

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Women's Path to Political Offices in Post-1991 Ethiopia

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Abstract

This study examines the political path of women in the context of the post-1991 political changes in Ethiopia. Using the data gathered from about 250 parliamentarians of the House of Peoples Representatives (HoPRs), 150 aspirants of national political parties, representatives of civil society organizations (CSOs) and archival sources, it reveals important gender dynamics, taking into account factors such as age, marital status and partner support, children's age, and educational status. The outcome of the analyses of these factors in this study also show linkages with women's pre-parliamentary political activism, representative motivation, source of political support, reelection interest, leadership preference and status, and pushing factors forcing women to terminate their political activities. Furthermore, the finding confirmed the extent of commonalities and differences between female and male incumbents and aspirants, in the sense that social and political backgrounds of women affect their access to political organizations or parties, elective offices, and ultimately their substantive political representation.

Keywords: Political parties, political path, substantive representation, women parliamentarians, women's political representation

1. Introduction

In Ethiopia, due to the voluntary party quota adopted by the two ruling parties, Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF, former) in 2004 and the Prosperity Party (PP, incumbent) in 2021, the national parliamentary representation of women grew significantly and reached 41.9% (IPU, 2025). Recently, substantive representation, the issue of whether women politicians actively maintain a distinct position on, and advocate for gender responsive political effects has become a center of scholarly interest about Africa and elsewhere in the world (Bauer & Burnet, 2013). Scholars working on this and related topics are emphasizing that substantive political representation of women can better be understood by examining differences in their social and political backgrounds

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and access to political offices in relation with each other and with men (Abbas, 2014; Pitkin, 1967). In Ethiopia the academic literature of substantive representation of women and its link with their access to politics is not yet adequately studied. This study makes some contribution towards efforts aimed at bridging the existing gaps.

The few available scholarly works such as by Agenagn (2020) emphasize the importance of distinguishing between the rhetoric and reality of Ethiopian women's political participation. Agenagn's analysis covered the political career of few women during two historical episodes: the imperial (prior to 1974), the military-socialist and the EPRDF regime (1974-2018). As Brukitawit & Sarikakis's (2019) analysis also revealed, the development of social media in the country is magnifying the political aspiration of women in recent time. Eden (2017) discussed inadequate political competitiveness of women. The attitude and views of parliamentarians, and executives towards the participation and effectiveness of women was analyzed by Meseret (2010) and Wubante (2021). Awotash (2010) and Meaza (2009) made analyses of Ethiopia's women political and public decision-making participation and implications for substantive representation and the inadequacies in this respect so far.

Building on the literature, this study contends that in order to thoroughly explain the elements that define substantive political representation of women in Ethiopia, its crucial to look into their social and political background, the path to access political offices, so as to understand women's engagement in representative activities on behalf of other women. By examining the path of women to the parliament and nationwide political parties in comparison with men, this study aims to contribute to the emerging body of literature on substantive political representation of women in Ethiopia and beyond. It also serves as contribution to similar efforts in understanding the political life of African women in the late 20th and the early 21st century, especially since Ethiopia is the second most populous nation with significant political and diplomatic presence in the continent (Berouk, 2012; Klosowicz, 2015). This study attempted to address the following set of questions.

1. How do women and men parliamentarians, leaders and members of national political parties gain access to political offices in the post-1991 Ethiopia?
 - a. Do female and male parliamentarians and aspirants come from similar or different social and political background?
 - b. Does women's social and political background impact their political leadership preference and their status?

2. Literature review, theoretical insights and conceptual framework of the study

The central point of women's political participation is their descriptive and substantive representation (Child & Krook, 2009; Chikapa, 2016; Tripp, 2012). The former is part of 'the standing for representation' measured by women's numerical share of political positions while the later built on 'the acting for representation', emphasizing the implication of women's political visibility in the larger politics (Bauer, 2021; Pitkin, 1967). Over 50 countries have enacted gender quotas to ensure a minimum representation of women, leading to an increase in global female parliamentary representation including Africa (Tripp and Kang, 2008).

In Ethiopia, both the 1987 and 1995 constitutions formally recognized the equality of women with men and the importance of special support or affirmative action towards the improvement of conditions of the same. The overthrow of the military-socialist regime (Derg) by the EPRDF in 1991 led to the formulation of a new constitution which has more detailed provisions about the political rights and equality of women (Art.35). Perhaps due to this and other factors, the post-1991 period in Ethiopia saw the proliferation of organizational machineries some of which directed their attention towards the promotion and the protection of the interests of women (Asnake, 2011; Meaza, 2009). Consequently, in the formation of six consecutive national assemblies (1991-2021) the descriptive representation of women has increased from 2% in 1995 to 41.9% in 2024 (IPU, 2025). However, as Vandebeld (2015) suggests drawing a direct link between the increased descriptive representation and its substantive political impact needs caution.

Studies on women and politics in Ethiopia by scholars such as Agenagn (2021), Awotash (2010), Berouk(2004), Brukitawit & Sarikakiis (2019) and others which include Eden (2017, 2024), Meaza (2009), Meseret (2010), Seblewongiel and Wubante (2021) assess the challenges and opportunities of women's political participation, the importance of greater representation of women and the negative perceptions against women. There are also some recent studies which have introduced the argument that women's access to political offices or positions is influenced by their social and political background, which enable or constrain their gendered experiences, and in securing their gender responsive legal gains (Broadbent, 2019). However, available scholarly studies did not systematically examine women's path to elective offices in comparison with men in Ethiopia. In spite of increased scholarly engagements, there is a lack of national level study which analyzes the status and the implications of women's path to politics in regards to their current and desired substantive representation which requires a more holistic methodological approach. These knowledge and methodological gaps highlight the importance of examining women's path to elective offices in relation to their social and political background in comparison with men.

