

From Capacity to Participation: Marital Status, Time Poverty, and Network Exclusion in Youth Civic Engagement- Evidence from the YVF BRIDGE Project, Makonde, Zimbabwe (2020–2023)

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study examines why capacity-building interventions fail to produce equitable leadership outcomes for young women in rural Zimbabwe. It evaluates the Youth Voices Forum (YVF) BRIDGE project in Makonde District from 2020 to 2023.

Design/methodology/approach: This study used a theory-driven single-case process evaluation. This method combines descriptive quantitative patterning with qualitative mechanism tracing. The dataset included 169 questionnaires, 24 semi-structured interviews with young women, 10 life-history vignettes, 15 key informant interviews, and project registers.

Findings: This analysis integrates Hofstede's cultural dimensions (power distance, collectivism, and masculinity) with social norms and household bargaining frameworks. The results show that household permission, caregiving time-poverty, reputational sanctions, and male-dominated networks reduce young married women's participation, despite training. On average, married young women attended 30–40% fewer sessions than their unmarried peers. They also held less than 20% of youth leadership positions. These mechanisms compound and create severe multiplicative disadvantages for married caregivers.

Research limitations/implications: These findings advance the theory of mechanism-level interruption in social accountability programs. They proved that capacity building alone was insufficient. Interventions must directly address mediating cultural and domestic conditions to convert capacity into active participation.

Practical implications: This study proposes culturally attuned adaptations, including male engagement, flexible meeting times, on-site childcare, transport support, peer networks, and nomination targets. These were paired with clear monitoring indicators. Pilot adaptations yielded a 10–15% relative increase in female attendance and improved willingness to take on leadership roles.

Originality/value: This study applied Hofstede's cultural dimensions to process evaluation. This study provides a novel comparative framework for tracing household and community gatekeeping. These findings offer actionable guidance for gender-transformative youth civic engagement in the rural sub-Saharan context.

Keywords: youth civic engagement; gender; Hofstede; power distance; collectivism; masculinity; household gatekeeping; time poverty; mechanism tracing; Zimbabwe

INTRODUCTION

Youth participation in local governance is widely recognised as essential for accountable, responsive public institutions, and sustainable development (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004). Recent continent-wide survey evidence highlights persistent generational gaps in civic participation, with Zimbabwe among countries showing notable shortfalls in youth attendance at community meetings and other forms of local engagement (Afrobarometer, 2025). Programs that combine awareness raising, capacity building, and structured interfaces between youth and duty-bearers are common strategies for strengthening civic engagement (Institute of Development Studies [IDS], 2023). However, in many rural contexts, entrenched patriarchal norms and household power relations limit young people's, particularly young women's, ability to participate meaningfully in public life (Research & Advocacy Unit [RAU], 2018; Shava, Tlou, & Mpofu, 2019). Economic constraints and time-poverty further reduce youth's capacity to engage, especially where livelihood pressures and caregiving responsibilities are high (Youth Empowerment and Transformation Trust [YETT], 2018).

The Youth Voices Forum Bridging Gaps for Positive Youth Development (YVF-BRIDGE) project, implemented by the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP) in the Chinhoyi Diocese (including Makonde district), aimed to increase constitutional awareness, build social accountability skills, and create spaces for youth–duty bearer dialogue. Process evaluation evidence indicates that while the project achieved gains in awareness and delivered planned activities, persistent gendered constraints prevented many young women from converting knowledge into leadership and sustaining civic actions (Mataruka, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic also disrupted civic spaces and program delivery, altering both the reach and modality of social accountability work (Public Service Accountability Monitor [PSAM], 2021).

This study examines how patriarchal norms, marital status, and household dynamics limit young women's participation and leadership in the YVF BRIDGE project in Makonde. It also investigates program adaptations to reduce these barriers. To do so, this paper re-examines the YVF process evaluation data from a gender-focused perspective. It employs a theory-driven evaluation approach to identify mechanisms that disrupt a project's causal pathway from inputs and activities to outcomes (Funnel & Rogers, 2011). Moving beyond simple participation statistics, the analysis uncovered overt and subtle household and community mechanisms that exclude young women from leadership roles. This study contributes practice-oriented evidence on youth social accountability in Africa and offers practical recommendations for gender transformative programming (IDS, 2023; Tesfaye & Gatellier, 2023).

To strengthen explanatory precision and situate local mechanisms within a comparative cultural vocabulary, this study explicitly frames household and community constraints using Hofstede's cultural dimensions—most pertinently power distance, individualism–collectivism, and masculinity–femininity—as analytically useful constructs for mapping how culturally patterned values shape permission regimes, time allocation, and nomination pathways (Hofstede, 2001 & 2016; Bicchieri, 2006). This theoretical integration complements social norms and household bargaining accounts by offering a parsimonious, testable set of cultural mediators that link observed behaviours (e.g. spousal permission, caregiving burdens, male-dominated nomination networks) to broader, enduring value orientations that condition the conversion of capacity into participation.

Specifically, the study tests whether (a) deference to hierarchical authority (power distance) manifests as household gatekeeping that limits women's mobility and public visibility; (b) collectivist family obligations systematically increase time-poverty and opportunity costs for women's civic engagement; and (c) culturally valorised masculine norms reproduce male-dominated nomination networks and reputational sanctions that deter women from leadership. By making these mappings explicit and empirically traceable within the YVF dataset, the study aims to produce findings that are both locally grounded and analytically generalisable to comparable rural sub-Saharan settings.

