

# Assessing the status of sustainable development goal 5 (gender equality) in South African context

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**Abstract:** In the context of South Africa, the study evaluates the state of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 (focus). There are still many public and private organisations, corporations, public service departments, and local, provincial, and national government levels that exhibit gender inequality. Owing to the topic's comprehensiveness, the study only examines the current state of gender equality at the local level (locus), as there are few discussions of the SDGs in a localised setting. In South Africa, discrimination against women has long existed. The persistent patriarchy could serve as evidence for this. Historically, men have been chosen for strategic appointments and promoted to higher positions. There have been several attempts in the last few years to stop this tendency, but it still exists despite various acts and legislative frameworks. What are the factors contributing to gender inequality and impeding the achievement of SDG 5 in South African local government? is the primary research question that forms part of the study. The article uses a qualitative desktop analysis to collect data and draw conclusions. The data was gathered through a review of the literature, which involved using a variety of academic journals, research projects, dissertations, and official documents. Document analysis as well as conceptual analysis were used to evaluate the data. Preserving equality and human rights has been one of the goals since the nation became democratic in 1994. The Bill of Rights in South Africa forbids all forms of discrimination and acts as a legal guarantee of gender equality. The United Nations Habitat 2008 documents state that the country's highest legal framework, the 1996 Constitution, requires the implementation of equality-promoting measures. This is mandated by the Affirmative Action Act, which calls for racial and gender equality to be balanced. Additionally, given the stark underrepresentation, it promotes government initiatives to support women's empowerment in the workplace and gender-based participation in decision-making platforms. But research reveals that barriers still exist that keep women out of political and administrative roles in South Africa, even with all the tools at their disposal—including institutional policies, legislative frameworks, and political will. It appears that the government is not acting forcefully enough to stop this from happening. To stop this trend from continuing, the government must act decisively to buck the trend. To do this, it is necessary to implement severe penalties for violators of the nation's laws and policies aimed at empowering women and to take campaigns and actions seriously. This article suggests implementing civic education to ensure the continued success of South Africa's relationship with culture and gender equality. The article makes the argument that gender inequality is a problem that needs to be addressed constantly, and that strategic discussions and solutions are needed. The article's objective was to start a conversation that would necessitate practitioners and policymakers joining the platform. To produce a longitudinal study of substantial value and contribute to the fields of gender studies, local government, and public administration, a consistent effort will be made to publish papers on this subject on a continuous basis.

**Keywords:** gender, gender equality, qualitative research, South Africa, sustainable development goal 5

## Introduction

**G**lobally speaking, and including South Africa as well, gender inequality has been prevalent. Considered to be one of the branches of government closest to the people is local government. The local government's mission is to partially supply the communities with essential services. The roles played by both men and women who work for the municipalities, along with the services that the communities receive from the local

governments, have a substantial impact on the communities' lives. Gender inequality is a real problem in South Africa, particularly at the local government level. The reason is that there are numerous obstacles related to gender inequality in municipalities, explored in this article.

Numerous laws have been developed to ensure gender equality, which is included in the Bill of Rights in the Republic of South Africa's 1996 Constitution. In South Africa, women face numerous obstacles, including lack of representation and voice in society. Due to social attitudes and gendered norms that impede their meaningful access to the structure of opportunities, employment, and social institutions, these challenges render them economically, socially, and politically disempowered, as highlighted in the documents of the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) Women's Commission (2017:3). When compared to their male counterparts, women are underrepresented in politics, which has a substantial impact on their social and economic standing, as further emphasised by the SALGA Women's Commission (2017:3). Women in local government encounter numerous obstacles pertaining to gender disparity in public office appointments, where data indicates that a higher proportion of positions—primarily high-level positions—are held by men.

Women continue to face significant discrimination even though policies have been put in place to protect them globally. While gender inequality has been combated in South Africa through various policy frameworks, the fight is still in its early stages. Women are not allowed to hold any other positions in the market or economy because of the stereotype of motherhood. Household duties are expected of women in society, particularly in rural areas, and are followed by childrearing, or the other way around, explores Bob (2013:107). There is very little chance that a woman will represent a community when it comes to citizen participation in policymaking. Government representatives meet with specific representatives of various communities to obtain information. The societal belief that men can handle such tasks and that women lack the appropriate words to use makes it difficult for women to engage in those meetings. A major obstacle to the implementation of laws supporting women and the development of democracy in the nation is the way society undermines the role of women or does not trust women in positions of authority, as opined by Albertyn (2011:39). Women in the communities are not effectively reached by the local government, which has an impact on the government. The local government is responsible for fostering relationships with people. This study intends to examine the reasons behind and contributing variables to gender inequality in South African local government.