In narrowing the aforementioned gaps and provide up-to-date examination of women's access to political offices in the post 1991 Ethiopia, utilizing insights from two or more supportive theoretical insights may be advantageous (Tsang, 2022). Hence, this study makes an effort to analyze the results of this study by employing insights from Pitkin's 'concept of representation' (1967), Saward's (2010) 'the representative claims' and Mansbridge's (2003) 'surrogate representation'.

Concerning the 'the concept of representation', the classical work of Hanna Pitkin (1967, p. 38-112) offered a fourfold broad category of representation termed 'formalistic, standing for or descriptive representation, standing for or symbolic representation and acting for representation'. Amongst these, 'acting for representation' refers to representation in terms of what and how the representatives do what they do, or through a combination of the two. Here, representatives need to be conscious of two things. First, they need to be prudent to behave or act in favor of the represented. Second, representation is an act that requires the representatives to represent justifiable actions and need to be answerable to their constituencies.

Substantive representation is centered on the question of what representatives' want to do or actually be able to do and how practical they are to attain it, suggesting that women's entrance to politics among others is about their representative motivation, political leadership preference, and the representative capabilities they ought to bring and achieve in politics. These aspects are crucial in explaining the substantive representation of women both in and outside elective offices in Ethiopia. However, and although the theory of substantive representation explains the 'substance' of 'activity' or 'content' of representation, it is inadequate to explain the social and political background of women which either enhance or impede their access to elective offices, and their subsequent gender impacts (Pitkin, 1967).

Saward (2010,p.35-81), offers two approaches of representation and one is 'representation making', which occurs when legally authorized representatives represent their constituency independent of surrounding political and social realities. The second, 'performing representation' is considered a practice that emanates from its own ever-changing political phenomenon, experience and procedure. Saward's insights help in examining the overall social and institutional environments of political representations that impact the political performance of women both at macro and micro level.

Saward's (2010) 'the representative claim' contend that representation should be viewed as progressive power dynamic in which claims including those related to gender is framed with the involvement of a wide range of actors. Saward offers additional insight into how legally authorized representatives represent their constituency independent of the surrounding political and social realities. Here, Saward is keen about how interests are constructed and debated, how the represented can appear as such, how their priorities

are constituted, retained and encountered, and what factors define the realization of their imagined presence.

The most popularized work of Mansbridge's (2003) offers another theoretical approach that add important insight into how women gain access to political offices and the representative relations they need to have with their constituency. Mansbridge classified representation into four: 'promissory', 'anticipatory', 'gyroscopic' and 'surrogate'. Amongst these, 'surrogate representation' maintains that voters who lost their policy and representative preferences in one constituency will gain in the other mainly due to the financial and material backup for the representatives which may be obtained not only from one's electorate but also from other constituencies. Therefore, representatives offer surrogate representation for the voters of another electoral district without direct answerability, rewards and sanctions from voters in their respective constituencies.

For Mansbridge, in a truly surrogate representational situation, the relationship between the representatives and the represented is neither related to resource claims nor an expression of a system of accountability. Instead, it's the sentiments of the representatives towards non-constituency electorates which appear to have sway. The mutuality of the representative and the non-electoral district voters become more salient when they share something in common. Incorporating this perspective is crucial to better analyze whether or not elected women and aspirants are willing to surrogate the desires of women within their political path without any contractual link. In sum, these three theoretical insights offer a broader framework to comprehensively examine the political path of women from wide ranging, social and political contextual angles.

The conceptual framework of this study presented below is developed by consulting the assumption of the three aforementioned different but interrelated theoretical perspectives of representation. Besides, variables dealing with social backgrounds of women parliamentarians and aspirants are included as additional factors that shape women's political entry to politics and their subsequent substantive representation by making reference to prior studies both in and outside Ethiopia within the wider African context. This in turn helped in shaping the methodological approaches that direct the data collection and analysis in this study (Durose et al., 2012; Jad, 2014; Leaphart, 2014; Manuh, 2014; Murray, 2010; Tadros, 2014; Tripp, 2019).

