election were diverse. Some of the women had vast work and political experience from serving as specially elected members of Parliament, Cabinet Ministers, and Assistant Ministers. Some of the candidates were in academia while others were in the education and health professions. Other candidates were well-established women in business. The 28 parliamentary female candidates had academic qualifications ranging from

diplomas to postgraduate degrees, in various fields of study including agriculture, economics, finance, education, international relations, public policy, psychology, law, and health (see Table 3).

**Table 3: A range of qualifications and work experience of female parliamentary candidates**

<b>Educational Qualifications</b>	<b>Areas of Specialisation</b>	<b>Positions Held</b>
Diploma	Teaching Laboratory Technology Health Sciences	Specially Elected Member of Parliament Businesswoman Health Professional
BA LLB	Accounting Economics Finance Law International Relations Agriculture Psychology Social Policy	Minister Assistant Minister Permanent Secretary Director High Court Judge
Master's Degree	Development Studies Economics Food and Agricultural Management Psychology	HR Professional Academic Lecturer Food and Agriculture Manager
Doctorate/PhD	Psychology	University Professor

*Source:* Compiled by the authors from various sources.

### **Findings: Themes From Social Media Posts**

The following are themes that emerged from the social media postings and commentary from the public regarding women candidates who participated in the 2024 general election. The commentary was found at various times when the candidates were launched and introduced, and during the public debates that were aired live on national television and radio. The themes were classified into positive and negative posts and commentary on the female candidates.

Positive themes that emerged from posts were mainly about the public being happy that political parties have selected women as parliamentary candidates and wishing the 28 women who contested success in winning the elections. Furthermore, some posts encouraged the public to vote for women, encouraged women to vote for other women, and praised political parties for having selected women as parliamentary

candidates, while a few posts condemned parties that fielded few women compared to other political parties.

Negative social media posts about female candidates pointed to patriarchy, made sexist and discriminatory comments against women candidates, displayed unfair scrutiny of female politicians, and portrayed negative public perceptions regarding feelings of entitlement among women who participate in politics. However, public perceptions were generally complimentary when it came to women candidates.

### **Positive Media Posts About Women Parliamentary Candidates**

#### *Support for Increase in Female Candidacy*

There was some level of excitement and support for female candidates to win the elections as parliamentary candidates. Posts read:

Great to see so many capable women stepping up for leadership.

The BDP is clearly leading the way in representation.

... all the best ladies except for ...

Look at BCP Women wow, wish all (*botlhe*) could win including women from the BPF and the UDC.

Good luck ladies, with hard work you will manage and best of luck to you all.

Wish you all the best ladies (*bomme*) expect the ones from the ruling party.

Good luck all of you from opposition, we are tired of people who do not care about our lives.

I wish all these women could go to parliament.

Excited about the potential these candidates bring.

This demonstrates beauty with brains.

Wishing you all the best (*Re le eleletsa katlego batsadi ba rona. Bommme, thari ya sechaba*).

Lets take all these women to parliament regardless of their party affiliation.

Women in leadership are essential for progress. Proud to support BDP in this election.

The backbone of the country ... All the best *bomme basadi*.

Women have a vital role in shaping our future. BDP is leading the charge.

Exciting times for female representation. BDP is leading the way forward.

Let's celebrate female leadership in politics. BDP is leading by example.

It's great to see women taking charge. BDP is setting a strong example.

*Urging People to Vote for Women and Encouraging Women to Vote for Women*

There were interesting social posts where people encouraged the public to vote for female candidates. In addition, women were urged to vote for and support other women although no reasons were given. For instance, some posts said:

lets vote for women (*Ako le thopheng bomme ....bomme..*) and women should support each other for ONCE.....

Supporting women in politics is vital. BDP is leading the charge. Let's change the party ladies ... lets vote for women.

I'm proud to support women in leadership.

Supporting female candidates is crucial for our future. BDP is leading the way.

I am happy to see women (*Kea itumela ke bona bomme*).

The diversity of candidates is encouraging. ... These candidates are a breath of fresh air. BDP is on the right track. Women in politics bring vital insights. BDP is showcasing great candidates. Strong female representation is key for progress. BDP is on the right path.

Let's support women in leadership roles. BDP is paving the way for change.

*Complaints About Lack of Diversity and Inclusiveness*

Other posts were directed at the UDC for not having more female parliamentary candidates. For example, some social media posts complained about the UDC not aiming to empower women and not being inclusive enough. From the numbers (Table 2) UDC did not have the lowest number of candidates and these social media comments might have been made because the party was one of the three major political parties. Posts said:

UDC does not care about inclusiveness (UDC *ga e na sepe ka* inclusivity).