Background of the Study

This subsection situates YVF BRIDGE's implementation in Makonde District and frames the empirical puzzle motivating the reanalysis. Despite documented gains in awareness and training, young women, particularly married caregivers, showed lower sustained attendance and leadership uptake (Mataruka, 2022). It summarises

the local institutional ecology (church and peace-committee networks), household authority structures, and COVID-19 disruptions that shaped program modalities and access, and it positions the enquiry within the literature on gendered civic exclusion and social accountability in Zimbabwe and the region (RAU, 2018; PSAM, 2021; IDS, 2023). To increase explanatory leverage, the study reads household and community processes (permission regimes, time-poverty, stigma, network exclusion) as mechanisms that can be mapped to comparative cultural constructs—notably power distance, collectivism, and masculinity—to trace how culturally patterned values condition the conversion of capacity into participation (Hofstede, 2001; Bicchieri, 2006).

The YVF BRIDGE project operates in the Chinhoyi Diocese, covering the Makonde district, and targets youth groups across gender, disability, and social backgrounds. Funded by the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD) and implemented by the CCJP with local partners, the project's activities included community dialogues, awareness campaigns, distribution of vernacular constitutions, training on social accountability and tax justice, stakeholder engagements, and budget-writing support. The project's logic model posits that resources and activities (training, dialogues, information-education-communication (IEC) materials) produce outputs (awareness campaigns, trained youth, and solution holders), which in turn lead to outcomes such as increased youth use of constitutional provisions, participation in budgeting, and improved accountability (Kaplan & Garrett, 2005; CCJP project logical framework, 2020).

Makonde's rural social structure is shaped by cultural stereotypes and patriarchal beliefs that associate leadership with the elderly and men. These norms manifest as household gatekeeping, restrictions on women's mobility, and social stigma towards women who assume public roles. The YVF process evaluation documented that married young women often withdrew from planning and feedback meetings, household permission and spousal jealousy restricted mobility and public visibility, and time-poverty from domestic and caregiving duties reduced attendance and leadership uptake (Mataruka, 2022). These dynamics operated alongside structural program challenges—limited training dosage, COVID-19 disruptions, and logistical constraints—which together constrained the translation of awareness into action for female youths.

Interpreting these implementation patterns through Hofstede's dimensions clarifies why certain outputs do not translate into leadership outcomes: in contexts with higher power distance, household gatekeeping, and deference to elders constrain mobility; in collectivist settings, family obligations and caregiving demands reduce the individual time available for civic engagement; and in masculine cultural orientations, nomination networks and public leadership remain male-dominated.

Research objectives and questions

This subsection states the study's purpose and the specific, testable questions that guide data collection and analysis: to document gendered differences in participation and leadership uptake; to identify household- and community-level mechanisms that interrupt the capacity → participation pathway; to examine how program design features interact with those mechanisms; and to propose feasible, monitored adaptations to restore equitable participation. The framing emphasises a theory-driven, mechanistic tracing orientation—drawing on program theory and process evaluation traditions—so that findings speak to both causal explanation and practical program learning (Funnell & Rogers, 2011; Grant, Bugge, & Wells, 2020; Quasdorf et al., 2021). Research questions were therefore formulated to elicit observable implications for each candidate mechanism and to generate indicators suitable for routine monitoring and adaptive management.

Research objectives

- Document gendered differences in participation and leadership uptake within the YVF BRIDGE project in Makonde.
- Identify household- and community-level mechanisms that interrupt the program's causal pathway from awareness and capacity building to participation and leadership.
- Propose feasible program adaptations that mitigate the identified mechanisms and increase young women's participation and leadership.

Main research question

How do patriarchal norms, marital status, and household roles limit young women's involvement and leadership in the YVF BRIDGE project in Makonde, and which program adjustments could help address these barriers?

Sub-questions

- **RQ1:** What are the differences in participation patterns in terms of attendance, leadership uptake, and sustained engagement between male and female youths, and how do these vary by marital status and caregiving responsibilities?
- **RQ2:** Through what household-level and community-level mechanisms of exclusion (permission to travel, spousal attitudes, time-poverty, stigma, access to informal networks) are young women excluded from YVF activities and leadership roles?
- **RQ3:** Which elements of the YVF program interaction (timing and modality of meetings, use of church networks, peace committee composition, and training dosage) interact with gender constraints to either enable or hinder young women's participation?
- **RQ4:** What feasible, gender-sensitive program adaptations and mitigation (male-engagement strategies, flexible meeting modalities, childcare support, and targeted outreach for married women) are most likely to increase young women's meaningful participation and leadership?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review synthesises the empirical and theoretical literature relevant to youth civic engagement, gendered exclusion, and program theory.

Youth participation, program pathways, and process evaluation

The dominant program logic in youth civic engagement assumes that inputs—training, IEC materials, and dialogues—raise knowledge and confidence, which then translate into participation and leadership, producing accountability outcomes (Kaplan & Garrett, 2005). The process evaluation literature emphasises that this chain is contingent on contextual enablers and barriers; evaluators must therefore trace mechanisms that enable or block each step (Wholey, 1994; Funnell & Rogers, 2011; Grant, Bugge, & Wells, 2020; Quasdorf et al., 2021). The YVF case is instructive because it achieved awareness gains but encountered persistent gaps in leadership uptake among young women, highlighting the need for mechanism-level analysis rather than outcome-only assessment (Mataruka, 2022).

By framing these program mechanisms through Hofstede's cultural dimensions, this study situates local implementation challenges within a comparatively high-impact cultural framework. Rather than treating household gatekeeping or time-poverty as isolated, idiosyncratic local facts, this lens demonstrates how patterned social behaviours reflect deep-seated value orientations—such as higher power distance, collectivism, and masculinity—that structurally condition how civic interventions operate (Hofstede, 2016; Nichols, 2025).