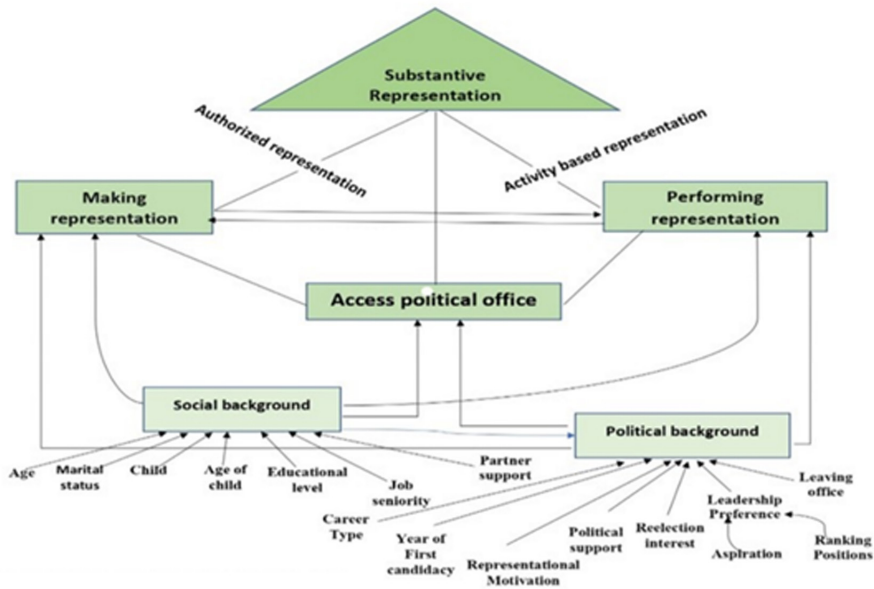


Figure 1: *The conceptual map of the study*

3. Methods and Data

This study employed transformative parallel mixed-method design³ to simultaneously utilize both qualitative interpretive and statistical data collection and analysis approaches to examine women’s political path in both parliamentary and political party settings. The study was carried out among members of the HoPRs and nationwide political parties. These include PP, Ethiopian Citizen for Social Justice, Ethiopian People Revolutionary Party (EPRP), Ethiopian National United Party (ENUP) and Enat (‘mother’) Party operating mainly in Addis Ababa, Oromia and Amhara Regional Administrations. Besides, representatives of CSOs and INGOs and female politicians’ groups were included in the study. Although female parliamentarians and aspirants are the primary target population, male groups are also included for better comparison of the gendered path of politics.

The selection of these target population is justified since they exhibited advancement in the descriptive parliamentary and extra parliamentary representation of Ethiopia’s women. A total of 402 participants (252 parliamentarians 132(52.4%) FPMs and 120 (47.6%) MPMs) and 150 aspirants that are 80 (53.3%) female and 70 (46.7%) male are included in the survey. A stratified random sampling technique was utilized to ensure balanced allocation of sample units in terms of gender. Tenure and party representation are also taken in

³ Allow to jointly utilized probability and purposive sampling techniques to simultaneously generate both quantitative and qualitative data from the study population whereby key issues of social justice could be identified (Mertens, 2015; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2009).

to consideration to purposively select 31 parliamentarians (18 FPMs and 13 MPMs), 15 aspirants (12 female and 3 male) and 3 (2 female and 1 male) representatives of CSOs.

The data was collected using survey questionnaire, online google forms, in-depth interview, participant observation and content analysis for six months in 2024 (other follow-up interviews were also conducted until January 2025). A total of 170, 90 (52.9%) of whom are female and 80 (47%) male parliamentarians successfully returned questionnaires and 90 of whom 50 (55.5%) are female and 40 (45.5%) male online responses of aspirants have been received. Accordingly, the overall response rate of the survey was 64.7%, comprising of 67.5% for the parliamentarians and 37.3% for national political parties.

A 'parallel mixed method data analysis' strategy mentioned earlier has been used to analyze both numerical and qualitative data, to contrast and blend these across the study. Procedurally, the former is analyzed through descriptive statistics using statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) version 27. While findings related with the latter are merged with the statistical data, effort is made to ensure anonymity of responses, and therefore, the interviews of participants were coded as IDI-1, IDI- 2 etc., in the process of data gathering and analysis. Moreover, additional data obtained from observation and archival sources are also incorporated.

4. Discussion of the findings

According to Tripp (2019) the socio-economic profile of women is the main explanatory factors for legitimate and effective political participation of women in Africa. Thus, examining the social and political background of FMPs (female Member of Parliament, plural) and aspirants can serve as indicators of women's political path and the kind of personal and professional profile they bring to politics in comparison with men.

4.1. The social background of parliamentarians and aspirants

The finding revealed that 80% male and female parliamentarians are above the age of 40 while 76% of aspirants' age lies between 30-40 years, and of these 76% female and 62.5% male aspirants are in the same age group (30-40). This implies that women appear to join elective offices when they are relatively free from domestic responsibilities. Besides, this aligns with the study of Tadros (2014) that most women enter into political offices after the age of 35, which in addition may be due to biological factors than lack of political experience, to some extent corroborating with earlier studies by Murray (2010) and Tripp (2019). Thus, since age is not the only determinant factor, this study further analyzes educational level, marital status, age of children (if any) and partner support concurrently.

As the survey shows, more than 80% MPs (Member of Parliament, plural) and 60% aspirants are married. However, when the divorce level of MPs and aspirants are compared, more divorce (36%) is reported by aspirants than FMPs (16.7%). The interview with one female

aspirant also reinforces this:

Most women in opposition parties are exposed to divorce and separation. Since my 20s I was actively involving in my party, organizing fund-raising and rally activities. Individuals whom I did not know frequently warned me to stop; they also advised my husband to persuade me to stop. One day when he was walking outside, they hit him with a motor. He was forced to leave the country finally (IDI-5, 25 March 2024).

This study also explored whether respondents have children under the age of 18. It revealed that the majority of MP's (84.1% female and 87.5% male) and aspirants (64% of female and 68.8% male) have children under the age of 18. This is consistent with the earlier findings of Durose et al. (2012), that women are the predominant childcare providers of the family influencing their ability to effectively participate in political activities than families that share childcare and other household responsibilities. This also links with discussion about the political engagement of women with the support of spouse and partners as indicated in Table 1 below.

Table 1: *Spouse/partners level of support (N=170 MP's and N=90 aspirants)*

Variables	Parliamentarians (%)		Aspirants (%)	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Supports my political involvement	40.5	39.2	36.7	23.1
Recognize my political involvement	38.0	20.3	16.3	11.5
Most part approving	11.4	21.5	20.4	11.5
Mildly opposed	7.6	15.2	16.3	26.9
Regularly resist	2.5	3.8	10.2	26.9

Source: Survey data collected from MPs and aspirants (2024).

