

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# ‘You can’t do politics without money’: female politicians, matronage, and the limits of gender quotas in Kenya

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## Abstract

In 2010, Kenya introduced a gender quota to boost women’s political representation. The quota mandated that a single gender should not hold more than two-thirds of elective and appointive positions in public bodies. When few women won seats in elections in 2013 and 2017, political parties fulfilled the gender quota by nominating hundreds of women as members of county assemblies (MCAs). Drawing on fieldwork conducted in 2019 in one of Kenya’s county assemblies, this article shows how nominated female MCAs participate in transactional relationships with the public. Like male politicians, they are often called on to contribute to fundraisers and to meet the needs of constituents. Female politicians also accompany their giving with political rhetoric in support of female leadership. I argue that, through their giving, female politicians use money as a tool to champion women’s political leadership. Their matronage – a term I use in lieu of patronage to emphasize the role of women in transactional relationships – ultimately shows how gender quota legislation can go only so far in increasing women’s political representation. Instead, political actors also rely on informal mechanisms in order to achieve gender equality in politics.

## Résumé

En 2010, le Kenya a introduit un quota de genres pour augmenter la représentation politique des femmes. Ce quota exigeait qu’aucun des genres ne détienne plus des deux tiers des postes obtenus par nomination au sein des organismes publics. Face au faible nombre de sièges remportés par des femmes aux élections de 2013 et 2017, les partis politiques ont respecté le quota de genres en nommant des centaines de femmes aux postes de membres des assemblées de comté (MCA). S’appuyant sur des travaux menés sur le terrain en 2019 dans l’une des assemblées de comté du Kenya, cet article montre comment les femmes MCA désignées participent aux relations transactionnelles avec le public. Comme les hommes politiques, elles sont souvent appelées à contribuer aux collectes de fonds et à répondre aux besoins des mandants. Les femmes politiques accompagnent également leur contribution d’une rhétorique politique en soutien au leadership féminin. L’auteur soutient que les femmes politiques, à travers leur contribution, utilisent l’argent comme un outil pour soutenir le leadership politique des femmes. Leur matronage (un terme que l’auteur utilise

au lieu de patronage pour souligner le rôle des femmes dans les relations transactionnelles) montre finalement comment la loi de quota de genres présente des limites s'agissant d'augmenter la représentation politique des femmes. Au lieu de cela, les acteurs politiques s'appuient également sur des mécanismes informels pour arriver à l'égalité hommes-femmes en politique.

'It's time for the big gift!' the master of ceremonies (MC) announced to the hundreds of women who filled the social hall for the share-out ceremony. This celebration was a once-a-year event in which a village savings and loan association (VSLA) group distributed money that its members had pooled in savings throughout the previous year. The MC turned to Amina, the guest of honour and a nominated female member of Kwale's County Assembly.<sup>1</sup> 'It's time for Mama to speak. Mama we have missed you,' he said.

Amina stood up and took the microphone. 'I'm sorry, I have been feeling unwell,' she began, apologizing for missing previous share-out ceremonies. She commended the group for their saving and investing. She urged them to encourage other individuals to join VSLA groups, before calling them to receive their gift. The group of twenty members hosting the share-out ceremony congregated around her. They were mostly women dressed in matching *lesos* (a type of colourful cloth) and T-shirts emblazoned with their group name. Amina turned to two of the women and presented two 1,000-shilling notes, as everyone began to take pictures of the exchange.<sup>2</sup>

Share-out ceremonies like these happened every weekend in Kwale, a county on the coast of Kenya where I conducted fieldwork between July and December 2019. A VSLA group hosted a ceremony and invited other VSLAs, friends and relatives to dance, eat, celebrate and witness them receiving envelopes that represented their savings and the interest they had accrued during the year.<sup>3</sup> The VSLAs in Kwale practised table banking, which entailed saving money together and giving out loans to each other. The members repaid their loans with interest, thus increasing the overall group and individual savings. The final yearly savings were distributed at the share-out ceremonies. During the festivities, friends and relatives showered each woman with various gifts, ranging from cash and clothing to laundry baskets and plates. When any politician graced these ceremonies, they were expected to present cash, a 'big gift', before leaving. The cash was intended to boost the VSLA kitty. However, for politicians such as Amina, giving the money to the group was not just to contribute to their investments. Giving money also enabled politicians like her to establish their presence in the community as the building blocks for future political campaigning.

<sup>1</sup> I use pseudonyms for female MCAs in Kwale County. I use real names only for national-level public figures – the deputy governor of Kwale and a member of parliament from Kilifi County – who spoke during public televised events.

<sup>2</sup> US\$1 is equivalent to approximately 110 Kenyan shillings.

<sup>3</sup> Popularized by CARE International, the VSLA model builds on the better-known informal financial institution, the rotating savings and credit association (ROSCA). Whereas ROSCAs usually include pooling money and giving it all to one member after each meeting, the VSLA model entails more flexibility in savings and loans. For a discussion of the differences, see Ksoll *et al.* (2016).

Political parties selected women such as Amina to join the county assemblies when few women were elected into Kenya's forty-seven assemblies in the 2013 and 2017 elections. The parties nominated the women into office in order to comply with Kenya's gender quota. Known as the 'two-thirds gender principle', the gender quota requires public institutions with elective and appointive positions not to have a single gender holding more than two-thirds of the positions available. Gender quotas have been adopted worldwide by countries seeking to elevate women in political office. In Kwale, where no female member of the county assembly (MCA) was elected in 2013 or 2017, the gender quota allowed women to form at least one-third of the membership. The county assembly has twelve female MCAs out of a total membership of thirty-four.