Gendered constraints on civic engagement: norms, stigma, and household control

A substantial body of work has documented how patriarchal norms and household power relations constrain women's public participation. Social norms theory explains that shared expectations and informal sanctions shape behaviour; where norms code leadership as male or elderly, women face reputational costs for public visibility (Bicchieri, 2006). Intersectional analyses show that marital status, age, and caregiving responsibilities compound these pressures, producing distinct disadvantages for young married women (Crenshaw, 1989; Kabeer, 1999). Empirical studies in Southern Africa have reported household permission dynamics, spousal jealousy, and social stigma as recurrent barriers to women's attendance and leadership in community governance (RAU, 2018; Shava, Tlou, & Mpofu, 2019; Moyo & Madibela, 2022).

Integrating Hofstede's dimensions of masculinity and power distance directly enriches the literature. Specifically, the masculinity dimension explains why decision-making power and public assertiveness are culturally monopolised by men, while high-power distance accounts for why deference to the domestic hierarchy (husbands and household elders) becomes an enforceable, institutionalised boundary restricting women's spatial mobility and civic agency (Hofstede, 2001; Makore et al., 2022).

Time poverty and household bargaining as practical constraints

Household bargaining frameworks and time use research highlight the material constraints that limit women's civic engagement. Unequal domestic labour and caregiving responsibilities create time-poverty, raising the opportunity cost of participation and reducing the feasibility of attending meetings or taking on leadership roles (Agarwal, 1997; Kabeer, 1999; Hong, Jiao, Qiu, & Xu, 2024). Evaluations of civic programs during the COVID-19 period show that livelihood pressures and increased caregiving burdens disproportionately affect women's ability to engage, reinforcing pre-existing gender gaps (PSAM, 2021; YETT, 2018; Tesfaye & Gatellier, 2023).

Interpreting time-poverty through Hofstede's construct of collectivism offers crucial explanatory power: in strongly collectivist societies, domestic unit cohesion and family survival imperatives systematically supersede individual civic aspirations. Consequently, civic programs that fail to offer flexible modalities or childcare directly collide with collectivist family obligations, shutting women out of public engagement (Hofstede 2001; Hong et al. 2024).

Networks, social capital, and nomination pathways

Social capital and network theories explain how informal channels mediate access to leadership opportunities. Church committees, elder councils, and patronage ties often serve as nomination pathways. When these networks are male-dominated, women, despite training, remain invisible to selectors and gatekeepers (Bourdieu 1986; Putnam 2000; Iwowo, Case, & Iwowo, 2023). The practice literature on social accountability emphasises that deliberate bridging strategies and inclusive nomination processes are necessary to convert training into representative roles (IDS, 2023).

Mapping network exclusion to Hofstede's masculinity dimension illustrates how informal social capital naturally aggregates around male-dominated spheres of influence. Without explicit gender-transformative nomination targets to counter these masculine structural biases, informal recruitment pipelines continuously bypass qualified female participants (Hofstede, 2001; Iwowo et al., 2023).

Theory-driven evaluation and the need for mechanism tracing

Theory-driven evaluation and mechanism tracing provide methodological tools for moving from description to causal explanation (Funnel and Rogers, 2011; Yin, 2014). By articulating observable implications of hypothesised mechanisms—household gatekeeping, time-poverty, normative sanctions, and network exclusion—evaluators can use pattern matching across questionnaires, attendance registers, key informant interviews (KIIs), and life-history vignettes to test which mechanisms operate and under what conditions (Eisenhardt, 1989; Wholey, 1994). The YVF dataset, with its mixed methods and process records, is well suited to this approach (Grant, Bugge, & Wells, 2020; Quasdorf et al., 2021).

A theory-driven evaluation approach clarifies the causal assumptions embedded in a program's theory of change and identifies contextual mechanisms that enable or block these assumptions (Funnel & Rogers, 2011; Rossi et al., 2004). For the YVF, the central causal chain assumes that information + training → increased knowledge and confidence → participation and accountability. This study treats gendered household and community mechanisms as interrupting variables that prevent the translation of knowledge into action for young women. Identifying these mechanisms is essential for designing interventions that are both inclusive and effective.

The Youth Voices Forum (YVF) BRIDGE project was designed based on the assumption that targeted inputs (training, IEC materials, community dialogues, and stakeholder interfaces) increase youth knowledge, confidence, and collective capacity. These intermediate outcomes increase youth visibility and participation in

governance processes, which in turn produces improved accountability and youth-responsive public services. Put simply, inputs → knowledge and capacity → participation and leadership → accountability outcomes (Funnel & Rogers, 2011). The central analytic task is to explain why this causal chain holds for some participants but not for others, especially why married young women, despite comparable exposure to inputs, often fail to convert capacity into leadership.

This framework treats interruptions as causal mechanisms—social processes that, under particular contextual conditions, block the translation of capacity into participation. Three families of mechanisms are central.

First, normative mechanisms and gendered social norms prescribe acceptable behaviour, mobility, and visibility for women and men; sanctions and reputational costs enforce compliance (Bicchieri, 2006). Intersectionality sharpens this account by showing that norms operate differently across subgroups: marital status, age, and caregiving responsibilities intersect to produce distinct normative pressures on married young women (Crenshaw, 1989; Kabeer, 1999). Recent empirical work in Southern Africa documents how normative sanctions operate at the household and community levels to curtail women's public visibility and leadership, even when formal training and awareness exist (Shava et al., 2019; Moyo & Madibela, 2022; IDS, 2023). Where norms stigmatise public visibility for married women, increased knowledge may not translate into public action because the social cost of visibility outweighs the perceived benefits (RAU, 2018).