As Table 1 above shows, 78.5% FMPs and 59.5% MPMs report the supportiveness of spouse/partner. While notable gender difference exhibits among aspirants, 53.8% male aspirants report mild and regular resistance of their spouse or partners while 53 % females' political engagement is supported by spouses or partners. This is also reflected in the story shared by a female aspirant:

I joined party politics in my 20s. When I found out that my party veered to ethno-centrism, I decided to raise my two kids at home. My husband frequently asked me if I am interested to return to politics. Once he found out my current party aligns with my preference, he registered on my behalf. People were criticizing him by saying "she is a woman why do you give your wife away to a cat (politics) who eats its own offspring". And yet he continued his appreciation of my participation in party politics (IDI-4,

22 March 2024).

The assessment demonstrated that the support (or opposition) of spouse or partner have a mixed effect on women's path to political offices depending on the type of spousal or partner's relationship. This replicates a view in a previous study by Manuh (2014) who found out the pivotal role of family in the daily life of elected Ghanaian women in regards to the support opportunity this offers. Jad (2014) also confirmed that the support of spouse, partners and children to secure the local assembly membership of women in Palestine was important.

Academic and professional profile was another social factor considered in this study. Despite slight difference, the answer is yes, with the majority MPs (75%) and more than half (53.8%) of aspirants are MA holders. Regarding this, earlier studies in Africa highlight the diverse outcome of education on women's political path. Leaphart (2014) reported the candidacy denial of Botswana's and Ethiopia's women due to lack of education while Tripp (2019) noted the existence of similar educational level of female and male legislators of Uganda. Despite the existence of contrasts, these studies recognize the positive role of education on the political navigation of women.

4.2. The political background of women and their access to elective offices

The survey findings are consistent with Murray (2010) that political factors impact women's political access and their representative role once they joined elective offices as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: *Pre-Parliamentary and party membership experience*

Variables	Parliamentarians (%)		Aspirants (%)	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Regional party office	19	34.7	23.1	5.9
National party office	8.9	28	57.7	47.1
Candidate, woreda/zonal/regional administration	26.6	18.7	30.8	17.6
Elected woreda/zonal/ regional administration	31.6	24	7.7	11.8
Professional association	20.3	10.7	11.5	11.8
Civil society organizations	16.5	12	11.5	23.5
Trade unions	8.9	9.3	3.8	11.8
Religious associations	16.5	6.7	23.1	5.9
Woman affairs offices or associations	54.4	4	15.4	17.6
other	13.9	24	7.7	17.6

Source: Survey data collected from PMs and aspirants (2024).

As information in Table 2 above presents 54.5% of FPM's political activism is linked with their prior engagement with policy machineries than men who have largely been engaged in regional politics (34.7%). When the responses of FMPs are compared with those of the aspirants, there is a 39% difference suggesting the previous career engagement with women's affairs activities contribute to their political recruitment while it is not the same in the case of the latter. The observation of the researcher at "Presidential leadership Program"⁴ also noted that FPMs commonly cite their engagement with women organizations like girls' clubs, women affair offices and associations. Reinforcing this, Brown (2010) also highlights that aspect from the direct engagement of women arms of the governing parties of Ghana where female members sponsored by women agencies largely occupy elective offices. Tripp (2012) also remarked that women structures or associations allied with a ruling party often decline to question politically significant issues compared with self-governing women agencies that initiate more critical demands of women. As indicated below, this study in addition makes examination of more factors that motivate women to join parties and run for candidacy.

Table 3: *Relevant factors in joining political party and advocacy works for constituency*

Variables	Level of importance	Parliamentarians (%)		Aspirants (%)	
		Female	Male	Female	Male
Choice to represent my ethnic group, region and HoPRs	NAI	3	0	0	0
	NI	5	3	22	0
	QI	29	42	44	71
	VI	62	55	33	29
Party invitation and my consent	NAI	1	0	17	0
	NI	1	2	0	20
	QI	12	36	11	30
	VI	86	62	72	50
Interest to represent women	NAI	1	3	4	28
	NI	4	18	8	33
	QI	7	37	8	22
	VI	88	42	81	17
Searching a living	NAI	39	31	58	61
	NI	28	49	27	28
	QI	15	13	4	11
	VI	18	6	12	0
Prior political profile	NAI	11	4	14	0
	NI	21	19	29	9
	QI	28	70	21	55
	VI	40	7	36	36

Source: Survey data collected from MPs and aspirants (2024).

⁴ "Presidential Leadership Program" jointly implemented by the FDRE Office of the President and UN Women Ethiopia from 2021-2024; observation made by the corresponding author who served as facilitator of the training from July 13-18, 2023 at the town of Town of Bishoftu in Oromia.

As Table 3 demonstrates, 88% of female MPs and 81% aspirants reported that their 'interest to represent women' was very important in shaping their candidacy decision and party membership while only 42% male MPs and 17% aspirants responded in the same way in this regard. Likewise, as it's noted during the coding of data, some MPMs left a comment under this item by saying, "questions of this kind shouldn't be raised to men since these are women's concerns". In relation to such a comment, one MPM maintains a similar view by stating that.

I don't understand it as women representing women, if there is a husband there is a wife; a brother needs to represent a sister. We are the representatives of the public, except that FPMs are female in their sex there is no difference between us (IDI- 8, 1 April 2024).