I conducted my research among these female MCAs almost two years after Kenya's 2017 general election. Despite our ethnic and religious differences, the female MCAs welcomed my curiosity, viewing me as a younger Kenyan daughter or sister whose educational pursuits they were keen to support. I attended county assembly meetings, accompanied female MCAs to community events, and interviewed eleven of them about their experiences in political office. During fieldwork, I began to pay attention to the ways in which female politicians navigated the issue of money. The share-out ceremony I describe above was one instance of female politicians giving out money. I listened to politicians' stories of personal giving to constituents. I watched politicians lament non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that failed to give them monetary support for electoral campaigns. I witnessed large fundraising events that turned into political rallies to endorse women in political office. Although the 2022 general election was still three years away, candidates had begun declaring their interest in elected positions. Attending and giving out money during political events allowed female politicians to increase their visibility.

This article analyses how female politicians engage in transactional relationships. Although transactional relationships are prevalent in African political cultures (Arriola 2009; Bayart 2009; Berman 1998), this scholarship has mostly focused on showing how male politicians use money to forge political networks. Drawing on the Kenyan case, I argue that women also engage in patronage practices that help to cement their political futures and to emphasize women's abilities to serve their communities. Female politicians thus use actions that are codified as male to advance their political careers.

Ultimately, women's patronage practices reveal the limits of Kenya's gender quota. The gender quota is based on the assumption that nominating women into political office will not only immediately increase the number of women in office, but also inspire more women to pursue elective office. Although the gender quota has increased the number of women nominated, it has not wholly transformed attitudes towards women's political representation. Instead, the ways in which female politicians engage in transactional relationships show how money is also used in the quest to shift attitudes towards women in politics.

I begin this article with a discussion about the history of women's political representation in Kenya and the introduction of gender quotas. Next, I describe transactional relationships in Kenyan politics. Finally, I present ethnographic vignettes describing how female politicians engaged in transactional relationships, before discussing how these relationships indicate the limits of gender quotas.

## Female politicians and gender quotas in Kenya

Kenya's gender quota was the culmination of historical struggles to increase women's political representation. Although women held positions of political authority in pre-colonial contexts and participated in anti-colonial struggles as much as men, they were excluded from politics following independence in 1963 (Mugo 1978; Nzomo 1997). Today, women encounter socio-economic factors that limit their participation. They are forced to surmount perceptions of politics as a preserve of men and to overcome socio-cultural expectations that deem their primary roles as those of being wives and mothers (Nasong'o and Ayot 2007: 188). Additional challenges include illiteracy and predominant views of 'politics as a dirty game' (*ibid.*: 189), as well as limited access to resources to enable them to 'compete on an equal basis with men' (Nzomo 1997: 236).

Adopted after years of constitutional reform and several failed attempts to introduce affirmative action laws, Kenya's 2010 constitution sought to redress these uneven dynamics (Kabira 2012). The constitution introduced two key provisions to increase women's political participation. The first was the creation of a 'women's representative' parliamentary seat in each of Kenya's forty-seven counties. The second was the 'two-thirds gender principle'. Although the latter provision has not been operationalized in Kenya's parliament, the two-thirds gender principle has been implemented in the forty-seven county assemblies. Gender quotas in Kenya had long been seen as important measures to increase the number of women in legislature and to incorporate women's perspectives in law making (Kabira 2012: 341). At the county assembly level, female MCAs participate in law making through preparing and debating county legislative bills and motions on health, agriculture and finance, among other issues. Furthermore, the general hope is that they will pursue elective office after their terms are over.

However, the adoption of the 2010 constitution has not translated into an immediate shift in the fortunes of female politicians. In a study on women's political inclusion after Kenya's 2010 constitution, Bouka, Berry and Kamuru (2019: 314) list barriers that include 'the power of political parties, the way campaigns are financed, cultural ideas about women's leadership, and the pervasiveness of (often gendered) violence in Kenyan elections. A new constitution does not necessarily overhaul a masculinized political sphere. Grace Musila (2009: 40) describes the rule of men as a 'phallic orientation of state power' stretching from colonial into postcolonial Kenya. This masculinist leaning of the state through prioritizing and preserving male leadership has excluded women from equal participation. Thus, female and male politicians have always experienced politics differently.

A notable example that illustrates these divergent experiences is the terms used to refer to politicians. With access to the state apparatus, male political elites assumed vast power and wealth to the extent that terms signalling 'a rich political leader' have invariably referred to men. Such terms have included *wabenzi* (members of the rich ruling class who own Mercedes-Benz vehicles) and *mkubwa* (a powerful individual). Other terms such as 'hustler' have emerged in recent years, alluding to the striving politician who was not born into generational wealth.<sup>4</sup> Although these terms are

<sup>4</sup> 'Hustler' has been popularized by William Ruto, Kenya's deputy president since 2013, who uses the term to refer to himself as a self-made politician and businessman. It is also supposed to connect him to everyday Kenyans who work hard to fend for themselves.

gender neutral, the absence of women in the political sphere means that they exclusively refer to a male political leader. While the metaphors in the public sphere referring to men are based on their conspicuous consumption and patronage, terms referring to women have feminized them. A female politician is *mheshimiwa* (honourable) and yet she is also *mama* (a Swahili word that means both woman and mother). In public, I noticed how ‘Mama’ was affixed before the name of female politicians during public events. The attribution of maternal characteristics to women in the public sphere is not unique to Kenya; indeed, the category of ‘mother’ is seen as powerful in African feminist perspectives (Nnaemeka 1997). Nevertheless, when set against the characterization of the male politician who has access to state power and wealth, the presentation of women as mothers is less likely to be associated with wealth and power. Instead, female politicians in Kenya who present themselves as mothers do so to emphasize their ability to nurture a family and community. In precolonial contexts, they may have held power behind the scenes as wives and mothers and visibly in leadership councils (Oduol 1993), but in the present day they are excluded in the context of a public imagination that codifies political power as male.