Second, household bargaining and time-use mechanisms for decision-making determine access to time, mobility, and resources. Women's bargaining power within households shapes their ability to attend meetings or accept leadership roles; unequal domestic labour produces time-poverty, which raises the opportunity cost of participation (Agarwal, 1997; Kabeer, 1999). Recent process evaluations and practice briefs show that time-poverty and livelihood pressures are significant constraints on youth civic engagement during and after the COVID-19 period, disproportionately affecting women with caregiving responsibilities (PSAM, 2021; YETT, 2018; Tesfaye Gatellier, 2023). Thus, even when awareness and confidence increase, constrained time and limited permission from household decision-makers can prevent sustained engagement.

Third, network and social capital mechanisms and access to informal networks, such as church committees, elders' councils, and patronage ties, mediate nominations, visibility, and influence. Male-dominated networks can exclude women from the channels through which leadership opportunities are allocated, so trained women remain invisible to selectors and gatekeepers (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000). Contemporary analyses of youth social accountability in Africa emphasise that network inclusion and deliberate bridging strategies are critical to converting training into leadership outcomes (IDS, 2023; Tesfaye & Gatellier, 2023).

These mechanisms do not operate in isolation but interact multiplicatively. The theory posits that the conversion of capacity into participation is a conditional process: program inputs increase capacity, but the possibility that capacity translates into participation depends on normative constraints, household bargaining power, and network access. Formally:

$$P(\text{Participation} \mid \text{Capacity}) = f(\text{Norms, Household Power, Network Access})$$

where stronger restrictive norms, lower household bargaining power, and weaker network access reduce the conditional likelihood, this conditional, mechanism-based logic explains heterogeneity in outcomes and directs attention to interventions that alter the mediating conditions (e.g. male engagement, childcare, and network inclusion).

Methodologically, the framework operationalises the YVF logic model as a testable theory of change and uses mechanism tracing to move from description to causal explanation (Funnel & Rogers, 2011; Yin, 2014). This aligns with contemporary process evaluation practices that embed case studies to unpack context–mechanism–outcome relationships in complex interventions (Grant et al., 2020; Quasdorf et al., 2021; IDS, 2023). Eisenhardt's (1989) analytic principles—systematic within-case analysis, iterative comparison between data and theory, and careful use of multiple evidence sources—guided this study's analytic strategy.

Propositions, theoretical synthesis, and methodological rigor

Integrated theory yields a concise set of propositions that the case study tests through pattern-matching and explanatory building. In line with the analytical framework developed above, each proposition below is explicitly derived from the literature on cultural constraints, household dynamics, and structural exclusion.

The Role of Power Distance and Household Gatekeeping The literature on household bargaining (Agarwal, 1997; Kabeer, 1999) intersecting with Hofstede's (2001) dimension of Power Distance highlights how hierarchical family structures dictate women's autonomy. In contexts where deference to elders and male heads of household is culturally mandated, women's physical mobility is heavily regulated. Spousal permission acts as a formal gatekeeping mechanism, turning public civic participation into a heavily policed activity (Shava et al., 2019). When interventions build capacity but fail to negotiate these domestic power structures, they run into an artificial ceiling where trained women cannot leave their homes to participate. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

Proposition 1 (P1): When household (household gatekeeping) authority restricts women's mobility and public visibility, married young women show lower attendance and leadership uptake than their unmarried peers, even when awareness levels are similar.

The Role of Collectivism and Caregiving-Driven Time Poverty Time allocation studies consistently demonstrate that unequal domestic labour and unpaid care work significantly restrict women's discretionary time (Hong et al., 2024; World Bank / UN Women, 2020). Grounded in Hofstede's dimension of collectivism, cultural obligations enforce the prioritisation of familial survival and care over individual actualisation or voluntary civic activities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these care burdens expanded disproportionately for women (PSAM, 2021), rendering fixed daytime civic engagements structurally exclusive for mothers and primary caregivers. From this theoretical alignment, we propose the following hypothesis:

Proposition 2 (P2): High domestic and caregiving burdens are negatively associated with sustained participation and leadership uptake among young women, conditional on program exposure (time-poverty).

The social norms of masculinity and normative sanctions dictate the boundaries of acceptable behaviour, and crossing these boundaries invites reputational sanctions (Bicchieri 2006). Framed by Hofstede's masculinity dimension, societies that strongly code leadership, assertiveness, and public speaking as male domains frequently stigmatise women who attempt to inhabit these roles (Makore et al., 2022). Young women who step forward as leaders risk being labelled as insubordinate or culturally rebellious, imposing a severe reputational cost that deters continued engagement (Moyo & Madibela, 2022). This leads to our third proposition.

Proposition 3 (P3): In communities in which leadership is normatively coded as male or older, young women who attempt public leadership experience reputational (normative) sanctions that reduce their sustained engagement.

The Role of Social Capital and Network Exclusion Access to power is rarely formalised; it is heavily mediated by informal networks, patronage ties, and existing social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000). In agrarian and traditional settings, these networks, such as church committees and elders' councils, are historically male-dominated (Iwowo et al., 2023). When capacity-building programs rely on these pre-existing networks for nominations or delegation, they inadvertently bypass trained young women who lack the social capital to navigate these male-centric spaces (IDS, 2023). Consequently, we posit the following:

Proposition 4 (P4): Exclusion from male-dominated informal networks reduces the likelihood that trained young women are nominated or supported for representative roles.