Referring to the majority of FPMs (88%) and aspirants (81%) who consider 'representing women' as more important factor than to run for office, it's possible to say that, FPMs either consider themselves as representatives of women more than MPMs do or perceive politics as avenue for promoting the interests of women. This aligns with the 'surrogate representation' (Mansbridge, 2003) view of 'sentimental responsibility' of the representatives that reinforce Saward's (2010) 'representative claim' which emphasizes on the argument that legally mandated representatives represent their constituencies' independent of the surrounding realities.

The other important element that informs the political path of women is their invitation by political parties. Although the stories of vulnerability to political violence by former female politicians and academic exposure are cited by some interviewees (IDI -7, 9-12, March 30 -31, April 11 and July 3, 2024), the analyses of the survey data (86% female and 62% male MPs vs. 72% female and 50% male aspirants) is in line with the idea that party invitation is one of the primary reasons to join and run for office. One middle-aged FPMs mentioned the following along the same line (IDI- 13, 14 April 2024);

I was one of the best performers in my woreda administrative office; I was excited by the 2018 new political development of the country, once I was invited by the party via phone call, I accepted and run for office.

Besides, women's interest to join politics is found to be a reflection of their ethnic affiliation. Another FPM confirmed (discussion with one FPM during a capacity building training, 2 August 2023);

I do not like politics. I feel I am better educated member of my ethnic group, when I was invited by one of the male members of my party, I couldn't decline although I like business and aspire to be a successful business woman. Who is there for my community? It's me who should set-aside personal priority and serve its interest until others succeed me.

As the results show, the political path of women in Ethiopia and its implication on their current and desired substantive political representation is more influenced by party and ethnic affiliation instead of the widely held argument that women are beholden to politics to bring the gendered experience of women.

Apart from party and ethnic affiliation as ground of entrance to politics, a notable gender difference is observed regarding political expertise as encouraging factor to join politics. 70% male MPs and 55% aspirants expressed that their political expertise is more important in informing their decision to run or join a party compared to 28% female MPs and 21% aspirants. This gender variation implies the perception that male MPs' and aspirants' path to politics emanates from their political competence than FMPs and aspirants. As it's noted in the interviews, though there are MPMs who did not expect to be picked as candidates by their parties, they commonly remark on list of their political experience. 54.4% of FMPs' prior political experience lies in "women associations and groups" who mainly engage in fund raising and other informal political activities than men who do much more formal political activism (Fraile, 2014). The earlier study of Gouws (2008) also indicating that more legislative seats of South Africa are occupied by the previous female members and leaders of women groups.

Although "searching for a living" served as another component of the motivating factors, the response of parliamentarians and aspirants was largely negative irrespective of sex. 61% male and 58% female aspirants felt "search for a living" was not important in their decision to join party as it's reflected in the candidacy of 28% FMPs and 49% of MPMs. However, the interviews conducted with aspirants are indicative of contrasting stories. As per a remark of one male party leader:

Some parties use women as source of earning, some of them using the state funding to buy land and other belongings. Some of them are like private companies. You might find a family-owned political party that chaired by a father, with his daughter as secretary and his wife as finance head (IDI-1, 6 March 2024).

There were also similar observations from the several capacity building trainings provided for members of political parties and incumbents. There were heated arguments between organizers and participants over repeated attendance of similar personalities (personal observation, June 16 2024). As one female aspirant mentioned this refers to some political parties "with no female members other than their female family members" (IDI-14, 16 October, 2024). Since the 2005 general elections gender-related requirements of funding of parties have been introduced and it appears that parties' source of income increased from one election to the other in this context.

Table 4: *State political parties funding and gender related requirements*

Year	No parties	Female candidates (Member in 2022-2023)	Total funding
2005	40	1035	86,400
2010	45	996	4,415,235.79
2016	58	1270	4,500,003.70
2021	47	1976	34,518,470.04
2022	50	4,887,612	19,469,232.26
2023	58	7,948,407	19,499,968.78

Source: NEBE (2006, 2010, 2016, 2019, 2021)

Note: The data only include the gender component of political parties' public finding.

Other sources of public funding are excluded for better gender comparability.

The data presented in Table 4 revealed that though the gender components for the country's electoral directives increased across elections with simultaneous increase in public funding of political parties, the extent of women representation as leaders and candidates lack consistency with constantly increased male dominance. Currently of 58 political parties (19 nationwide and 39 Regional) in Ethiopia, only one is chaired by a woman. This is also exhibited in the practices of ruling Prosperity Party (the PP). While the PP claims to have over 5,360,683 female members (NEBE, 2024), 75.6% of the party's council members are men while only 24.4% are women (EBC, 2025)⁵. This data aligns with Tripp's (2012) classic study of Uganda, where she found out women's modest committee leadership and men's continued domination.

Likewise, although the voting record of women in the country is improving across elections, the proportional candidacy of women is still overshadowed by the dominance of their male counterparts. See Figure 2 summarizing the voting and candidacy record of women in the course of six general elections (NEBE, 2016; 2021).