In Kwale County, female and male politicians also experienced politics in similar and divergent ways. Having hailed from the same region, Kwale politicians had comparable experiences, such as their political, religious and ethnic affiliations. The majority population in Kwale includes members of the Digo and Duruma sub-ethnic groups of the Mijikenda, as well as a sizeable Kamba population. I researched in Kwale town and its environs, where most of the residents were Digo Muslims. The Kwale politicians often emphasized their close affiliations to the wider coastal region, which has long experienced marginalization from the state (Willis and Chome 2014). They identified as people of *pwani* (the coast), distinct from the people of *bara* (the interior). When debating items of national concern in the county assembly, the MCAs regularly pointed to a need to voice their opinion as *pwani* residents.

Although both male and female politicians in Kwale had similar experiences, female politicians often had to deal with ambivalent views about their leadership. I encountered these contested views about female politicians in everyday conversations and interviews. Since independence, only one woman – Marere Mwachai – has served as an elected member of parliament (MP) in Kenya’s National Assembly, holding office from 1997 to 2002. Mwachai also happened to be the first woman to be elected as an MP from the coastal region. Nevertheless, one of the male MCAs I interviewed criticized Mwachai, insisting that the ‘first woman leader of Kwale was not good’. The male MCA alleged that Mwachai ‘went and bought vibrators for women’ and that ‘she’d go around and slap women’. According to the male MCA, Mwachai’s actions linger in the public memory, with voters judging women by Mwachai’s actions. However, although Mwachai’s record was criticized by the male MCA, her participation in politics inspired one of the female MCAs I interviewed to pursue politics.

Culture and religion were other spheres where women’s leadership was disputed. Both male and female residents often mentioned to me that the Digo had not yet embraced women’s leadership, without specifically stating why. Conversations with state and non-state officials shed light on why individuals would cite culture in this

way. Girls in Kwale were often socialized into domestic roles. One female state official noted: 'The way we bring up our children has big differences. For girls, once they leave school, they are told to go and fetch water. After they fetch water, they wash dishes. After washing dishes, they are told to cut vegetables, then help with cooking, then bathe the younger children.' Boys, meanwhile, might just be sent to the shop before being allowed to play with their friends for the rest of the evening. This difference in socialization is not unique to Kwale, but plays out in other regions of Kenya.

The most explicit reasons for and against women's leadership in Kwale were often made using religion. I interviewed a male community leader and a female government official who both stated that women could become political leaders owing to the fact that Khadijah, Prophet Muhammad's first wife, was a business leader. However, this line of argument was disputed by two *kadhis* (Muslim clerics), who insisted that Khadijah was a business leader, not a political leader. They maintained that women were not allowed to lead men in Islam. The clerics saw that giving women leadership positions over men unnecessarily exposed them to unbridled male sexuality, which would compromise their worth as well as complicate a woman's relationship with a male spouse.

Hence, both nationally and regionally, female politicians experienced the political sphere differently in the way that they were excluded rhetorically, culturally and religiously. In the next section, I describe how female politicians have been excluded in the scholarship on transactional relationships.

### Transactional relationships in politics

The scholarship on money in social life is extensive and diverse, with researchers considering how money replaces in-kind gifts in social exchanges (Bohannan 1959; Olivier de Sardan 1999), undermines existing social value systems (Kelly 1992; Shipton 1989), builds new social relations (Keister 2002; Maurer 2006) and reinforces hierarchies (Guyer 2004; Scott 1972). Researchers have noted how politicians engage in cash-based patronage (Arriola 2009; Bayart 2009; Berman 1998). Scholars have noted how, during election seasons, money is used to buy votes that may result in undermining democracy (Stokes 2007; Wilkinson 2014). However, Lisa Björkman (2014: 618) has argued that such cash exchanges go beyond buying votes to building 'enduring networks of trust, sociality, and accountability'. In some cases, the cash exchanges can fail to buy votes or build networks, as clients do not always support patrons (Lockwood 2019).

In the African context, scholars have documented widespread patron–client practices in different social and political contexts (Bellagamba 2004; Omoḡowale and Olutayo 2010; Orock 2014; Shadle 2002). Motifs such as Jean-François Bayart's (2009) 'politics of the belly' and 'big men' (Berman 1998) have been used to emphasize the ways in which political leaders channel resources to meet the needs of their clients, such as giving cash gifts and facilitating infrastructure projects. Clients, in turn, support patrons who distribute the most resources. These patron–client relationships have led to the phenomenon of electoral handouts, which serve to create and negotiate existing relationships (Kramon 2018). While these relationships have often been viewed as encouraging corruption, other scholars have reframed them under the optic of 'prebendalism', showing how redistributing state resources

based on clientelist networks becomes a legitimate form of governance (Adebanwi and Obadare 2013; Joseph 1987).

