

# Exploring Women's Perceptions of Gender Rights Advocacy in Leadership and Public Decision-Making Processes: Evidence from Three Districts in Masvingo Province

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## ABSTRACT

This study explored how rural women perceive their ability to advocate for gender rights and assume leadership roles in public decision-making. The research was conducted in three districts namely, Bikita, Chivi, and Zaka in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe. The research used the qualitative method. Data was collected through focus group discussions and purposive sampling was used. A total of 44 women participated and they comprised of 11 from Bikita, 23 from Chivi and 10 from Zaka. The findings revealed a hierarchy of confidence, highest in local tangible activities and lowest in national policy participation. Women's self-efficacy was strengthened by peer support and prior successes but limited by fears of stigma, opposition from traditional leaders and structural barriers. The study confirms the confidence gradient across governance levels and shows that social risks, rather than lack of knowledge, restrict women's agency. The study recommended capacity-building programs, mentorship, visible pathways and fostering strategic allyship to transform social and institutional norms. The research also highlighted the need for psychological and structural support to enhance participation and advance women's leadership in rural contexts.

**Keywords:** Advocacy, Leadership, Perceptions, Self-efficacy, Women's rights

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The discussion of women's roles in leadership and decision-making in the public sphere has gained significant momentum over the past few decades (Cornwall & Goetz, 2005; Kabeer, 2012). Feminist movements, women's rights activists, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have strongly advocated for the inclusion of women in leadership and governance systems (UN Women, 2020). They argue that women's participation is essential to the achievement of gender equality and the promotion of human rights (Rao & Kelleher, 2005). These organisations have been very instrumental in highlighting the systemic forms of exclusion of women in decision-making arenas, as well as, in advocating agenda and practices that would increase the voice, agency and influence of women in the public life (Eyben, 2010; Gaventa, 2006). These groups have also played a significant role in promoting the women rights and inclusive governance agenda at the local, national and global levels through continuous advocacy, awareness and through interaction with state and non-state actors (United Nations, 2015).

Women are estimated to make up about half of the global population and they centralise to the social, economic and political life in societies (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UN DESA] 2023; World Bank, 2023). Consequently, the issue of women involvement in leadership and in making decisions in the society is gradually being understood as gender equality issue but also as essential human rights issue and a requirement of inclusive and democratic governance (Kabeer, 2012; UN Women, 2020). The right to be fully and equally engaged in the life of the state and politics are explicitly laid down in the international human rights frameworks, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, (2015) under the

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and the 2030 Agenda of Sustainable Development (United Nations, 1979, 2015).

Nevertheless, these normative commitments are not in line with the global evidence as in most cases, there is always a disconnect between women in society in numbers and their participation in any leadership and decision-making processes (Cornwall & Goetz, 2005; Kabeer, 2012; UN Women, 2020). In a broader context, both developed and developing countries, such as the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States, China, Thailand (Bangkok), India, and Iran, the literature demonstrates that women still experience structural, cultural, and institutional obstacles that restrict their access to leadership and diminish their impact on the process of governance (Franceschet et al., 2019; Alexander et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2021). These impediments comprise the patriarchal norms, disproportionate entry into political networks, under-appreciation of leadership abilities among women, as well as unbalanced access to human rights advocacy networks.

The same trends can be observed in Africa, where women tend to be the support of the community but are under-represented in any official structure of leadership and decision-making (Tripp et al., 2009; Waylen et al., 2013; UN Women, 2023). Women in certain countries like Nigeria, South Africa, Malawi and Zimbabwe are very important in agriculture, community building and informal economies especially in rural and peri-urban setups. Yet, they are still underrepresented in the decision-making institutions of the local and national levels and their voices are often overlooked in the creation and execution of policies (Goetz and Hassim, 2003; Tamale, 2020; World Bank, 2023). According to scholars, this exclusion remains in place even though women tend to be the majority of the rural population, which shows a lack of association between the demographic importance of women and the influence they have on politics (FAO, 2011; Kabeer, 2012; UN Women, 2020).