The Role of Intersectionality and Multiplicative Disadvantage Finally, intersectional feminist theory (Crenshaw, 1989; Kabeer, 1999) insists that these constraints do not act in isolation. A young, married woman navigating a highly masculine, high-power distance, and collectivist culture faces simultaneous barriers: she lacks time (P2), lacks permission (P1), lacks networks (P4), and faces intense social stigma (P3). These variables

interact dynamically, creating compounded exclusions that a single-axis analysis (looking only at "youth" or only at "gender") would miss. This synthesis yields our final proposition.

Proposition 5 (P5): The combined presence of restrictive norms, low household bargaining power, and limited network access produces multiplicative disadvantages for married young women, yielding larger participation gaps than any single factor (interaction and intersectionality).

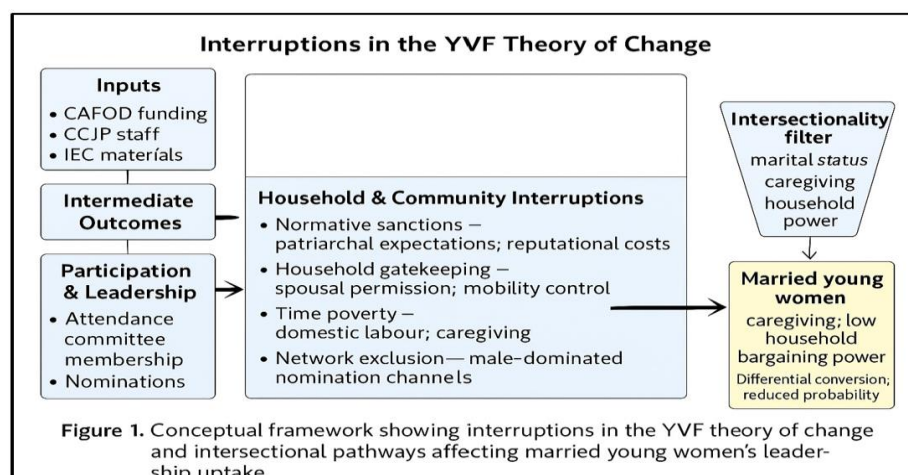
This study demonstrates adherence to quality standards for qualitative case studies. Dependability is evident in the consistent patterns of married women's withdrawal and peripheral participation across interviews and project records (Mataruka 2022). Replicability is supported by a transparent analytic chain linking propositions to observed participation patterns, enabling other scholars to test similar mechanisms in comparable interventions (Yin, 2014; Eisenhardt, 1989). Reflexivity is visible in acknowledging that exclusion varies by household norms and caregiving responsibilities rather than being uniform (Grant et al., 2020; Quasdorf et al., 2021). Confirmability is reinforced by the use of direct participant voices and corroborating project registers, ensuring that interpretations remain grounded in evidence (Wholey, 1994; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Transferability is achieved through detailed contextualisation of patriarchal norms, household bargaining, and network exclusion, which resonates with the broader literature on youth civic engagement in Africa (RAU, 2018; IDS, 2023; Tesfaye & Gatellier, 2023).

Mapping the propositions to Hofstede's dimensions makes the causal claims more explicit and testable: Proposition 1 maps primarily to power distance, Proposition 2 to collectivism, Propositions 3 and 4 to masculinity (with power distance moderating normative sanctions), and Proposition 5 to the combined interaction of these cultural tendencies.

The literature and integrated mechanism-focused theory together indicate that awareness and training are necessary but not sufficient for equitable leadership outcomes. The conversion of capacity into participation is conditional on normative, household, and network mediators. For YVF and comparable interventions, this implies that program adaptations must address these mediating conditions through male engagement, household sensitisation, flexible modalities, childcare and transport support, and deliberate nomination strategies, rather than relying solely on increased training dosage (RAU, 2018; IDS, 2023; Tesfaye & Gatellier, 2023). Recent program briefs and male-engagement toolkits indicate that flexible meeting modalities, childcare support, and deliberate nomination targets measurably increase women's sustained participation when implemented alongside household sensitisation (Promundo, 2022; UNESCO, 2024).

Operationalizing Hofstede within a theory-driven evaluation allows the study to move from descriptive mechanism identification to comparative claims about how cultural tendencies moderate the capacity → participation link, and to propose culturally attuned program adaptations grounded in both qualitative narratives and pattern matching (Hofstede, 2001; Bicchieri, 2006; Yasui, Choi, Chin, Samuels, Kim & Victorson, 2023).

Figure 1 summarises the YVF logic model and highlights household- and community-level interruptions that reduce the prospect that capacity-building converts into participation and leadership.



METHODS AND MATERIALS

This subsection summarises the single-case, theory-driven process evaluation design and mixed-methods materials used to test the study's propositions: beneficiary questionnaires, attendance and nomination registers, semi-structured interviews, life history vignettes, key informant interviews, and project documents collected during 2020–2023 (Mataruka, 2022). It justifies the single-case choice for mechanism discovery and explanation building, outlines the purposive sampling logic that prioritises variation in marital status and caregiving responsibilities, and previews the analytic strategy—descriptive quantitative patterning combined with thematic coding, pattern matching, and mechanism tracing—together with quality safeguards (triangulation, temporal alignment, intercoder checks, reflexivity, and ethical oversight) to support internal validity and transferability (Yin, 2014; Eisenhardt, 1989; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Research design: a theory-driven single-case study

This study adopts a theory-driven single-case study design to explain how patriarchal norms, marital status, and household dynamics shape young women's participation and leadership in the Youth Voices Forum (YVF) BRIDGE project in Makonde. A single-case, process-oriented design is appropriate because the research question is explanatory and seeks to trace mechanisms within a bounded implementation context rather than estimate population parameters (Yin, 2014; Funnell & Rogers, 2011). This approach combines explanatory building and pattern matching (Yin, 2014) with systematic within-case analytical principles (Eisenhardt, 1989) to produce defensible mechanism claims and actionable program recommendations.