Patronage has been a key feature of politics in Kenya (Ajulu 2002). Although Kenyans hold widespread perceptions of politicians as self-serving and greedy, they still expect politicians to participate in cash exchanges. Political patronage in the country has often had ethnic dimensions, with patrons distributing resources to clients hailing from their own ethnic groups. The ethnic dimensions of politics in Kwale featured in the ways in which politicians discussed how to fairly balance opportunities such as employment among the ethnic groups in the county. This patronage reflects the dominant place of ethnicity in Kenyan politics, where political differences, historical land conflicts and disproportionate allocations of social and economic resources have fuelled ethnic conflicts and tensions (Kanyinga 2009; Lynch 2006; Mueller 2008). Politicians have exploited this 'negative ethnicity' (wa Wamwere 2003) to bolster their own claims to power. Michelle D'Arcy and Agnes Cornell (2016) argue that the introduction of Kenya's new constitution has led only to decentralizing patron-client networks. These networks in Kenya's devolved system might be seen as a form of prebendalism, as county representatives are expected to lobby for funds from the central government. However, politicians who are reported to enrich themselves are often plagued with corruption scandals, showing the limits of prebendal politics in Kenya.

Although scholars have studied patron-client relationships as a key feature of African and Kenyan political cultures, this scholarship has mostly focused on male politicians. This article extends the literature on money in politics by emphasizing the gendered dimensions of transactional relationships in political life. Such gendered dimensions have been documented in other aspects of Kenya's social life. Sanyu Mojola (2014) has recorded how young Kenyan women have higher HIV and AIDS rates because of engaging in transactional sex relationships with older men, while George Paul Meiu (2017: 33) has noted how Samburu *morans* engage in transactional relationships with foreign women that ultimately 'shape [their] subjectivities, identities, and social worlds'.<sup>5</sup> However, there has been little documentation of the gendered dimensions of transactional relationships in political life. 'Big men' rhetorically exclude women from developing patronage networks. In Kenya, older male politicians have been the progenitors of the country's 'patrimonial symbolic economy' (Blunt 2019: 4). Meanwhile, African women are rarely presented as patrons; they are depicted instead as token figures or the pawns of male politicians who are often co-opted into a paternalistic state agenda (Bauer 2008; Collier 1974; Kibwana 2001). In Kenya, female MCAs are viewed in public as the girlfriends or relatives of male MPs, although many of them self-identify as serious politicians and supporters of their political parties. The lack of money has also been feminized – the lack of finances to conduct campaigns is regularly cited as a factor preventing women from participating in elective politics.

Recent scholarship has challenged this portrayal by showing how female politicians practise patronage through in-kind and cash exchanges that help them extend their political networks (Bedi 2016; Björkman 2014; Riley 2019). Emily Riley (2019: 111)

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<sup>5</sup> *Morans*, also known as warriors, are unmarried young adult males from the Maasai and Samburu ethnic groups.

has observed how Senegalese female politicians engage in patron–client relationships through *terànga*, a form of Senegalese hospitality entailing ‘gendered performances of femininity, generosity and hospitality’. In her ethnography of female members of a regional party in India, Tarini Bedi (2016: xvii) uses ‘matronage’ to refer to the ways in which female politicians employ ‘political, symbolic and material resources’ in constructing their political authority. In line with this literature, I also show how female politicians in Kenya construct political authority through engaging in patronage relationships to boost their political networks. However, this article argues that, beyond furthering their political mileage, these patronage relationships ultimately highlight the limits of using gender quotas in Kenya.

In the following sections, I delve deeper into the ways in which female politicians engaged in transactional relationships in Kwale County. Like Bedi (2016), I primarily use ‘matronage’ in lieu of patronage to describe women’s transactional relationships; however, the focus of my use is to emphasize the place of women as the primary political actors in these transactional relationships. Female politicians take on a role that is typically viewed as male and use it to advance their political leadership. Through their material giving, they present themselves to the public as ‘matrons’ and promote the image of women as suitable leaders.

### **Transactional relationships in Kwale**

Drawing on three ethnographic vignettes, I illustrate how women engaged in cash-based matronage. The first example points out the similarities between men’s and women’s transactional relationships in Kwale. It also draws on interviews with female MCAs to highlight their experiences on the campaign trail and among Kwale residents. The second example uses a public fundraising event to emphasize how female politicians use cash-based matronage to advance their political goals by pointing residents to the politicians for whom they should vote. While the example focuses on national-level politicians, it shows the kind of political landscape that female MCAs were part of. The last vignette uses the example of NGOs failing to consider the money expectations levied on women to highlight the invisibility of women’s matronage.

### **Patronage and matronage in Kwale**

Both male and female politicians in Kwale County engaged in transactional relationships with the public. They obtained money from sources such as salaries, allowances, per diems, businesses and investments. Although I did not witness it, I also heard about MCAs and other politicians receiving kickbacks from helping an individual secure a lucrative appointment or tender. Elected politicians could also lobby for funds to be allocated to projects within their wards, and therefore receive credit for the money utilized. Compared with national politicians, the MCAs did not have ostentatious displays of wealth, perhaps owing to their lower levels of compensation. The governor and the deputy governor were two of only a few county officials who rode in large, expensive cars. Despite the absence of overt showiness, the MCAs were still expected to participate in transactional relationships.