This divide is particularly quite high in rural and peri-urban settings in Zimbabwe, where the human rights advocacy systems are weak and where there are few spaces of civic activities. Women in such environments are faced with overlapping problems of poverty, gendered expectations, poor access to education and low access to leadership and advocacy (Chirawu et al., 2019; Dube & Charamba, 2021). Despite the fact that women constitute a significant percentage of the rural population and play an important role in the household and community survival, they are not involved in leadership and decision-making processes on the local level (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency [ZIMSTAT], 2022; UN Women, 2023). Women also have an inadequate representation in policy and research regarding their views on human rights advocacy and governance.

This research paper has reduced the scope of the study to Bikita, Chivi, and Zaka districts in Masvingo Province which is mainly rural and peri-urban population where women have not been given a chance to take part in leadership and community decision-making. Cultural pressures, scanty institutional facilitation, and access to human rights advocacy systems remain a limiting factor to women in these districts, where aspects of engaging relevantly in the governance processes are restricted (Miti et al., 2025). This research examined how women view human rights advocacy in such contexts.

## **Purpose Statement**

Although the global and national governments have guaranteed equality between men and women in leadership, as well as in the realm of making decisions, women are significantly underrepresented in all decisions that are made globally (United Nations, 1979; Goetz & Hassim, 2003; UN Women, 2020). The situation remains similar in Zimbabwe where women have less political and civic participation in the country at local levels especially the rural and peri-urban settings. Although the literature has widely considered structural and institutional factors behind women leadership, little has been done to focus on the perceived agency of women and their self-efficacy to further promote human rights, mobilisation and leadership positions (Bandura, 1997; Cornwall & Goetz, 2005; Kabeer, 2012). The given study helps fill this gap by considering the self-perceived advocacy and leadership potential of women in Bikita, Chivi and Zaka districts, where the low perceived agency is one of the essential limitations to the further involvement in the sphere of making political decisions (Franceschet et al., 2019).

## **Primary Objective**

The main objective of this paper was to contribute to a deeper, context-specific understanding of the barriers and opportunities shaping women's leadership and participation in public decision-making in rural Zimbabwe.

## Objectives

1. To determine perceived self-efficacy of women in the application of knowledge of gender rights and advocacy to changes in policy to be gender inclusive.
2. To assess the confidence of women to mobilise, defend and make decisions to increase the role of women in leadership and decision making.
3. To measure the level of confidence of women in taking up of certain positions in leadership in the local, community and national governance

## Significance of the Study

This study has identified obstacles to the leadership of women in Zimbabwe and has based these on the unmet self-confidence and advocacy gaps. The results will inform the interventions that would improve the self-efficacy of the women and translate the formal opportunities into meaningful participation and the actual improvement in the sphere of governance and community development.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Self-Efficacy in rights advocacy and policy change

The key psychological mediator between the rights knowledge and their practical use is self-efficacy, which is the belief in one's ability to do something to obtain the desired outcome (Bandura, 1997; Mauchi et al., 2020). In gender and leadership, the perceived self-efficacy is a fundamental element of the confidence of the woman to advocate, influence decision making, and take up the public roles, particularly in the context of structural barriers (Cornwall & Goetz, 2005; Kabeer, 2012). The recent research confirms that self-efficacy improves female autonomy and involvement in rural decision-making and makes it a priority of intervention to reduce the discrepancy between legal rights and exercised agency (Salinger et al., 2024; Escobar, 2024).

This ideology is not a creation by itself but is formed in a systematic manner by a format of structural and socio-economic dictators. Even senior jobs can be undermined by organisational sexism (Mauchi et al., 2020), and advocacy self-efficacy cannot develop due to social marginalisation and low networks (Eshikhena et al., 2025). Economic empowerment is one of the main enablers, as increased income is associated with increased leadership confidence (Salazar and Moline, 2023), and economic precarity kills the aspirations (Musengezi & Mwenje, 2025). This highlights the fact that these contextual determinants should be considered as interventions in order to bring about real self-efficacy. More importantly, self-efficacy is not homogenous but has an apparent gradient among the levels of governance. Women have confidence in concrete, physically based activities (Stephenson et al., 2024; Rakgwata & Talifhani, 2025). This trend is observed in the regional data about the participation of women being still localised (SADC, 2022). The shift to national advocacy creates a sense of perceived complexity, political animosity and inaccessibility of structures that cripples confidence to a serious extent (Chikwanha & Moyo, 2024; Wang, 2025). This gradient underscores the primary disconnection of perceived political agency by women.