## **Materials and Methods**

The article utilised qualitative research methodology as a means of data collection. Two of the distinguishing features of qualitative research are providing in-depth descriptions of the social contexts under investigation and concentrating on events, norms, and values from the viewpoint of those being studied. The researcher attempts to gain a qualitative understanding of the situation by examining events and behaviour in the context of each other, as suggested by Bryman (1995:61) and adapted by Maile (2022:11). The article used desktop analysis to analyse the data. Information was compiled using literature reviews of journal articles, books, official reports, and research works in the areas of gender equality and local governance. Finding and evaluating literature and/or information sources related to a particular research question is the task of a literature review, as opined by Robson (2011, in Makhubu 2020:10). The crucial step in the research process that offers a thorough analysis of recently published research findings in particular areas of interest is called the literature review (Houser 2018:109). The literature review, according to Machi and McEvoy (2012:4, in Mutenga 2021:31-32), is a collection of written documents that makes a case for a subject of study that is rationally supported by extensive knowledge of the field's current state of knowledge. The information was assessed through conceptual and document analysis. For qualitative research involving multiple concepts of interest and/or when understanding the relationship between these concepts and how they have evolved over time is necessary, then conceptual analysis is crucial, suggests Pirttimäki (2007:11). All things considered, conceptual analysis facilitates a thorough comprehension of a concept and, as a result, supports both the application of practical solutions based on findings presented, and additional theoretical developments (Graan, Williams, and Koen 2016:33, 38, in Soga 2022: 51). On the other hand, document analysis is a social research technique that is employed, particularly in literature reviews, to gather pertinent documentary evidence to bolster and validate research findings. Reviewing and analysing a substantial amount of written content is part of this exercise (Creswell 2013, in Mutenga 2021:31).

The past has seen several development movements that call to enhance gender-based equality. Some of the significant movements include Women in Development (WID), Women and Development (WAD), and Gender and Development (GAD). These developments led the path to establish various gender-linked approaches in a multi-disciplinary context. The notable ones are the gender disparities theory, critical feminism theory, the efficiency

approach, the equal treatment approach, the equity approach, the gender mainstreaming approach (GMA), the liberal theory, the empowerment approach, and the welfare approach. The feminist movements, especially the ones that were gender-based, brought positive transformation, which states that gender-based considerations must be included into all government initiatives, programmes, and policies. The GMA is the acronym given to this gender mainstreaming approach. As the GMA satisfies the goals of this study, the researcher accepted it as a theoretical framework (cf Bangani 2019).

**Results and Discussion**

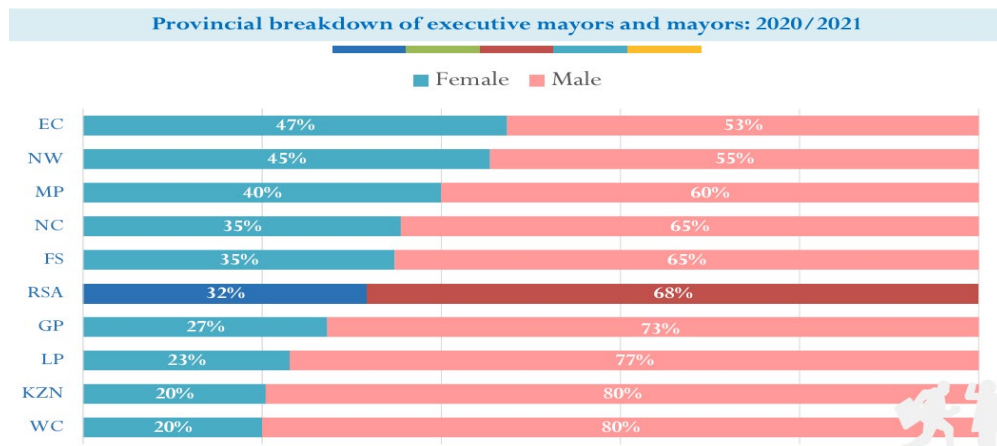
The literature compiled in this section explores the following: the information regarding gender inequality in South African municipalities is discussed. There are various factors causing challenges to achieve gender equality. These challenges are highlighted that rationalise the non-achievement of SDG5 in the country, especially in the local context. Based on the findings, the article offers conclusions with policy recommendations that may be considered by policymakers for improvement.