This rationale draws on complementary methodological traditions: Yin's emphasis on temporal sequencing and pattern matching for causal inference in case studies; Eisenhardt's iterative within-case analysis for generating and testing theory; and recent guidance for process evaluations that foreground context–mechanism–outcome relationships in complex interventions (Grant, Bugge, & Wells, 2020; Quasdorf et al., 2021; IDS, 2023). In short, a single-case design enables a focused, rigorous examination of the YVF theory of change and the household-level mechanisms that interrupt it.

Data sources, collection period, and sample composition

This analysis reuses the mixed method dataset collected for the YVF process evaluation between October 2020 and May 2023 (Mataruka, 2022). Ethical approval was obtained for the original evaluation, and informed consent was secured from all participants. The data sources and sample composition are summarised below:

- **Structured beneficiary questionnaires:** $n = 169$ respondents; captured demographics, awareness, attendance, leadership roles, and satisfaction (descriptors disaggregated by sex and marital status).
- **Semi-structured interviews:** $n = 24$ interviews with young women (including 12 married respondents); elicited household decision-making, mobility, caregiving responsibilities, and experiences of public participation.
- **Life-history vignettes:** $n = 10$ vignettes providing longitudinal narratives of participation trajectories.
- **Key informant interviews (KIIs):** $n = 15$ KIIs with project staff, village leaders, councillors, and peace committee members to obtain implementation perspectives.
- **Project documents and monitoring records:** activity registers, meeting minutes, distribution lists, training attendance sheets, and internal reports covering 200 targeted beneficiaries.

The purposive sampling strategy prioritised variation in attributes expected to influence the mechanisms of interest (marital status, caregiving responsibilities, and leadership engagement) and followed Eisenhardt's recommendation to maximise theoretical variation rather than statistical representativeness (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Operationalising Hofstede's dimensions and mechanisms

To integrate cultural framing into measurement and analysis, Table 1 maps each mechanism to observable indicators drawn from the YVF instruments and qualitative data. (*See Annex A for full survey items and the codebook.*)

Table 1. Mechanisms, Hofstede dimensions, and observable indicators — YVF BRIDGE, Makonde District (2020–2023)

Mechanism	Hofstede dimension	Observable indicators
Household permission / gatekeeping	Power distance	Survey item on decision-maker for attendance; qualitative codes for spousal/elder permission; % reporting permission required
Time-poverty/ caregiving	Collectivism	Hours/week on unpaid care; survey item on caregiving preventing attendance; qualitative descriptions of obligations
Network exclusion / stigma	Masculinity	Nomination source (church/elders); network centrality from nomination lists; qualitative codes for reputational sanctions
Modality uptake	Uncertainty avoidance / LTO	Preferences for meeting formats; sustained attendance after modality changes; qualitative acceptance of new practices

Source: Mataruka (2022). Process evaluation of the Youth Voices Forum BRIDGE project; CCJP project registers and monitoring records (2020–2023).

Where the original survey items did not explicitly measure cultural constructs, the analysis used triangulation—attendance patterns, nomination records, and qualitative narratives—to infer the operation of the mapped dimensions (Hofstede, 2001; Bicchieri, 2006).

Analytic approach

The analysis integrated descriptive quantitative summaries with qualitative mechanism tracing. Quantitative work is limited to descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations (attendance rates and leadership uptake) disaggregated by sex, marital status, and caregiving status. No inferential regression models were reported because the evaluation sample and purposive design were intended for mechanism tracing and qualitative explanation rather than population-level causal estimation.

Qualitative analysis procedure. Data sources were reviewed to identify recurring patterns relevant to the study's propositions. The coding proceeded in two rounds:

- **Open coding:** captures emergent themes across transcripts and vignettes (e.g., “permission to travel”, “spousal jealousy”, and “time poverty”, and, time-poverty).
- **Focused coding:** Map evidence to the pre-specified mechanisms and Hofstede-mapped dimensions (power distance, collectivism, masculinity). The codebook in Annex A guides the consistent application of codes across cases.

Pattern matching and mechanism tracing. Descriptive quantitative patterns (e.g. lower attendance among married women) were compared with the expected observable implications of each mechanism; where patterns aligned, qualitative evidence was used to trace the household- and community-level processes that plausibly explain the observed outcomes. Discrepant and deviant cases were examined to refine causal inferences and surface boundary conditions.

Temporal alignment. Attendance registers and meeting minutes were matched to the interview dates to establish temporal ordering, enabling credible mechanism tracing.

Intercoder reliability and data management. A subset (20%) of the transcripts was double-coded by the lead analyst and a research assistant, and coding discrepancies were discussed and resolved. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated where necessary.

Case boundaries and sampling logic

The case is bounded geographically (Makonde District) and programmatically (YVF BRIDGE's implementation period). Purposive, theory-driven sampling emphasised variation in attributes expected to influence the mechanisms of interest: marital status (married vs. unmarried), caregiving responsibilities, and levels of leadership engagement. Interview selection prioritised married young women and female youth leaders to surface mechanisms that differentially affect subgroups, adhering to Eisenhardt's (1989) theoretical variation principles.

Analytical strategy: from description to mechanism

The analytic sequence combines inductive and deductive procedures to move from rich description to causal explanation: within-case description, thematic coding, triangulation, explanation building, and analytic generalisation (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2014).