Situated, collective interventions are the only means to build efficacy since gender-transformative change depends on coalition-building to build shared confidence (Munive et al., 2023; OECD, 2025). Community based organisations are ones that mediate between agendas and local reality (Gebrihet et al., 2024; Rahmanian et al., 2025). One of the major loopholes is the inability to quantify situated confidence, determining how knowledge can be applied to real-life leadership confidence (Stephenson et al., 2024). This paper fills this gap by exploring the confidence of women in rural Zimbabwe, and looks at the lived advocacy efficacy gradient.

### Confidence in collaborative mobilisation and defence

Although leadership programmes are also designed to build capacity (Coluccio et al., 2024; Salinger et al., 2024), the long-term effect of such programmes on self-efficacy is usually overrated in the presence of structural barriers (Herbst, 2020). The level of confidence achieved can be merely symbolic and not contextual (Salinger et al., 2024), and thus evaluating the success of support in developing long-term and cooperative

confidence in rural environment is crucial. Rahmania et al. (2025) place collective action on its foundations. Transformative change in gender is a coalition-building effort inherently that develops agency based on common purpose (Munive et al., 2023). Peer networks and women caucuses strengthen political courage in Africa (Gebrihet et al., 2024; Chikwanha and Moyo, 2024), and supportive groups have the power to make women defiant of conventional norms (OECD, 2025; Rahmania et al., 2025). Nevertheless, group systems are capable of reproducing internal hierarchies, concealing personal differences in confidence (Cornwall & Edwards, 2021; Herbst, 2020). Hence, the design and inclusivity of such spaces are essential towards their effectiveness.

### **Understanding confidence in specific public leadership roles**

Studies always find that there is a scale of confidence based on the levels of governance, with women giving the highest level of assurance in the local, tangible levels and the lowest confidence in national, political levels (Mauchi et al., 2020; SADC, 2022). This is a perceptual gradient. Local leadership is perceived as a continuation of normative care with observable results, which contributes to comfort (Rakgwata & Talifhani, 2025), whereas national offices are perceived as abstract, hostile and exclusive (Wang, 2025). It has been proven that the proportions of females in local councils are larger than in national parliaments (SADC, 2022). Women can be operationally great in their fields of work but afraid of strategies because of the internalised boundaries (Mauchi et al., 2020; Wang, 2025). This gradient is increased by socio-economic precarity in Zimbabwe (Musengezi & Mwenje, 2025).

Intersectional structural barriers bring about this stratification. Unfriendly working environments, unbalanced family responsibilities, and the lack of mentors destroy self-confidence everywhere (OECD, 2025). In Nigeria, access to capacity-building is limited, and this reduces the development of skills (Eshikhena et al., 2025). In Zambia, male networks are opaque and perceived to be unattainable (Miti et al., 2025) and the political systems in Africa are volatile to discourage high office (Chikwanha & Moyo, 2024). These barriers are internalised by qualified women in Zimbabwe forming a capability-confidence paradox (Shava et al., 2023). These constraints are complicated by rural isolation.

Therefore, the building of confidence involves the cultivation of environments on purpose. Policies of quotas and representation can help get more visible and indicate potential (UN Women, 2021; UNDP, 2022), but on their own may become tokenism unless institutional reform is widespread (Stephenson et al., 2024). Structural facilitators should be used to augment the practical exposure: mentorship, networking, and facilitated experiences that can bridge the policy and lived agency (Salazar, and Moline, 2023), bridging the gap between policy and lived agency.

The first barrier is the lack of measures in leadership programmes that usually presuppose that training develops confidence and does not focus on this area-specific belief (Wong et al., 2012; Bergman et al., 2021). Another essential difference is present between abstract skills and situated confidence in real world leadership (Stephenson et al., 2024). Plans do not have diagnostics on confidence gaps (Borger et al., 2025) and interventions cannot work without data on perceived readiness (Gebrihet et al., 2024). This is discussed in this research by estimating confidence in differentiation among the different levels of leadership.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employed the qualitative research method and exploratory research design was used. The exploratory research design was the appropriate design to analyse lived experiences of women (Elliott et al., 2023). Qualitative methods allow the researcher to work with the words and meanings of the participants themselves that is why they are suitable in the studies that aim at perceptions and social realities as experienced by people in certain situations (Tisdell and Merriam, 2025).