Independent candidates have more female candidates than the UDC (*Koore UDC e hetwa ke mekoko? Waitse kana*).

Its time the UDC recognizes that women's empowerment is crucial for progress.

We need more in 2029, this is not enough (*mo gase gone*).

Only 3 women (*Bomme ba le 3 hela?*), this shows the UDC's failure to prioritize gender equality.

Did you know? UDC is the worst when it comes to women empowerment.

UDC has never really spoken about women empowerment, so I am not surprised with these numbers.

These numbers are sad.

The UDC's limited female candidates are a missed opportunity.

If the UDC wants to be a true alternative, they need to step up their game on women's representation.

The UDC has to be honest, independent candidates are doing much better! A party that claims to care about the future of Botswana but they do not have female candidates.

Even the BPF is doing much better than the UDC. Gender equality in politics is still very far (*e santse ele kgakala waitse*).

### *Praising Political Parties for Increasing Female Candidates*

Most of the posts praised the then ruling Botswana Democratic Party for having more women representation than other political parties:

It's crucial to have women in decision making roles, the BDP is setting the standard.

It's important to have women in parliament, the BDP is paving the way for a brighter future.

Women's participation in politics matters, proud to support the BDP.

Female candidates are crucial for our democracy, BDP is leading with great choices.

A diverse parliament essential for affective governance. BDP is leading the way.

Women's voices are essential in politics. BDP is paving the way for change.

I appreciate the focus on women candidates. BDP is setting a strong precedent.

The BDP's commitment to female representation is commendable.

Let's make our voices heard in the elections.

Proud to see so many strong women representing BDP. They deserve our votes.

Female candidates are crucial for our democracy. BDP is leading with great choices.

I believe in the strength of female leadership. BDP is paving the way.

Women have the power to change politics. Proud to back BDP.

Proud to see so many capable women representing BDP. They deserve our support.

Women bring unique insights to governance. BDP is highlighting this importance.

It's inspiring to see so many women stepping up. BDP is making strides in representation.

It's time for women to lead. BDP is setting a great example.

I appreciate BDP's efforts in showcasing female talent. Let's support them.

Let's ensure women have a voice in parliament. BDP is making it happen.

Let's celebrate the commitment to female representation. BDP is leading by example.

Let's ensure women are represented in decision-making. BDP is making it happen.

Let's stand behind our women candidates. BDP is making a difference.

Let's stand behind our female leaders. BDP is making strides for representation.

The commitment to female leadership is commendable. BDP is leading the way.

Women's participation in politics is essential for change. BDP is the way forward.

The representation of women in parliament matters. BDP is leading the charge.

The future looks bright with these women candidates. BDP is the way to go.

The diverse representation is inspiring. BDP is the party to back.

The commitment to female representation is commendable. BDP is leading the way.

Women are key to effective governance. BDP is highlighting this importance.

Strong female representation is key to a balanced government. BDP is on the right path.

It's inspiring to see so many women stepping up. BDP is paving the way.

It's time for women to have their say in governance. BDP is paving the way.

The BCP was praised for the quality of their women:

*Bomme ba motiya bako* Botswana congress party. (Great women are at the BCP.)

*BCP ke yone hela e pekileng bomme ba motiya* (BCP is the only party that has nominated great women.)

Despite the above support for the Botswana Democratic party, all their seven female candidates did not win their parliamentary seats. Three out of the 28 women won their seats; two of the three were from the UDC and the third was one of the six from the BCP. Three women were then specially elected, which increased the total number of women in Parliament (Chinyepi 2021). With the 2024 general election, women representation has declined from 10.9 to 8.7 per cent (see Table 4) and this is the lowest in the Southern African region (Chinyepi 2021; *Mmegi Online* n.d.) However, female candidates at parliamentary level increased by 11 women compared to the 2019 general election (Chinyepi 2021). Even women in local government structures are not doing well in terms of representation, as only 8 per cent of councillors that were elected were women and this increased to 15 per cent including specially nominated female councillors (Chinyepi 2021). Furthermore, this was a decrease from the 18 per cent of female councillors in 2019. The highest representation rate of women at the local government level is 23 per cent in 1999 and 2009.