**Gender inequality in South African municipalities**

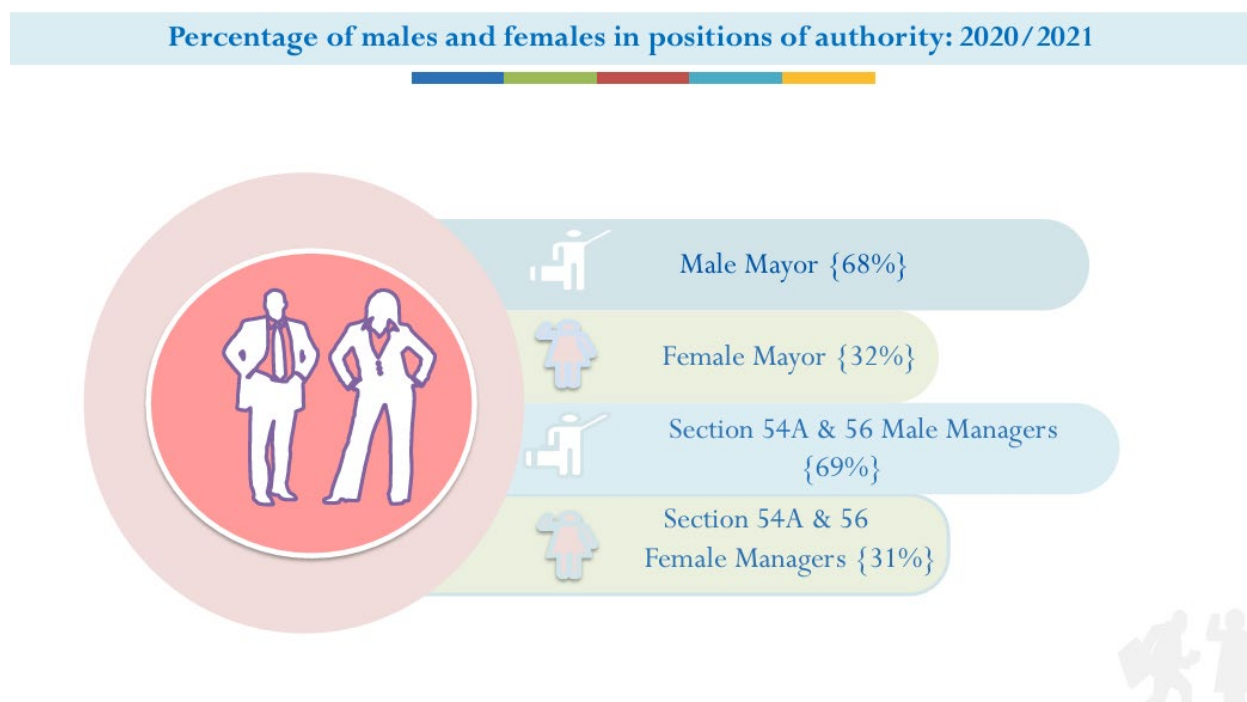
The low standard of living that the majority of South Africans currently receive continues to be a major source of concern for the government and other stakeholders. Unbelievably high rates of poverty, unemployment, and disempowerment are found in South Africa. But these challenges are not distributed equally, and rural women—especially Black women—continue to bear the brunt of these disadvantages. This is a concern raised by Babbie and Mouton (2001:9). According to Casale and Posel's research (2010:46) Black community members who are residing in geographically far rural areas experience more poverty than those in metropolitan areas. Additionally, Statistics South Africa (SA) (2016:1) state that in contrast to rural men's rates of 55%, urban women's rates of 42%, and urban men's rates of 30%, Black rural women had the highest rates of poverty, at 70%. According to Evertzen (2000:1) research on agricultural productivity in Africa indicates that there is a significant negative correlation between gender inequality and agricultural output. The mounting evidence that limits placed on a woman's well-being have no positive effect on future productivity because the likelihood of children enrolling in school rises with their moms' educational level. Next generation productivity is also negatively impacted by gender inequality.