The research was based at the three districts of Masvingo Province; namely Bikita, Chivi and Zaka which are mainly rural and peri urban areas. 81 adult females were purposively selected. Purposive sampling method was utilised to pick up participants who were most likely to present information that would be useful in achieving the research objectives. The purposive sampling approach is well known in qualitative studies as a technique of

locating people with specific knowledge or experience of the phenomenon under investigation (Campbell et al., 2020). Local community organisations helped in finding more possible participants such as women who had participated in different types of civic engagement so that diversity of opinion could be provided.

This paper also used semi structured focus group discussion (FGD) guide that included open ended questions to collect in-depth information on the level of confidence that women had in using rights knowledge, mobilisation and leadership roles. The semi structured FGDs are useful in qualitative research since participants have the freedom to express various opinions and engage with each other, where some things are agreed upon, some are divergent and some are collective in their meaning making (Cohen et al., 2018; Nyumba et al., 2022). A number of FGDs were done with groups of 6-8 people in neutral community and audio recorded with consent, moderated to keep it on track without interrupting the natural conversation. In Bikita, two focus groups of 6 and 5 women and Chivi, three focus groups of 8 women each were used, with the advantage of further discussing the matters at hand. The 10 women in Zaka were involved in two groups of 5 women groups.

To analyse, a reflexive thematic analysis method was applied, which facilitated the systematic transcription of data, repeated reading, coding and development of themes in order to have a meaningful interpretation of patterns in data (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Byrne, 2022).

The study had its ethical considerations that were strictly observed in line with the general principles of research that involves human subjects (Iphofen, 2020). The informed consent was used and the participants were informed that participation was voluntary, anonymous, and could be withdrawn without any harm, which implies the satisfaction of the main ethical principles in qualitative research (informed consent; protection of confidentiality and anonymity) and guaranteed the respect to their autonomy and well-being (Nyumba et al., 2022). The security of data and identity of the participants and the information was preserved using pseudonyms and the secure storage of information, which ensured confidentiality. The facilitators also created a respectful and accommodating atmosphere that admitted the power dynamics in focus groups so that every member was free to make contributions to the discussion of sensitive issues as per ethical guidelines of managing group dynamics in qualitative research (Hennink et al., 2011).

## RESULTS

### Core discussion on confidence and capability

#### Confidence in rights knowledge and action

The results depict an ironic contradiction between the practical ability of women to utilise rights demonstrated and a narrow confidence in the situation. Although the vast majority of the participants had actionable knowledge, especially when it came to equality and inheritance, the perceived social risk interceded a great deal upon their readiness to act. A Chivi participant (FGDC22) exemplified this capability by successfully promoting for widow's land rights, stating she "*explained the legal provisions... and advocated on her behalf.*" Her sources of confidence were past success validation, training in the NGO, and peer support.

The fear of social stigma, the backlash of local leaders and challenging the traditional systems were also mentioned by the same participant as the major inhibitors.

#### Supporting and promoting women's rights

The results show that the source of support of leadership rights among women is strategically directed through the safeguarded peer networks to deal with social risk. Advocacy was mostly relational and indirect with emphasis on strengthening other women in trusted groups and not facing the public. An interviewee of Bikita (FGDB3) embodied this: "*I encourage fellow women... to speak up... I tell them, 'If you stay quiet, they will decide for you.'*"

This is an indicator of a calculated advocacy that aims at gaining gains in a way that was not confrontational to patriarchal authority as doing this would most likely result in dismissal or ridicule by men and traditional leaders.

### Working collectively with groups

Results validated a gradient of mobilisation with the highest levels of confidence and perceived efficacy being found in cohesive local groups and decreased considerably when it came to higher governance levels. The act of collective action was considered as a strategic need towards legitimacy and protection which was totally against the weakness of individual advocacy. This was captured by one of the participants of Zaka (FGDZ9), who mentioned how collective action turned the presence to power: *“You are only noise alone. Collectively we are a voice which they must hear. When we go as a group to the council, they cannot ignore us.”*

The facilitating condition of cooperation was already existing social capital, entrenched trust and common goals in existing networks such as savings clubs. The effectiveness was limited by huge structural and internal limitations, however. The lack of cohesion was facilitated by logistical challenges of coordinating women with strong domestic and economic work and the presence of internal competition with the influence periodically.