Female MCAs highlighted two main ways in which they engaged in cash-based patronage: giving money publicly during campaigns and fundraisers and privately to constituents in need. Although none of the female MCAs in Kwale were elected members, several had vied for nomination as party candidates in the 2017 elections. A female MCA recounted to me how campaigning required significant financial resources:

Someone will come to you and say, 'Mama, I will support you wherever you want to campaign but I want money.' But if you go with them to a campaign and in the midst of it, they see that you are not giving a lot of money, they will abandon you and go to someone else who has money. Their issue is money. Kenyans don't care about good leadership. They are after money when it reaches time for campaign.

For female MCAs who vie for elective office, the expectation of cash-based patronage is placed on them long before they enter the county assembly. Like male politicians, they are also expected to participate in a political culture of electoral handouts. Acting as patrons on the campaign trail becomes the yardstick against which their suitability for leadership is measured. The MCA's quip that 'Kenyans don't care about good leadership' illustrates the expectations that citizens have nationwide. It is not just in Kwale that politicians are expected to be patrons; the national political culture inhibits their ability to participate in politics without money.

In addition to campaigns, Kwale politicians gave out money during fundraisers. A fundraiser in Kenya is also known as a *harambee*, which means 'let us pull together'. The word was coined by Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta, who used *harambee* as a 'rallying call' for citizens to work collectively in developing the nation (Abwunza 1990: 184). The rallying call eventually morphed into the name of fundraisers that communities hold to fund a range of projects, such as building schools, cattle dips and churches (Abwunza 1990; Barkan and Chege 1989). *Harambees* are thus important avenues for politicians to showcase their patronage by distributing money to communities and by engaging in targeted political rhetoric (Haugerud 1995). Fundraising events occurred regularly in Kwale. I attended *harambees* that involved raising money for medical bills, church construction, VSLAs, and so on. Although there have been reports of Kenyan politicians giving out false cheques during the events, I did not witness this occurring during my fieldwork as both male and female politicians gave out cash.

Being in political office also required the politicians to engage in private acts of patronage. Like their male counterparts, female MCAs were expected to help constituents in need. This need often took the form of hospital expenses, school fees, employment and weddings. One female MCA described how an individual would approach her for assistance:

Someone will come to me and maybe it's even a lie, and tell you, 'My child has been sent away from school.' And when you tell them I am a nominated MCA and ask them [to] go to the bursary office and get a form to fill, they tell you, 'I cannot wait. I want the school fees now because the child has been sent from school.'

Female MCAs were thus subsumed into a culture of cash-based matronage. During campaigns, individuals expected money from them. While holding office, they faced increasing demands to practise matronage in order to solidify their political fortunes and secure future votes from the electorate. Although both male and female MCAs faced these demands for money, female MCAs were in a more precarious position than male MCAs. Nominated female MCAs do not have the same access to resources as elected officials; because they do not have a ward that they represent, they cannot demand resources from the county government. They function primarily as representatives of their political parties in the county assembly. Nevertheless, as the quote above shows, their positions as nominated MCAs do not shield them from constituents who ask for money. They are often forced to dip into their own resources to satisfy the demands of matronage and to present themselves as suitable future leaders.

The inability to meet these demands had consequences for both male and female politicians. When attempting to gain office, female MCAs felt that the lack of money prevented them from obtaining votes. The inability to plough back money into their wards after elections led residents to perceive the politicians as being selfish. A discussion with a VSLA group emphasized what is at stake for politicians who do not distribute funds. The VSLA members insisted to me that they would switch their votes to the neighbouring county of Mombasa, where, they felt, politicians would be more open to patronage.

In Kwale County, women's matronage was thus similar to men's patronage, albeit advanced by a female actor with the goal of increasing women's political visibility. In the next section, I describe the wider landscape of women's matronage by showing how female politicians deployed it during a large fundraising ceremony. During the event, the female politicians distributed large sums of money to VSLA groups while calling on the attendees to support women's leadership. By practising matronage, the female politicians used an approach that is often delineated as male to establish the right of women to lead.

### ***Using matronage for political goals***

Thousands of women filled the showground in Ukunda, the largest town in Kwale County. They had shown up for a political rally organized by *Inua Mama*, a women's political movement whose name translates as 'Lift Women'. The women's movement consisted of female politicians, many of whom were MPs in Kenya's National Assembly.<sup>6</sup> The female politicians presented their movement as a group of female leaders committed to encouraging development projects that improve women's lives. Dressed in complementary maroon and gold outfits, the women traversed the country and held public rallies in different counties. The female politicians were hosted in each county by a local female political leader.

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<sup>6</sup> Kenya's government is divided into three arms: the executive, parliament and the judiciary. Parliament is divided into a lower house (the National Assembly) and an upper house (the Senate). Members of the National Assembly are known as members of parliament (MPs), whereas members of the Senate are known as senators.

I attended the *Inua Mama* event in Kwale after hearing about it from some female MCAs discussing whether they would attend it or not. The event was a public rally hosted by the deputy governor of Kwale, a woman known as Fatuma Achani. Achani had declared her intention to run for governor in 2022, a fact that was well known throughout the county. The event, as I later learned, was organized through her office and focused on positioning her as a key contender for the governorship.