**Table 4: Women representation in political decision-making in Botswana**

Representation	2009 (%)	2014 (%)	2019 (%)	2024 (%)
Women members of Parliament	7.9	9.5	10.9	8.7
Women councillors	23.1	18.5	19	15
Ministers	11	18.75	16.6	22
Assistant ministers	28.5	2.5	28.5	10
Speaker	100	100	0	0
Deputy speaker	0	0	0	100

*Source:* Chinyepi (2021: 2).

A total of 28 women contested in the 2024 national elections out of 61 parliamentary seats, and only three won the elections (Chinyepi 2021). Despite women making up 45 per cent of registered voters (SADC 2024), the number of female candidates remains very low (Table 5).

**Table 5: Total parliamentary seats and female candidates**

<b>General election</b>	<b>Total parliamentary candidates</b>	<b>Women candidates</b>	<b>%</b>
2014	192	17	8.9
2019	210	11	5
2024	263	28	10.6

*Source:* SADC 2024.

### *Perceptions About Female Candidates*

Some of the comments from social media post were complimentary regarding women candidates representing their parties in the 2024 general election. Some positive comments were that ‘Our women from the BDP look stunning’, and that ‘BCP has intelligent women’. Other posts indicated that ‘BNF women work hard; they represent Africa’, and that ‘BDP has nominated women who can stand up for themselves’. Others felt that ‘Women folk are the only people who are accountable’, and that ‘Women are the only people who can govern/rule’, while others commented that ‘They say her enthusiasm is great’. Others commented on how beautiful female candidates from their political parties were. For example, they said, ‘Our BDP ladies look beautiful’, ‘BCP has all intelligent women’, ‘BNF women are mothers for Africa and they work hard for themselves’, the ‘BDP has taking out/nominated women who can stand up for themselves’, and ‘Females have a heart to run government’.

### **Negative Themes**

#### *Discriminatory Remarks, Sexism, and Doubting Women’s Capabilities*

Some of the comments that were posted on social media were discriminatory and sexist remarks. They were mainly directed at female candidates during the 2024 general election; as pointed out in the literature review, women are normally faced with an array of challenges when they want to enter politics. The following are some of the examples of what the public posted or commented about female candidates who aspired to be in leadership positions and in politics. Some comments were based on a lack

of trust of female candidates, for instance, 'I don't trust her'. Other comments were about negative stereotypes regarding emotional women, such as, 'Parliament is not about emotions'. Others felt that some of these women were not well-mannered by not adhering to cultural beliefs, and regarded leadership by women as 'unnatural'. Allegations of witchcraft have historically been utilised to demean and undermine women's agency. Derogatory comments about female candidates related to the confidence of some women, which was associated with witchcraft, and indicated that women who are over-confident need to be controlled. For example, one post read that 'She acts like a bewitched man forced to fall in love', while other comments about control said that 'She needs a husband to control her' and that 'She talks too much like a boy but she is a woman'. Other comments were just negative where female candidates were involved. For instance, a post indicated that 'I wish she could lose elections'. Others commented that 'She has not been hurt', and that 'She needs to be sent back home'.

As demonstrated in the above social media posts, emotional abuse is just one of the few of the ways that discrimination can challenge female participation in politics. The social media feedback examined in this study acquired during the 2024 elections underscores the need to raise public awareness and provide education about discriminatory ideologies regarding women, as well as about attitudes and behaviours that reinforce negative gender norms in society. Some of the comments were about the quality of women in Parliament. For instance, women candidates were 'crybabies' and 'they needed a man to control them', and 'voters were forced to vote for these women'. Some female candidates were said not to be 'parliamentary material', the meaning of which can only be inferred, since Botswana does not have a clear framework for qualification to stand for parliamentary elections. There is only the requirement to be an adult citizen who is literate to the extent of reading and writing; none of the women candidates fell below this standard, hence they were official candidates.

Some men made sexist remarks and commentary. One individual commented after the results of the primary elections that 'Next time, speak softer right into my left ear and well in time so that I could come up with a veritable solution to the problem'. Some female candidates' capabilities were questioned on social media posts. For example, one person asked, 'Have you ever heard this lady debating in Parliament?' and observed that 'The Chairperson of the VDC can perform better than her'. Others felt that female candidates 'must consider themselves very lucky' as they 'benefited from women empowerment' policies and programmes. Another post said that one female candidate who contested was not a politician as

such but was selected because of her status in her community due to her status as a businesswoman.