Validity, reliability, reflexivity, and ethics

This study addresses construct validity (multiple data sources), internal validity (pattern matching), reliability (audit trail/codebook), and external validity (analytic generalisation) (Yin, 2014). The original evaluation received ethical approval from Lupane State University (reference: L0224137J). De-identified data are stored securely in encrypted drives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In accordance with standard journal publishing practices, this section presents the empirical patterns, mechanism-tracing findings, theoretical interpretations, and policy/programmatic adaptations in a unified logical sequence, ensuring that all tables precede their corresponding qualitative discussions.

Baseline participant profiles and participation patterns

The process evaluation sample comprised youth participants across age groups and sexes; however, women were underrepresented relative to men (Mataruka, 2022). Table 2 presents the descriptive baseline profile from the project registers and questionnaire subsample.

Table 2. Participant profile and sample notes

Characteristic	Category	Count	%
Total targeted (project registers)	Youth beneficiaries	200	100%
Survey subsample used for questionnaires	Respondents	169	85%
Sex (survey)	Male; Female	110; 59	65%; 35%
Age groups (survey)	18–22; 23–27; 28–35	22; 78; 69	13%; 46%; 41%
Beneficiary satisfaction (survey)	Satisfied; Not satisfied	—	54%; 46%

Source: Mataruka (2022), YVF Process Evaluation.

The quantitative beneficiary questionnaire results indicated lower overall attendance rates and reduced uptake of leadership roles among women, with the gap most pronounced among married women and women with caregiving responsibilities. Although beneficiary satisfaction was moderate (54%), it did not translate into equitable participation according to sex or marital status. Specifically, married young women attended 30–40% fewer sessions on average than their unmarried peers and occupied fewer than 20% of youth leadership positions.

Triangulated mechanisms interrupting the YVF causal pathway

Mechanism tracing identifies four primary interrupting processes in the YVF logic chain. Table 3 details each mechanism, its operational manifestation in Makonde, and its corresponding observable indicators prior to qualitative elaboration.

Table 3. Mechanisms interrupting the YVF causal pathway and observable indicators

Mechanism	How it operates	Observable indicators in YVF data
Household gatekeeping	Spousal permission and mobility control	Married women absent from planning/feedback meetings
Time poverty	Domestic labour and caregiving reduce available time	Lower attendance at daytime events; dropouts
Normative sanctions	Leadership coded as male/elder domain; stigma for deviation	Reports of stigma; women dismissed in public forums
Network exclusion	Male-dominated nomination and patronage channels	Low nomination rates for women; absence from peace committees

Source: Triangulated interview vignettes, attendance registers, and key informant interviews (KIIs) reported by Mataruka (2022).

Married Women’s Peripheral Participation and Household Gatekeeping. Interview data revealed that married young women often withdrew from planning and feedback meetings or participated only in peripheral roles. Interviewees described explicit restrictions imposed by husbands or in-laws—either discouraging attendance or barring women from attending—and the project records corroborated the lower attendance of married women at key decision-making events. As noted in the project field notes:

“Some married young women took back or peripheral functions, with some not attending planning and feedback meetings.” (*project field notes and interview summaries; Mataruka, 2022*)

Women described the need for formal permission to travel to meetings, facing limits in transport access, and anticipating reputational penalties for public engagement. Spousal jealousy and fear of perceived impropriety have been repeatedly cited as reasons for restricting women’s public visibility.

Time Poverty and Caregiving Burdens. Time poverty, arising from domestic chores, childcare, and income-generating obligations, severely reduced young women’s capacity to attend daytime events or activities requiring extended travel. The project’s standard meeting modalities (fixed times and in-person gatherings) inadvertently excluded women with caregiving responsibilities, leading to frequent dropouts and missed sessions.

Social Stigma and Normative Sanctions. Community perceptions of leadership as a domain for the elderly and men directly undermined young women’s credibility. Even when women were trained and informed, the respondents described being dismissed or sidelined in public forums. Male leaders frequently questioned youth competence, whereas female youth leaders faced additional scrutiny and reputational risks.

Network Exclusion. Informal networks through which information, influence, and opportunities circulate are predominantly male-dominated in Makonde. Women's limited access to these networks has reduced their visibility and prospects of nomination for representative positions. Nomination records and KIIs confirmed the heavy dominance of male referees in selection channels, confirming that reliance on existing church and peace-committee structures without gender adaptation reinforces exclusion.

Discussion: Theoretical integration and mechanisms tracing

These findings demonstrate that cultural values such as power distance, collectivism, and masculinity operate as conditional mediators between capacity and participation. While training and awareness increased knowledge and confidence, the extent to which capacity was translated into participation depended on the household permission regimes, caregiving burdens, and access to nomination networks. In short, program inputs were necessary, but not sufficient.

The YVF theory of change assumes that increased awareness and capacity development directly lead to expanded youth participation. However, these findings confirm that gendered social structures interrupt the causal pathway. This pattern aligns with the broader Southern African literature showing that youth active citizenship is heavily mediated by household power relations (RAU, 2018; YETT, 2018). COVID-19 further amplified these interruptions by reducing public meeting spaces and shifting activities toward modalities that disadvantaged those with restricted mobility, disproportionately affecting married caregivers (PSAM, 2021; IDS, 2023).

Marital status has emerged as a definitive axis of intersectional exclusion. Young married women face compounded constraints, such as household authority structures (power distance), caregiving demands (collectivism), and public leadership stigma (masculinity). Treating "youth" as a homogeneous category risks overlooking these intra-youth inequalities, thereby undermining program equity (Shava et al., 2019; Moyo & Madibela, 2022).