The thousands of women invited to the event were members of VSLAs. There were many men in attendance as well, although the vast majority of attendees I saw were women. Some were dressed in colourful *deras* (long flowing dresses) and matching headscarves. Others were wrapped in matching *lesos* and wore T-shirts or polo shirts branded with the names of their VSLAs. They were seated under large white tents that had been set up around a stage. Others were seated on the ground in front of the stage. Many other women and men stood, while some sat on the showground seating. The female politicians from the National Assembly were seated on the stage. Most of them were dressed in shades of gold and maroon and wrapped in a matching *kitenge* material that accentuated their outfits.

The event did not start until later in the afternoon, when all the politicians in attendance had arrived. The MC was Aisha Jumwa, an MP from the nearby county of Kilifi. About thirty female politicians from other counties were there. Each female politician was given a couple of minutes to speak. The women would introduce themselves and the counties they represented, before talking about how they had come to the county to support Achani. A female politician would call out '*Inua Mama!*', and the audience would respond, '*Jenga Taifa!*' ('Build the nation'). Other politicians would say, '*Wamama hoyee!*' ('Women hoyee!'), an exclamation to encourage the women to cheer in reply '*Wamama hoyee!*' This call and response was also enacted during the speeches. It helped establish rapport between the female politicians and the audience as well as rally the women to affirm the politicians' political discourse.

Indeed, although the *Inua Mama* event was advertised on social media as an event to support women's economic empowerment through their participation in VSLAs, the speeches showed that the rally was less about the women who attended the event and their VSLAs and more about delivering specific political messages. Enacting women's matronage on a public stage was accompanied by the use of political discourses that served to elevate women's political leadership in two main ways. First, several of the female politicians called on the crowd to vote for the deputy governor, Fatuma Achani, in the 2022 elections. Below are two excerpts from the speeches of female parliamentarians from different parts of the country, with the responses from the crowd in parentheses:

There is Mama Achani here who is the deputy governor and she will be governor in 2022. I am asking you to stand up and support women. They are not committing any crime by vying to be governors. It's their constitutional right. Do we understand each other or not? (We understand each other!) Are we with women or not? (We are!) Are we with Mama Achani or not? (We are!)<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Female MP from Narok County, south-western Kenya.

Fellow women, today is our day that your sister Fatuma has called you to us. We congratulate her for her efforts, and she has told us many things that her government and our governor Mvurya have done for women. I know that she is a hardworking person. We have said only one seat is for the woman representative, but women can vie for other seats. So Fatuma, when Mvurya leaves what will she do? Or should I tell you. Okay then, if you have forgotten, I will tell you. When Mvurya leaves, Fatuma will go in.<sup>8</sup>

In the examples above, the politicians make it clear that they want their host, Achani, to ascend to the gubernatorial seat in the next elections after the term of the current governor, Salim Mvurya, ends. They use the public stage to call on the women of Kwale to support Achani's political ambitions. From the outset, women's matronage is connected to women's leadership. Raising money for the women's groups in attendance is tied to raising the platform for Achani.

Second, the female MPs called on women to vote women into all the elective offices available: MCAs, MPs, senators and governors. Below is an excerpt from a speech given by Aisha Jumwa, the MP from Kilifi County, that highlights this call:

For many days you have voted for men. Your governor is serving you well, but we have men we have been voting for since 1963 and women are really suffering. Are we not suffering? (Yes!) Now our time is here, there is no seat we will not take. We will take the MCA seat, MP, the entire senate, governor, and the deputy president. The only seat we will leave in 2022 is the one for the president, because we know we said the president will lead for ten years, and the deputy president for ten years. But when the deputy president is done, we are done giving seats to men, shall we agree to that? (Yes!) I am saying in 2032, men and women prepare yourselves to see the presidential seat being given to women, is that okay?

Jumwa's call to elect women to all political offices available echoed the sentiments of other female politicians who spoke in support of women's leadership. Hailing from different ethnic and religious backgrounds, the female politicians urged support for women's leadership regardless of ethnicity. They de-emphasized ethnicity, often portrayed as a mainstay of Kenyan politics, in lieu of a narrative that sees women as individuals who understand other women's plight and, by extension, society's plight. The de-emphasis of ethnicity in this context underscores how women strategically advance their political goals.<sup>9</sup> The only seat for which the female MPs endorsed men was the presidency. Several MPs urged the women to vote for the current deputy president – William Ruto – to become president in 2022.<sup>10</sup> Still, in light of her

<sup>8</sup> Female MP from Murang'a County, central Kenya.

<sup>9</sup> This is not to suggest that ethnicity is unimportant for female politicians. Kabira (2012: 324) notes that ethnicity still remains a 'first identity' for many women, even as they align on 'women-specific issues'.

<sup>10</sup> The *Inua Mama* group was characterized as a group supportive of the deputy president. They were often pitted against Embrace, a contemporaneous women's political movement whose members were also female politicians. They donned pink and white garb and supported the president's constitutional reform process known as the Building Bridges Initiative (BBI).

overwhelming call to vote for women, this appeal to vote for Ruto appeared to be strategic, allowing Jumwa to present the validity of women's leadership by aligning it with a prominent male politician.