### *Patriarchy and Leadership Roles*

A patriarchal social structure is one in which men are dominant in positions of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege, and property ownership (Dube and Lowe Morna 2025). Women and other disadvantaged genders are frequently oppressed and marginalised in society because of this system. Cultural patriarchy in Botswana is reinforced by the Setswana adage, '*Ga di etelelwe pele ke manamagadi*', which loosely translates into 'The female of the species is not to lead'. This adage is often cited when a woman aims for a prominent decision-making position in public affairs, and has persisted despite socio-economic change.

Though Botswana had its first general election in 1965, the nation did not register its first female member of Parliament until 1979 (IPU n.d.). Laws and practices that have traditionally benefited men over women have also contributed to Botswana's patriarchal society, further solidifying gender inequality. Given that women's rights are not guaranteed under the Botswana constitution,<sup>3</sup> women continue to be a minority in positions of power and are frequently excluded from leadership and decision-making roles. The idea that women cannot and should not lead has been consistently cultivated by patriarchy, to the point of indoctrination in Botswana's culture. Certain remarks made during the primary elections made this clear.

Cultural patriarchy was directed towards female candidates during the 2024 general election. Social media posts mentioned that 'the role of women is to lead the household' and that 'Women do not lead in Botswana'. Other posts raised issues related to women's traditional role of looking after the household and children. For example, posts said, 'Women should look after the household and feed the children', 'The role of a woman is to look after the household', and 'Women's traditional role is to look after children and make sure they are well fed'. Other posts emphasised that women were never born to lead. For example, posts said, 'Women lead at home', 'It's true that women are not born to lead', and 'Botswana is the land of men, we have never seen women lead'. Strong patriarchal perceptions were cemented by comments such as, 'It is well documented that leadership of public office is not for women'.

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<sup>3</sup> The Botswana constitution does not directly prohibit discrimination that is based on gender.

### *Scrutiny of Female Politicians*

The challenges faced by female politicians differ from those faced by their male counterparts. In many ways, male parliamentarians do not encounter what female parliamentarians frequently face, such as comments about their personal lives; women are usually criticised for their choices in life, and their appearances. Some women candidates faced criticism because of past actions as former cabinet ministers or as former members of Parliament (MPs). Furthermore, there were degrading comments such as, 'How did she end up in parliament when she is such a crybaby'. The reality is that, if a man lost primary elections and appealed the results, they would not be called a crybaby and so this explicitly indicates the harsh scrutiny from society that women candidates face compared to their male counterparts.

Some social media posts were directed at degrading women and challenging their capability to participate in politics. For instance, one candidate was directed to focus on community activities (such as Motshelo) and not be involved in politics. Others were viewed as going into politics for personal achievement and for revenge. For instance, posts said that 'This is personal, she has a heart of a stone (*pelo ee lehuto*)', 'She has been influenced by being an elderly person', and 'She has taken this job to pride herself'. One felt that some female candidates should 'Move out of the way to give others a chance and stop being selfish'. Others posted, 'Madam, you have been rejected by the masses, you failed women and the Batswana at large', and 'You literally stole the constituency'. The following section is an analysis of perceptions regarding the empowerment of women.

### *Perceptions About the Empowerment of Women*

Sentiments about the dearth of women's political activism stems from the recognition that the success of women's movements in Botswana in the 1990s is associated with the largest number of women parliamentarians in the 1999 elections. Mosime and Mookodi (2020) proposed that women's sociopolitical activism in Botswana varies in shape and focus. While some civil-society-based women's empowerment activities focus on leadership and mentoring, others focus on topics such as gender-based violence, and the status of women in the constitution of Botswana.

Botswana has ratified important international and regional treaties aimed at facilitating gender equality in social, economic, and political spheres. They include the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979 (*UN Women* n.d.); the revised SADC Protocol on Gender and

Development (SADC 2016); and the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women (African Union 2003; *Solidarity for African Women's Rights* 2023). Despite these commitments, there is limited evidence of the domestication of these treaties. As a result, the ascension of women to political office depends to a large part on the whims of the ruling party. In the general election of 2019, only three of the 57 constituencies elected female representatives, so the president of Botswana used his discretionary powers to specially appoint four more women to Parliament, bringing the total number of women in Parliament to seven. Similarly in 2024, only three of the 61 constituencies elected women. The new president used his discretionary powers to specially appoint three additional women to Parliament. It is arguably for these reasons that some social media posts on women candidates in the 2024 elections claimed that 'empowering women' has contributed to women becoming bold and, in some cases, developing a mentality of entitlement once they enter into politics.