5 The data only consider the candidate of political parties

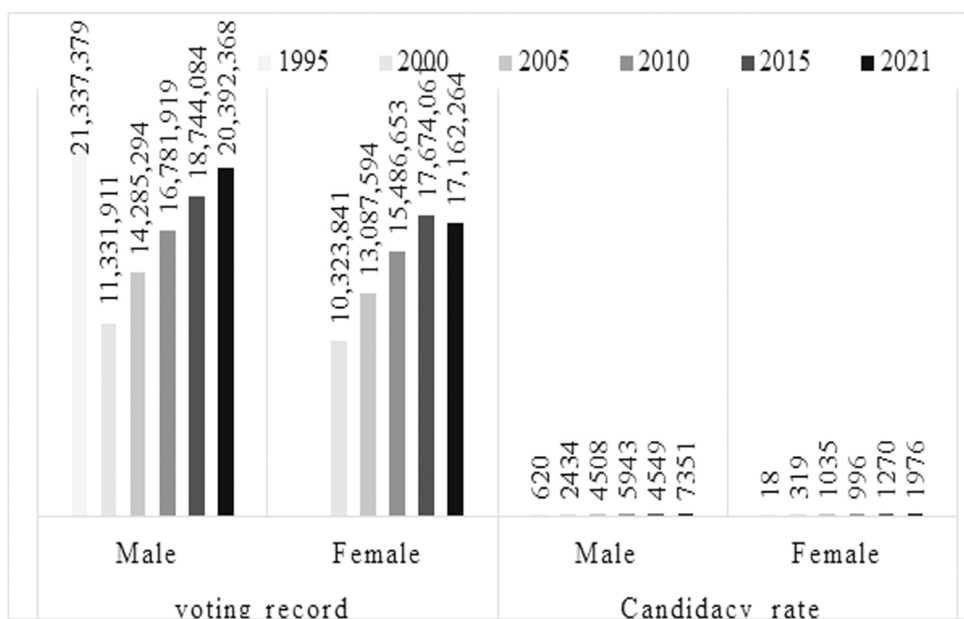


Figure 2: The voting and candidacy records of women in Ethiopia (1995-2021)

Sources: Archival data of the NEBE, 2016 and 2021.

Note: Sex disaggregated voting rate is not available for 1995 general election and candidacy rate does not show independent female candidates.

This result reflects the findings in other studies. As OSCE’s (2014) study indicated the leadership of women in political parties has been constrained due to gender biased party work procedure and organizational culture. Likewise, Ohman and Lintari (2015) in their study of Kenya revealed their doubt about the impact of public funding of political parties in enhancing women’s access and success in holding elected offices. Questions about the gender impact of state funding in Ethiopia’s women access to political offices, how political parties actually utilize funding from the government, and whether government funding creates enabling environment for substantive representation of women are very important issues requiring further inquiries this study highlights, in order to understand women’s path to elective offices and the broader implications of these on their substantive representation.

4.3. The leadership preference and status of women

The other crucial dimension that impacts women’s path to political offices is their political leadership preferences. In this study, women are neither better in their political competence nor possess a leadership preference distinct from men. Instead, their gendered experience informs both leadership preference and status once they join elective offices.

Table 5: *Future leadership preference of MPs and aspirants*

Variables	Parliamentarians (%)		Aspirants (%)	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Women, gender, children	23.3	9.9	6	8
Social, culture, sport and health	23.3	16.9	14	15
Environment	3.5	11.3	18	19
Resource utilization	15.1	26.8	39	38
Employment, education, technical and vocational	12.8	16.9	22	19
President, prime minister and foreign relation	1.2	2.8	0	0
Political and justice institutions	8.1	14.1	0	0

Source: Survey data collected from MPs and aspirants (2024).

Table 5 shows that, although none of the leadership categories heavily dominates the others, “resource utilization” is preferred by 30% of female aspirants and 38% by male aspirants; with 26 % for MPMs than 15.1% FMPs. This again is in line with observations in earlier studies which maintain that gender, children social, cultural, sport and health related leadership posts are favored more by FPMs (23.3%) than by MPMs (13.4%). Studies by Ucaray-Mangitli and Yildirim (2023), IDEA (2024), Javed and Malik (2021), Pandsardi & Vercesi (2016) and UN Women (2025) all cited heavy presence of women in feminine clusters and less in policy influential parliamentary committee and party positions (86.7%), compared with men (81%) who were disproportionately appointed in higher and prestigious political posts such as defense, justice and security. Altogether, observation from these five factors support the conclusion that the leadership preferences of incumbents still reinforce the societal vertical and horizontal stereotypical division of labor limiting the actual political control by women. Yet, leadership preference cannot alone capture the whole political track of women. This study includes the leadership status of women from mid 1990s to the present (See Figure 3 and 4).

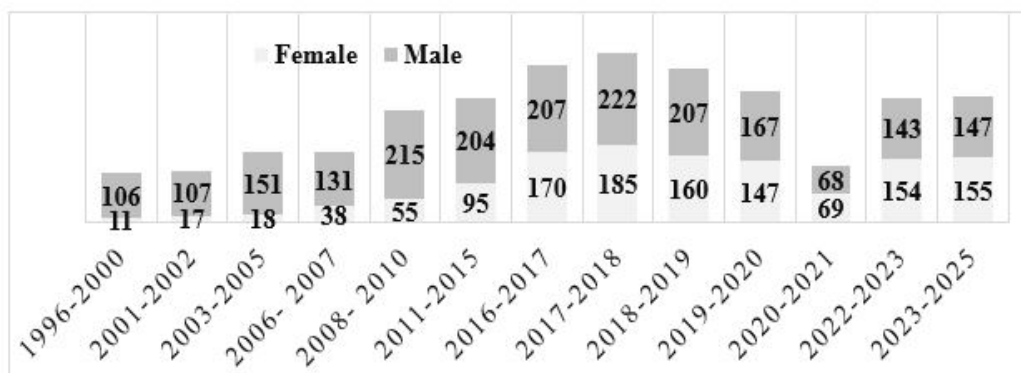


Figure 3: The membership of women in the HoPRs standing committees (1996-2025); Sources: Archival data of the HoPRs, (2024).