The climax of the *Inua Mama* event was the presentation of funds to the VSLAs in attendance. One by one, Jumwa invited the female politicians back on stage to give their contributions, before announcing loudly to the crowd what each woman had contributed. Finally, she announced that Achani had contributed 1 million Kenyan shillings (Ksh), bringing the total contribution to about Ksh 3 million. Throughout the event, Achani barely spoke, allowing the visiting politicians to endorse her candidacy. I saw only two female MCAs from the Kwale County Assembly in attendance, although at least three others had mentioned to me that they might attend the function. The female MCAs were not given an opportunity to address the crowd. Instead, the large-scale performance of women's matronage became a platform challenging gendered assumptions that women should not lead and endorsing women's leadership across ethnic and religious groups. The event wrapped up soon after the presentation of funds, with the politicians departing and the crowd slowly dispersing out of the showground.

A couple of weeks later, I spoke with two female MCAs about the event. For them, it had been purely a political event masquerading as a development forum. One of the female MCAs who had not gone to the event said, 'Some people might blame us and ask why we didn't go, but it was more political, a party event.' Another female MCA who had attended felt that it should have been presented as a political rally, not a platform for development: 'It's useless because even with the Ksh 3 million raised, there are so many groups in Kwale that some groups will end up getting Ksh 200 or Ksh 50, which is of no use. They should have done something substantial like training the women on table banking or looking to see if their investments are working.' She did not believe anything was achieved politically, saying that many of the women there did not leave with a resolve to vote for Achani. The female MCAs' response shows how the effectiveness of matronage was also debated among politicians. While matronage was expected of politicians, it did not necessarily meet the goal of securing one's political future.

Although it seemed to have failed to achieve anything politically, the event highlighted the landscape of public matronage that female MCAs are expected to navigate. As one of the most prominent female politicians in Kwale County, Achani's public giving sets the tone for other women. Amina's gift of money that I described at the beginning of this article mirrors Achani's giving. While Amina's 'big gift' was distributing money to one VSLA, Achani's 'big gift' entailed partnering with other female politicians to give money to hundreds of VSLAs. For both women, distributing money gave impetus to their political ambitions. The recipients of the funds were encouraged to see women as future leaders. In the political rally, female politicians reminded the women in the audience of women's political exclusion, which has resulted in socio-economic suffering, before proffering their leadership as the solution to the women's plight. Matronage thus bolsters women's political networks and helps propel discourses supporting women's leadership.

So far, I have described how female politicians engage in transactional relationships in similar ways to male politicians. They are expected to give money publicly during campaigns and *harambees*, and privately to constituents in need. These

transactional relationships are deemed necessary to secure their individual political futures. Using the example of the *Inua Mama* event, I have further shown how women use matronage to bolster political futures by deploying it alongside narratives that encourage women's leadership. In the following section, I describe how women's matronage is not always acknowledged. I show the invisibility of women's matronage through the example of NGOs not giving female politicians money for use in political campaigns.

### ***The invisibility of women's matronage***

Both local and international NGOs in Kenya have played an important role in supporting women socio-economically and politically. Women, too, have contributed to the proliferation of NGOs in the country. As early as 1951, women's groups were organized into Maendeleo Ya Wanawake Organization (MYWO), which rose to become a major women's organization (Chitere 1988). While not formal NGOs, the women's groups highlight the role of women in organizing for social welfare, the focus of many of Kenya's NGOs. The number of formally structured NGOs rose rapidly following the end of President Moi's rule in 2002, as Moi had cracked down on civic organizations during his tenure (Hershey 2013). Many of the NGOs that work on women's political representation are headquartered in Nairobi. Local NGOs are the implementing partners of international NGOs and external funders such as UN Women, receiving funds that are earmarked specifically for programmatic purposes. NGOs supported the initial adoption of the gender quota in Kenya's constitution and have advocated for its full implementation in parliament. Their main programming involves hosting capacity-building workshops and mentoring programmes for aspiring female politicians and current female legislators.

However, female MCAs argued that NGOs supporting women's political representation do not recognize the demands of matronage placed on women. The MCAs expressed these sentiments during a training workshop that I attended. The five-day workshop convened female MCAs and county assembly staff from several counties, with the aim of helping female MCAs learn how to engage with the youth, discuss the challenges that they face, and exchange ideas about the contributions they can make to encourage leadership, empowerment and reproductive health. During one of the sessions on the challenges that female MCAs face, one nominated female MCA stood up and mentioned how she no longer wanted NGOs to organize workshops for them. Instead, she wanted NGOs to give money to female politicians for use during campaigns:

Donors, don't call us for a meeting three months before an election, and give us Ksh 1,000 and pay Ksh 10,000 for a hotel room. Give us that money for us to do real politics. Donors, the time for Ksh 1,000 is over. Link us to people who can give us money and fund our elections. There's no service without resources in the hands of women . . . Conferences will not help in 2022 when they're on the ground and they don't have money, or they're losing ground because they don't have money. They need serious resources.

The female MCA criticized NGOs' propensity to host aspiring female politicians on capacity-building workshops. Instead of programmes, she proposed unconditional cash transfers for women. While such transfers have been used to support poor households in Kenya (Haushofer and Shapiro 2016), the money NGOs receive for women's political participation is geared only towards programmes. Consequently, the NGOs do not give women what they really need – money for elections. Scholars have documented this tendency of NGOs to promote specific agendas through the dissemination of ideas such as 'best practice' (Elyachar 2006) or 'good governance' (Abrahamsen 2000). In this case, the NGOs support a specific stance: equipping female politicians with soft skills, rather than giving them financial resources for campaigns. The NGOs elevate the workshop over the campaign trail, a practice that overlooks the needs of female politicians.