The social posts contended that, because women who were specially elected did not campaign for the general election and had not competed for voters, they lacked legitimacy in and accountability for their positions. The success of the Specially Elected Member of Parliament strategy in genuinely empowering women in political leadership has been called into question by this. One of the commenters said, 'Can you imagine us having a female president who has just been favoured by a man! We cannot take that risk, we have a country and generations to preserve and protect'. This creates a narrative that a woman cannot possibly get to the highest seat in political office by working hard herself.

The other issue is that of political party structures that covet power and perpetuate male dominance. Political parties shy away from nominating female candidates to be part of the leadership in their political party structures (Chinyepi 2021). As mentioned above, some comments from social media were aimed at accusing women candidates of having the mentality of entitlement mainly because of empowerment laws and policies that were developed over the years to help women enter politics and aspire to hold senior and leadership positions. For instance, one person commented that 'You think we are going to vote for you just because you are a woman'. Some commentators felt that some of the empowerment laws and policies have contributed to women feeling that they deserve to be rewarded with leadership or political positions in government. For instance, one post indicated that 'They want to make it appear like they are the only ones who are educated'. However, other posts said, 'No one ever listens to those ones', and 'People never listen to these women'. Women candidates were also accused of expecting assistance from their political

parties, government, or the public to help them occupy leadership positions. A good example is the comment that ‘They expect us to help them, but they never help us with anything’. Another person was adamant that ‘They want help but they don’t look after themselves’. One post read, ‘You’re so gone you don’t deserve us *mmaetsho* (madam)’.

The above comments can be a dissuading factor for women, especially those young and aspiring women who want to venture into politics and leadership positions through their political party structures or as independent candidates. Their competence receives comment. For example, ‘Women must introspect, there is a tendency by women to ignore what matters especially when they are specially elected’. Other posts were about women demonstrating their value, their impact, and the different and unique qualities they bring, ‘apart from “women power stunts”’. Others felt that some women are praised for nothing. For example, a post accused women of ‘expecting a silver plate without works or showing capabilities’.

Furthermore, other social media posting had negative connotations about women from their own political parties while others posted that women candidates should give up. Examples are: ‘Go well, you are one of those useless people’, ‘We say you are worst Minister in the history of the Republic, for years suppliers were not paid on time and government coffers are almost empty’, and ‘You are scared, when are you calling for transport to move you?’ Supporters of the then opposition parties did not spare the ruling party’s female candidates as elected officials from criticism. One example is that of a female candidate who, during her primary elections appeal argued that she had not been accorded the chance to observe the voters roll, as the voters’ registration was chaotic and this also contributed to a chaotic election process that lacked adequate oversight and implementation. Therefore, she believed the process was unfair and she lodged her appeal. Rather than addressing the lack of transparency, some of the comments from social media postings dismissed the injustice felt by the female candidate, and related her experience to how other opposition party members felt in the past when they were not allowed to observe voter registration during primary elections.

## **Discussion**

### *Structural and Cultural Factors*

Considering the developmental theory and the structural and cultural factors discussed above, the findings suggest that as the society or the nation develops, perceptions about women change, as most of the social media posts show enthusiasm and support for female candidates to win the

general election. Botswana's democracy has matured over the last 55 years, and we can conclude by suggesting from the findings of this research that the public's views about women in politics and leadership positions has changed in the five decades. It has been 58 years since the country gained independence, and Botswana has had five general election.

As demonstrated in tables above, women's participation in politics has not increased significantly over the years, it has contracted and/or fluctuated as the country has modernised and passed through various stages of socio-economic development. Sociocultural views and beliefs about women might have changed over the development and postmodernist stages. But these have not translated into the public voting for women, as only three women were elected out of the 28 female parliamentary candidates. The proponents of development theory suggest that, as nations develop, young people and the general public's views about women undergo changes. Many social media posts praising political parties for having female parliamentary candidates are an indication of these shifting cultural beliefs and changes over the years.