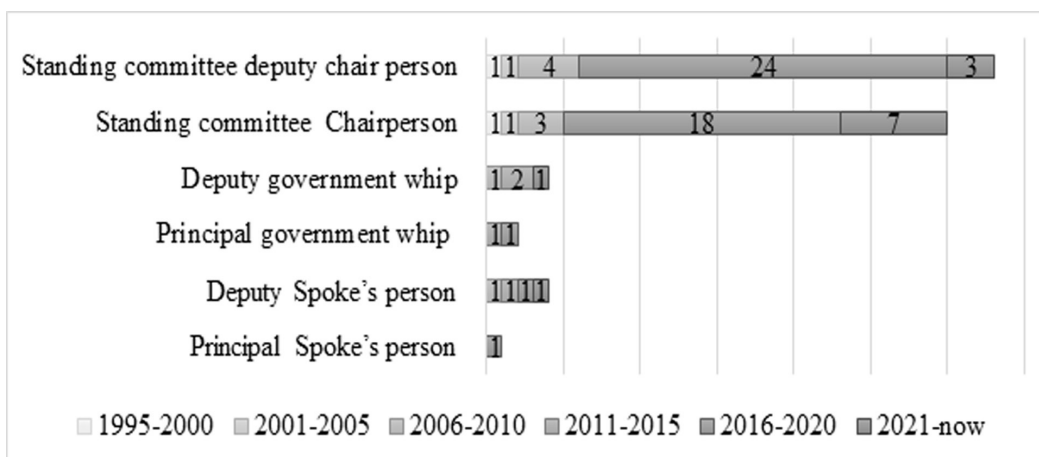


Figure 4: The appointment level of FMPs to the executive positions of HoPRs.

Source: Archival data collected from the secretariat of HoPRs (2024).

Though there is a lack of consistency due to the frequent committee restructuring (promotion, merger, splitting) including the Women Affairs Standing Committee that has been reduced to a subcommittee for the first time over 30 years, the representation of women in standing committees and the other key positions is improving. Currently, 7 (60%) of standing committees are chaired by women. However, marked gender difference was observed in the appointment of FPMs in key executive posts. Of the total 120 MPs assigned to the executive bodies, only 35 (29 %) are women while 85 (71%) are men. This is also reflected in spokesperson and government whip positions.

The future reelection and candidacy interest of women was also examined as another important element of women's interest to stays in politics. Currently, 18 MPs (10 female

and 8 male) are serving for two or more terms.

Table 6: Reelection/candidacy interest of PMs and aspirants

	Parliamentarians (%)		Aspirants (%)		
	Female	Male	Female	Male	
Do you have a plan to serve the HoPRs for additional term as a candidate for your party?	Definitely	21	13.3	4	8
	Probably	58	52	8	12
	Probably not	9.9	16	16	12
	Definitely not	6.2	1.3	39	42
	I would not do it	4.9	17.3	33	27

Source: Survey data collected from MPs and aspirants (2024).

Note: Reelection and candidacy interest measured by 5 Likert type scale (1-lower and 5-higher).

As Table 6 illustrates, more than half of MPs express the possibility of their reelection. On the other side, their response dropped down in the case of the item of “Definitely”, indicating their doubt of reelection which requires further probing & investigation into gendered and gender-neutral factors of reelection. This is found to be inconsistent with an earlier study by Papp & Russo (2018) that highlighted the link between party’s candidate selection procedures and the likelihood of incumbents’ reselection and reelection. In this study the relative majority of aspirants select “*Definitely not*” and “*I would not do it*” reflecting the view of one-party leader that “the political landscape is narrow and the process of democratization is stagnant, it creates fear and uncertainty for both male and female aspirants” (IDI-6, 30 March 2024). This also implies that the interest of women for additional tenure and candidacy cannot alone explain their political goal unless transparent and accountable candidate selection procedures are in place by political parties and elective offices. This in turn necessitates examining the question as to what other important factors constitute the termination of the terms of incumbents and discourage aspirants to take part in political activities.

Table 7: Factors affecting resignation from office/party politics

Variable	Parliamentarians (%)		Aspirants (%)	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Health problems	65.4	51.4	56.8	68.0
Family related issues	21.0	13.9	27.3	24.0
Economic pressures	11.1	5.6	18.2	24.0
Party resistance	61.7	65.3	22.7	52.0
Educational opportunity	11.1	15.3	9.1	12.0
Political violence	18.5	11.1	15.9	16.0
I will never leave	18.5	20.8	38.6	32.0

Source: Survey data collected from MPs and aspirants (2024).

The result shows both shared and divergent consideration and factors to quit from politics. For example, “Health Problem” is the broadly selected factor by both legislators and aspirants. As it’s also noted more FMPs (65.4%) are more likely to resign from office if they face health challenges than 51.4% MPMs do. As it clearly emerged female aspirants encounter political and electoral violence and various forms of family or social exclusion which profoundly hamper their emotional and physical wellbeing forcing quit from politics earlier. This is in line with the observation that, when a health status checkup campaign was launched by women caucus of HoPRs, FMPs cited health related problems including cervical and breast cancer. Similar findings by Allen (2013), and Raymond and Overby (2019) show that the simultaneity of political and family mandates together with the absence of safer politics derive women to withdraw or retire from politics.