Indeed, NGOs do not see distributing money as an act that enables women to elevate their political significance. Two NGO officers complained to me in interviews that they have to give money to female politicians for them to attend their meetings. Like the public, NGOs expect female politicians to be self-sacrificing, characterizing them as money hungry if they ask for money before attending a meeting. Lynsey Farrell has documented this tendency for NGOs to be suspicious about claims for money. Researching in Kibera, an urban informal settlement in Kenya, Farrell (2015: 143) noted that, while NGOs see the expectation to receive monetary reimbursements as 'morally suspect', their participants view reimbursements as important sources of income. Similarly, the excerpt above highlights how NGOs do not relate to money in the same way as female politicians. Although they might acknowledge the challenges that women face in securing campaign financing, they do not have workplans that include giving campaign money to women. Consequently, both internal and external NGOs fail to recognize how money in the Kenyan political sphere attains different 'social roles and meanings' (Maurer 2006: 15). They fail to see how matronage functions as a medium that enables women to advance their political careers and to strengthen their claims about women's leadership.

Having discussed how female politicians engage in matronage and how NGOs fail to recognize their use of the practice, I now turn to a discussion of what matronage reveals about the limits of Kenya's gender quota.

### **The limits of gender quotas**

Kenya's gender quota has led to greater representation of women in political office. Although the gender quota has not been evenly applied in all elective and appointive institutions, the provision has led to greater representation in county assemblies. In Kwale, where no woman has been elected onto the county assembly in the past two election cycles, the two-thirds gender principle provides a means for women to become legislators. However, as this article has argued, female politicians still have to engage in cash-based matronage in order to secure their futures as leaders. On its own, the law is not enough to reinforce the need for women's leadership.

The unintended consequences of gender quotas have been documented in different contexts. Although over forty African countries use some form of gender quotas (International IDEA 2022), the quotas can fail to lead to legislation that supports women's causes (Goetz and Hassim 2003). In East African countries, scholars have

noted that gender quotas served the interests of the ruling regime in Uganda (Tamale 1999), failed to challenge patriarchal cultures in Tanzania (Meena 2004), and resulted in less democratic openness and increased social conflict in Rwanda (Burnet 2011).

In the case of Kwale, although nominated female MCAs have benefited from the gender quota and have attained political office, the quota does not directly help them cultivate a political future. The women also practise matronage to boost their visibility and encourage support for women's leadership. Therefore, just as gender quotas have been utilized to bolster women's political leadership, matronage is also enacted in support of women's political rule. However, as the NGO example shows, the ways in which female politicians exercise matronage can easily be rendered invisible.

This gendered dimension of political giving ultimately reveals the limits of gender quotas in Kenya, where they were part of a constitution designed to remake Kenya and its 'winner-takes-all' political culture (Mueller 2008). However, Cheeseman *et al.* (2019) argue that Kenya's constitution has not resulted in a complete overhaul of politics. Basing their argument on how Kenya's disputed 2017 elections were finally resolved by informal discussions between the contenders, Uhuru Kenyatta and Raila Odinga, they write:

Kenya's ability to come back from the brink of another electoral crisis perhaps had less to do with the formal constitutional changes introduced in 2010, and more with an established set of informal institutions through which elites have managed, and to an extent shared, power since independence. (Cheeseman *et al.* 2019: 223)

Likewise, the experiences of female MCAs and money show that the 'formal institution' of gender quotas cannot always do the work of addressing women's political exclusion. Instead, the legislation inadvertently provides pathways for more women to be inculcated into a culture of patronage. 'You can't do politics without money,' a female MCA told me when I asked her about the challenges that she faced when trying to run for elective office. She further emphasized the difficulties in accessing financial resources, remarking that female politicians in Kwale are the only women with substantial resources. The gender quota enabled Kwale women to access political leadership, but it also ushered them deeper into transactional relationships. As this article has shown, in everyday political life, the law is not always enough to attain its own vision of women's political leadership. Female politicians also amass and redistribute financial resources in order to secure political futures for women.

## Conclusion

Presenting examples from female politicians across different cadres in Kenya – MCAs, a deputy governor and female MPs – this article has shown how female politicians in Kenya engage in transactional relationships with the public. Female politicians deploy a practice that is often characterized as androcentric in order to boost their clientelist networks and urge the public to vote for women. As they enter into political office, nominated female MCAs in Kwale are drawn into this political landscape that expects them to practise matronage in order to build their political careers. Women's



matronage thus mimics gender quotas; like gender quotas, matronage practices become tools for buttressing efforts to increase women's political representation.

Ultimately, this article has argued that matronage reveals the limits of gender quotas in Kenya and beyond. Gender quotas have been adopted in more than 100 countries, with policymakers increasingly recommending quotas to address the underrepresentation of women in political office (Dahlerup 2005). Despite their popularity, this article has demonstrated that gender quotas do not automatically transform the existing gender dynamics within democracies. Even though female politicians in appointive positions often lack access to sufficient funds, they are still expected to engage in informal practices such as matronage in order to build their political futures.

This article thus shows how transactional relationships – an arguably 'non-democratic' practice – may also be used in the service of democratic ideologies. Although non-democratic structures such as traditional authorities have been shown to compete against democratic ideals (Mamdani 1996), they have also been proven to support democratic tenets (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997). Hence, analysing the impact of affirmative action laws in liberal democracies must also include investigating other means that political actors utilize to attain gender equality in politics within their communities.

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