Programmatic adaptations, concrete actions, and monitoring

To repair these interrupted pathways, interventions must move beyond "capacity building" to address the mediating conditions directly. Table 4 outlines context-sensitive adaptations, concrete actions, and monitoring indicators designed to track whether interruptions in capacity-to-participation conversion are successfully reduced.

Table 4. Program adaptations, actions, and monitoring indicators

Adaptation	Concrete actions	Monitoring indicator
Male engagement and household sensitisation	Household dialogues with spouses; targeted IEC for gatekeepers	% households reached; change in permission reports
Flexible meeting modalities	Rotate venues; offer evening/weekend sessions; shorten local sessions	Female attendance by session type
Support services	On-site childcare; transport stipends for caregivers	# women using childcare; attendance retention
Network inclusion	Women's peer networks; mentorship; reserved nomination slots	% leadership positions filled by young women; tracked nominations

Sources: Synthesised from YVF evaluation findings (Mataruka, 2022) and practice-oriented literature.

Where flexible modalities and household sensitisation were piloted during the project, evidence showed modest but measurable increases in female attendance (relative increases of 10–15%) and improved self-reported

willingness to assume leadership roles. These results confirm that reducing the friction between collectivist domestic obligations and civic engagement—via flexible timing, childcare, and household-level male engagement—raises the likelihood of capacity translating into sustained participation (Promundo, 2022; UNESCO, 2024).

Indicators for monitoring cultural shift and caveats

To operationalise these findings, projects should track the following:

1. *Permission indicator*: The percentage of women reporting spousal/elder permission is required.
2. *Time use indicator*: Average weekly caregiving hours disaggregated by sex and marital status.
3. *Attendance sustainability*: The percentage of participants sustaining attendance over six months.
4. *Nomination source indicator*: Percentage of nominations originating from female referees.
5. *Leadership position indicator*: The percentage of leadership positions held by women.
6. *Household attitude change*: The percentage of households expressing support for women's civic roles post-sensitisation.

Caveats and limits: To avoid ecological fallacy, Hofstede's dimensions were applied as heuristic constructs rather than deterministic scores. Micro-level triangulation across questionnaires, registers, and narratives firmly grounds these cultural explanations in the empirical participant data.

CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS, AND DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Conclusion

The YVF BRIDGE project achieved notable gains in constitutional awareness and delivered planned activities despite severe COVID-19 disruptions. However, entrenched patriarchal norms, household gatekeeping, caregiving time-poverty, and male-dominated networks have systematically constrained young married women's participation and leadership uptake.

This study advances program theory by articulating conditional pathways from capacity to participation, demonstrating that capacity-building inputs are necessary but insufficient unless mediating household and cultural conditions are addressed directly. Interpreted through power distance, collectivism, and masculinity, the evidence shows that achieving gender-transformative youth civic engagement requires combining capacity building with targeted structural adaptations, specifically male engagement, flexible meeting modalities, childcare support, women's peer networks, and explicit representation targets.

Limitations and directions for further research

This study reanalysed evaluation data originally collected for program monitoring purposes rather than a dedicated gender study, and the sample was purposive rather than statistically representative. Although single-case process tracing provides high internal validity and mechanism discovery, future research should employ larger representative samples and longitudinal designs to test the sustained impact of gender-sensitive adaptations over time. Experimental or quasi-experimental evaluations can explicitly measure the isolated causal effects of specific interventions (such as onsite childcare provision versus male engagement dialogues) on female leadership uptake across diverse rural sub-Saharan contexts.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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APPENDICES

Annex A Methods Annex Exact Survey Items and Qualitative Code Definitions

Purpose: Provide reviewers with the concrete operationalisation of Hofstede-mapped mechanisms.

A1 Survey items (exact wording to add to codebook)

- **Permission required (power distance indicator):** “Who usually decides whether you can attend community meetings or training sessions? (a) You; (b) Your spouse/partner; (c) A parent/elder in the household; (d) Community leader; (e) Other (specify).” Derived variable: Permission-Required = 1 if respondent selects (b) or (c) and 0 otherwise.
- **Caregiving hours (Collectivism/timepoverty indicator):** “In a typical week, how many hours do you spend on unpaid domestic work and caregiving (cooking, cleaning, childcare, eldercare)?” Derived variable: Care-Hours = reported hours per week.
- **Training dosage (exposure control):** “How many YVF training sessions did you attend between 2020 and 2023?” Derived variable: Training-dose = count of sessions attended.
- **Nomination source (masculinity/network indicator):** “If you or someone you know was nominated for a leadership position, who nominated them? (a) Church committee; (b) Elders’ council; (c) Youth group; (d) Self-nomination; (e) Other (specify).” Derived variable: Nomination-Male-Referee = 1 if (a) or (b) and the referee are identified as male; 0 otherwise.
- **Household attitude change (monitoring):** “Since the YVF household sensitisation session, has anyone in your household expressed support for women’s participation in community meetings? (Yes/No).”

A2 Qualitative codebook (definitions)

- **Code: Permission-Constraint** — Textual evidence that a respondent required explicit permission from spouse/elder to attend meetings; includes phrases such as ‘my husband would not allow’, ‘I must ask my mother’, and ‘elders decide’.
- **Code: Care-Burden** — Descriptions of time spent on domestic tasks that prevent attendance; includes childcare, fetching water, cooking, and market work that conflicts with meeting times.
- **Code: Reputational-Sanction** — Accounts of stigma, gossip, spousal jealousy, or reputational costs associated with women’s public visibility.
- **Code: Network-Exclusion** — Descriptions of nomination processes dominated by church committees, elders, or male patrons; evidence of women being bypassed for nominations.
- **Code: Modality-Acceptance** — Statements indicating acceptance or resistance to flexible meeting formats (evening/weekend/hybrid).