### *Shifting Perceptions About Women*

The developmental theory suggests that, as nations develop, people's perceptions change in modern societies, due to, for example, more people joining the labour force, changes in socio-economic status, influences from women movements, feminism, liberalism, and a general call for gender equality. The above findings demonstrate a shift (minimal) of a modern or postmodern society in Botswana, from more rigid and absolute thoughts about women's political participation to biased analyses of women's capabilities as leaders. However, structural and cultural factors, particularly patriarchy and the stereotyping of women, continue to affect and discourage women from joining politics. Examples are the findings that some people felt that women can never be leaders and should stay home, and others felt that women need to be controlled, while others blamed the very same empowerment initiatives that were developed to encourage women go into political and leadership positions. Some of the social media commentators blamed empowerment policies and initiatives for giving some women a feeling of entitlement to political and leadership positions. The UN (2025) acknowledged that there is backlash against gender equality initiatives, from passive online harassment to internal resistance in organisations. The UN (2025) suggests that these challenges can be addressed by having strong, visionary leadership that sets the tone from top leadership and views gender equality as a core value with clear and transparent policies that actively support women.

### *From a Modern to a Postmodern Society*

Despite Botswana having passed through different developmental stages from a traditional society to a modern and postmodern society, issues of patriarchy and a strong belief that men should be leaders continue to persist, as is evident in the documented analysis and the social media posts assessed in this study. Political parties' structures and the campaign strategies of candidates are gendered because men have more financial resources, and the confidence gained from experience and exposure to politics at a younger age; women tend to act as campaign managers and fundraisers at a younger age and only venture into politics at a later age (Chinyepi 2021; SADC 2024). This puts female candidates at a disadvantage. It could be argued that, despite the socio-economic development of a society, the behaviour for both men and women are influenced by a variety of factors, including patriarchy, limited financial resources, and past experience gained from engagement in political activities from a young age. As argued above, Botswana has moved through various developmental stages, from a low-income country to an upper-middle-income country (Bank of Botswana 2024; United Nations 2025; World Economic Forum 2025).

Findings from this study revealed some changes in the public opinion, as demonstrated by social media posts displaying positive attitudes about female parliamentary candidates, aspirations for them to win the elections, and general encouragement to support and vote for women. Attitudes and beliefs about women in leadership positions could be changing as our democracy matures, and the country has transited from a low-income to a developing (middle-income) country. Structural and cultural values, norms, and beliefs are changing slightly, as demonstrated by supportive positive social media posts and the enthusiasm shown for women to win elections. Maybe the feminist movement and empowerment initiatives have had a positive influence as reflected in the positive posts regarding female parliamentary candidates. The positive posts, minimal as they may be in the broader conversation, may be indicative of Botswana's economic development and growth, and Botswana's investment in human capital development, having paid off over the years.

### **Conclusion**

The developmental theory suggests that, as nations develop, they transform people's lifestyles and values. The above findings from documented analysis and social media posts indicate that the public still holds the cultural norms and values that women should be confined to the home looking after the household while men are born to lead and join politics.

The main themes that emerged from the social media posts were evidence of both positive and negative views about women candidates. Positive commentary was mainly of encouragement to fellow voters, to vote for women. Women were urged to vote for and support other women.

While some political parties were praised for fielding an increased number of women, the numbers were insignificant considering that more than fifty per cent of registered voters are women. Negative posts raised issues of patriarchy, doubting female candidates' capabilities, unfair scrutiny of women, discriminatory remarks, and negative perceptions regarding policies and programmes designed to empower women. These problems can be addressed by making more economic opportunities available to female candidates, avail mentoring opportunities, and encourage women and girls to go into politics at an early age as this will help them develop confidence and skills to venture into politics and leadership positions. Botswana is said to be leading globally when it comes to economic participation and opportunities and educational attainment for women. However, the country is not performing well in terms of women's political empowerment. Political empowerment and the share of women in politics and leadership can be increased by implementing laws that promote gender equality; changing legislature without a concerted effort to implement gender equality legislature will not yield any results (Chinyepi 2021; SADC 2024).

Overall, the assessment of social media posts converge to the assumptions of the developmental theory that, as nations or societies develop, perceptions about female candidates change, mainly due to socio-economic changes increasing job opportunities, feminist movements influencing public opinion, and voters becoming more liberal in their choices. However, when it comes to casting votes, people still vote for male candidates, as demonstrated by only three women winning in the 2024 general election out of the 28 who contested. Hence, political parties should make a concerted effort to field more women as candidates in party structures, to reduce the imbalance. Finally, as suggested by Chinyepi (2021), a review of the electoral law of first-past-the-post is overdue, and introducing the quota system for women would help to increase women representation in politics and key decision-making positions. These policy and legislative changes should be implemented to bring Botswana closer to the regional 50 per cent requirement and to higher global gender-parity scores, and to have women in politics and decision-making positions.

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