The other broadly considered factor forcing women to resign from politics is the resistance of their respective party. The relevant item here is picked by over 60% of legislators, by half (52%) of male aspirants and 27.1% of female aspirants, suggesting the commitment of female aspirants to stay in politics despite the reality of encountering pressure or violence. However, the response of participants to the item “I will never leave politics” revealed a modest difference across different groups. Although, both groups reported that they prefer to stay in politics regardless of challenges including those related with violence, only 38.6% female and 32% male aspirants show commitment to stay in politics. This indicates that although women’s path to politics has been challenged by both gendered and gender-neutral factors, they still try to stay in politics by managing both the challenges and the opportunities (Pitkin, 1967; Saward, 2010). The finding in this study also questions the usually held assumptions that women resign from politics for lack of resources, violence, party resistance and domestic responsibilities while calling for further investigation into the diverse challenges faced by women both in parliament and in political organizations.

5. Conclusion

Altogether, this study explored the political path of Ethiopian women by analyzing their social and political background in comparison with men. The findings revealed social factors such as the age of children which may delay women’s entry into politics overtly. As its shown, though both male and female legislatures and aspirants are found to have similar educational status and career experience, a greater number of FMPs and aspirants report their prior professional engagement, child rearing and other gender issues as important factors compared with MPMs and aspirants who engage in direct political activities such as local and regional political activism as path to political offices.

The findings also show the gender impact of political factors such as representatives’ motivation, leadership preference, political status and commitment to stays in politics. Both female and male incumbents consider political party as primary source of candidacy support, although their response still highlights the inadequacy and inconsistency of such

supports. Notable difference was however observed in the representational motivation of women as more FPMs and aspirants agreed on representing other fellow women while prior political knowledge and involvement are reported by men as driving factors of candidacy and party membership. Interestingly, though more MPMs and aspirants as well are reluctant to recognize 'women representation' as a motive to run for office, notable number of them recognize women groups and associations as support basis of their candidacy as FPMs did.

Leadership preference also reveals the desire of more women to lead women, with gender, children affairs and social, cultural, sport and health sectors reflecting their prior professional areas of engagement. The assessment shows men more aspire for 'resource utilization' sectors indicating the presence of more men in policy influential political leadership positions. As observed from the analysis of leadership status, while the gender parity of membership and key legislative leadership posts are open for women across parliaments, the heavy leadership of MPMs and aspirants are evident in regards to both parliamentary and party settings. Moreover, views about the reelection and candidacy interest indicated that women quit politics due to late political arrival that shorten their term of office and family related problems while men may not be considered for further candidacy due to parties' candidate selection procedures and other political considerations.

Altogether, the result demonstrates notable gender differences as well as commonalities as to how elective offices have been accessed by women in comparison with men. Social factors like age, marital status, and age of children are indicative of marked gender dynamics while partner support, educational level and job seniority exhibit commonalities. There are modes of differences between female and male PMs and aspirants and with variations within female legislatures and aspirants themselves. These are also manifested in relation to the variables about political factors, such as type of pre-party and parliament political activism, representatives' motivation, political support, reelection interest, leadership preference and status, and factors resulting in termination of political career. This mixed outcome of the analyses in this study implies the extent of commonalities between female and male incumbents and aspirants. Moreover, both the societal and political background of women would continue to affect their access to elective offices.

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Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The writers declare no conflict of interest that could impact this study's findings, interpretation and conclusion.

Ethical Statement

This study is based on both statistical and qualitative data with the consent of the study population.

Statement of Originality

The writers declare that this work is original and has not been presented for publication elsewhere.

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Appendix 1: National Political parties of Ethiopia and their female leaders and members

S.No	Name of National Party	No. of female members	No. of female leaders
1	Prosperity party	5360683	7
2	Ethiopian Social-Democratic Party	1000865	2
3	New Generation	235000	4
4	Ethiopian democratic party	190000	2
5	Oromo Liberation front	90869	0
6	Ogden National Liberation Front	87702	4
7	Oromo Federalist Congress	23468	1
8	Ethiopian citizen fir social justice	23206	4
9	Hibir Ethiopia democratic party	21400	2
10	All Ethiopian unity party	18574	1
11	Raya Rayuma Democratic Party	15341	2
12	Enat party	13250	5
13	freedom and equality	8630	4
14	Wello People Democratic Party	6796	2
15	Wolita people National Movement	4222	3
16	Ethiopia National Unity Party	3000	3
17	Gogot for Gurage unity and justice party	2927	3
18	Ethiopian People Revolutionary Party	2000	2
19	National Congress of Great Tigray	1858	0
Total		7109791	51

Source: Archival Center of the National Electoral board of Ethiopia (NEBE) November 2025

Appendix 2: List of key informants

Code	Interviewee type	Position	Site	Date
IDI-1	Political Party	Male secretariat	Office	6 March 2024
IDI-2	Political Party	Female secretariat	Office	16 March 2024
IDI-3	Political Party	Female member	Residence	20 March 2024
IDI-4	Political Party	Female member	Residence	22 March 2024
IDI-5	Political Party	Female secretariat	Office	25 March 2024
IDI-6	Parliamentarian	Male MPs	library	30 March 2024
IDI-7	Political Party	Male chair person	Office	30 March 2024
IDI-8	Parliamentarian	Male MPs	Committee Office	1 April 2024
IDI-9	Political Party	Women wing leaders	Office	March 31 2024
IDI-10	Political Party	Female member	Office	March 31 2024
IDI-11	Political Party	Female member	Training hall	July 3 2024
IDI-12	Political Party	Female finance head	Office	April 11 2024
IDI-13	Parliamentarian	Female MPs	Residence	14 April 2024
IDI-14	Political Party	Female member	Office	16 October 2024