Most importantly, the boundaries of collective power were evidently agreed upon. The influence of groups was seen as weak and local, which was why they were considered to be very useful in exerting localised pressure and distributing the social risk. The common theme among many participants was that without external resources or networks, local mobilisation could hardly be rolled out to local influence on district or national policy, and a gaping hole in the mechanisms between community mobilisation and influence over policy appeared.

### Mobilising others

Mobilisation confidence was not absolute but very contextual, with relation to personal power of the mobiliser, the existence of a local issue that is real, concrete, and unifying. This was perceived as a relational process that was gradual instead of a call to action. One of the participants (FGDC19) described a planned trust-building approach;

*“I begin with one-on-one talk and create trust. Then, we meet as a small group. A practical example like a faulty water pump demonstrates to them that there is a necessity to have a single voice that will push the government to act.”*

This brings out the essence of the mobilisation strategy; using the immediate and common grievances on the basis of concrete issues such as infrastructure to show the practicality of collective action. More general strategies involved infiltrating existing local events and telling localized stories of success.

Mobilisers, however, had their deepest barriers to recruitment. The most mentioned stumbling blocks were general indifference and hopelessness among the potential recruits, a sense of fear of reprimand that was ingrained and the sheer logistical problem of reaching out to women in scattered homesteads. In turn, the success of mobilisation was seen as being precarious and episodic, very dependent on a visible local crisis that would temporarily overcome inertia and fear but highlighted the weakness of collective action in the long run.

### Policy advocacy and change

Policy advocacy domain was the most untrusted with the general feeling of inaccessibility and systemic obscurity. Respondents perceived formal policy processes to be remote, complicated and mostly irrelevant to their local realities.

One of the people of Bikita (FGDB9) expressed such a perception of marginalisation, saying that even being able to impact one of their home representatives was overwhelming since *“the process appeared to be distant and complex.”* Direct experience was uncommon and limited to hyper-local actions, such as, lobbying market stalls or school committees' positions.

The results reveal that a significant reliance on insider champions is essential. The few success stories came down to gaining the support of an approving councillor or official and the importance of success was on the gatekeeper rather than the worth of the issue. The prevailing experience, however was that of bureaucracy of attrition. The main challenges of systems involved on the one hand, the intentional delay of processes, absence of clear feedback, and the depressing attitude that policies are developed in remote capitals with little input locally. It was an atmosphere that exhausted the general push and the feeling that successful advocacy needs some form of political network and support that lie well out of reach to most rural women organizations.

### **Confidence in specific leadership roles**

The results affirm a clear pecking order of trust which directly translates into a two-step gradient of perceived access, abstraction and political exposure. One of the participants (FGDC8) described this hierarchy by identifying tangible access and exclusive distance;

*“I am able to control a water point; it is convenient. The council is political and boisterous. Educated people are the national policy... We do not know on whose doors to knock.”*

Local, service-related positions (like operating a water point) evoked great confidence, as it is familiar, has a direct effect on the community and has a well-defined job.

### **Closing and additional information**

#### **Motivation of women’s confidence and participation**

In brief, participants believed the most effective way to boost women’s confidence and engagement in leadership is through structured, practical support rather than awareness campaigns alone. They emphasised long-term capacity-building in public speaking, financial management, and navigating bureaucracy, alongside creating visible avenues like reserved seats and ensuring male allyship and support from traditional leaders to challenge entrenched community attitudes.

Finally, the researcher also explored whether there was anything else the participants could add that had not yet been addressed and the following themes emerged

- Limited direct experience with policy processes
- Dependence on local champions
- Bureaucratic complexity and delays
- Inaccessibility of decision-makers
- Fear of political or social reprisal
- Poor information flow
- Cultural and community attitudes
- Limited male allyship and traditional leader support

## **BRIEF DISCUSSION**

### **Self-efficacy in rights advocacy**

The results support the focus of the literature on self-efficacy as the key factor between right knowledge and advocacy action (Munive et al., 2023). The ability to confirm previous achievement and systematic training seemed to be the source of confidence in women, which is consistent with capacity-building studies

(Stephenson et al., 2024). This study however is a critical extension of the literature by giving an account of the manner in which this linkage has been disrupted by localised social risks. The key deterrent that poses an immediate, daily fear of stigma and backlash by traditional leaders offers a unique means of the wider sociocultural reservations suggested in continental studies (Gebrihet et al., 2024). This is the paradox of circumstances: the fact of being equipped with action knowledge does not necessarily result in action, since efficacy is subject to a material calculus of possible social stigma.

### **Confidence in collaborative mobilization**

The preliminary importance of collective action in the construction of confidence is highly justified by the results (Chikwanha and Moyo, 2024; OECD, 2025). The described need of group advocacy as one that a voice they have to hear to is a direct reflection of the recorded strength of the women caucuses and networks. This confirms a gender-transformative change as a necessarily coalitional process (Munive et al., 2023). The results however critically refine this by revealing an evident gradient of mobilisation and its inherent limitations. Whereas in literature, a coalition-building process is emphasised, the paper identifies those logistical burdens, internal rivalry and barriers to trust that disunify solidarity and limit collective efficacy to local, issues specific behavior. This serves as an example of how the potential of collective action and its scalability to impact differs, a change that most efforts do not equip women to take (Stephenson et al., 2024).

### **Confidence in specific leadership roles**

The resulting hierarchy of trust is quite typical of the known gradient of governance-tier registered at the regional (SADC, 2022) and local (Rakgwata & Talifhani, 2025) levels. The information verifies that those roles that are viewed as physical expansion of community care bring the highest level of assurance. Importantly, the results present fine-grained, experienced data on the obstacles outlined in the literature as structural (Wang, 2025). The participants specifically said that low national trust was as a result of lack of formal education, insider relations (doors to knock on), and knowledge with closed systems. This goes beyond abstract prohibitions to what the lived experience of systemic exclusion involves, which is some degree of growing abstraction and the perceived lack of exclusivity of higher governance formations providing a formidable psychological and practical cap to leadership ambitions (Musengezi & Mwenje, 2025).

## **Implications For Practice and Recommendations**

### **Implications for Practice**

The results suggest that interventions should move beyond generic rights awareness to actively build situated confidence. Programs should address the unique obstacles at each level of the confidence hierarchy, from managing social risks in local advocacy to demystifying national policy processes. Support must transform knowledge into practical experience through mentorship and practice. Furthermore, it is essential to strengthen women's collective platforms, reduce internal divisions, and foster male and traditional leader allyship to reshape the normative space that currently excludes women from public participation.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Design long term capacity programmes with women to offer tangible skills (public speaking, budgeting) and establish safety nets in which they can apply their learning and make errors.
- Establish mentorship and visible channels through connecting women leaders of the future with existing female officials and reserving seats on local development committees to women.
- Create specialised resources and toolkits that demystify both local and national governance systems that clearly map out where to enter and advocate practices and procedures to women groups.
- Organize allyship consultations between women organisations, men in leadership positions in the community, and the traditional authorities in order to establish credibility and minimise the opposition to the women as they engage in the political arena.



- Enhance the internal leadership of women groups by training them about conflict management and facilitating in the implementation of meetings to ensure cohesiveness and reduce logistical and trust obstacles.

### Limitations of the Study

The study focused on rural women in Masvingo Province to explore confidence, leadership, and advocacy in public decision-making, using qualitative methods such as focus group discussions and interviews. This approach was ideal for capturing detailed, context-specific experiences of barriers, social risks, and strategies, especially in male-dominated governance and community norms. Women were targeted to understand challenges like social stigma, household burdens, and limited access to decision-making channels. Further research could include quantitative measurement of confidence and advocacy outcomes, long-term impacts of capacity-building programs, urban-rural comparisons, and the role of male and traditional leader allyship in supporting women's leadership.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study explored women's perceptions of human rights advocacy in leadership and public decision-making processes in three districts of Masvingo Province. It found that women are most confident in local roles but feel less capable in higher-level decision-making due to lack of education, connections, and access. Collective action, mentorship, and practical experience help build confidence, while barriers like household burdens, fear of backlash, cultural norms, and poor information flow limit participation. Awareness of rights alone was not enough, structured, practical support is needed to turn knowledge into action.

The study recommends programs that provide skills in public speaking, financial management and navigating bureaucracy, alongside safe spaces for learning. Strengthening women's groups and building male and traditional leader support are also important to change restrictive norms. Future research could measure the impact of such programs, compare rural and urban contexts, and explore ways to improve access to higherlevel policy processes.

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