According to Masenya and Mokoele (2015:26) due to higher time costs associated with gender inequality, women are less motivated to produce trade commodities and are thus less able to respond favorably to supply-side of structural adjustment measures. It can be argued that because of gender inequality among women, investing in women's education should not be neglected in the interest of economic growth and education. Khosla and Barth (2008:2015) argue that gender inequality is a serious issue in local government, as men continue to dominate, and women are not given the same opportunities or status. The differences between men and women's access to opportunities, resources, employment, economic advancement, and fundamental human rights are just a few of the ways that this gender inequality presents itself. The graphs 1 and 2 illustrate how gender inequality is still present in South African politics and public office positions, where women continue to be denied equal rights.

**Graph 1: Provincial breakdown of executive mayors and mayors 2020/2021**



Source: Statistics South Africa 2023:32.

**Graph 2: Percentage of males and females in positions of authority: 2020/2021**

Source: Statistics South Africa 2023:34.

Since the last election in 2021, there has been a 4.1% decrease in the overall representation of women in local councils. Women's representation in ward seats has decreased from 33% in 2016 to 12.7% in 2021, while women's representation in PR seats, which we once applauded, has drastically decreased from 48% in 2016 to 24.2% in 2021 (Maziwisa 2022:3). See Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Women's representation in ward and PR seats from 1995-2021**

Year	Women (ward seats)	Women (PR seats)	Women (overall)
1995	11	28	19
2000	17	38	29
2006	37	42	40
2011	33	43	38
2016	33	48	41
2021	12.7	24.2	36.9

Source: Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) in Maziwisa 2022:3.

The percentages from the table and graphs demonstrate that there is a lack of equality when it comes to employment and women's empowerment. This also highlights the fact that men occupy many positions in the local government. This scenario is supported by the works of Jansen and Vyas-Doorgapersad (2023:1984) emphasising that because of this, the institutional elements of municipalities foster an organisational culture that is dominated by men. This, in turn, shapes the economic factors, which give men greater financial autonomy within the community by allocating a significant portion of salary costs to them. Institutionally, there is no one to make sure that gender-related issues are brought up and meaningfully represented because men represent organised labour, the employer, and the council. It was further reason out by Vyas-Doorgapersad (2015:122; 2023:2062) stressing that institutional plans and guidelines haven't taken gender equality into account, hence leading to lack of gender mainstreaming in municipal organogram. This can be deduced that there is gender inequality at local government, and women are not empowered enough to claim strategic appointments. The factors causing gender inequality are discussed in the next section.

### **Factors causing challenges related to gender inequality in South Africa municipalities**

This section discusses factors that cause challenges related to gender inequality in South Africa municipalities/local governance. Social, economic, political, institutional, and other factors are discussed. Gender inequality in South African municipalities presents several difficulties, ranging from a lack of funding to unstable financial situations in the homes these women come from to a lack of opportunities for empowerment.

The social factors investigate the idea that policymakers in South Africa should not ignore poverty in all its forms, since problems like unemployment are caused due to citizens who are not given the opportunity to further their education and obtain the qualifications they need to apply for jobs. Living in impoverished rural areas devoid of municipal employment opportunities and without a way to obtain information about job postings is another contributing factor, as highlighted by Cuberes and Teignier-Baqué (2012).

Economic factors are mostly linked to the lack of employment opportunities offered to women. Standing and Sender (1996) opine that gender equality in municipalities is challenged by several issues that are caused by economic factors. The dearth of suitable employment opportunities and the scarcity of newly created positions in South African municipalities are among these problems. Those who are on the painful receiving end of employment inequality might well obviously not have employment if there are no job opportunities. Gender inequality persists in municipalities even though policies designed to support women are currently in place. This is because putting these policies into practice is a significant challenge. It was added by Kahn and Motsoeneng (2014:20) that the number of jobs and educational opportunities available to women was reduced by programmes for structural adjustment and economic reform. This had an impact on women's chances of holding management-level positions because education is crucial in fostering the development of a new concept of power that is less stereotyped, less focused on hierarchical elements, and more accessible to women.

The inability of public policy to be implemented effectively may be related to political factors. It is also important to note that political candidates running for local office make public promises in their manifestos to address social issues that lead to the ongoing battle against gender-based inequality. However, once in office and holding municipal offices, these candidates often fall short of their promises. There are numerous municipalities where the community's dynamics have not changed much since the previous local elections. Those holding political office have utterly failed to improve living standards or end gender inequality. According to Beall (2005:253), important political decision-making inner sanctuaries are off-limits to women. The political development and advancement of men is positively impacted by their support networks (Beall 2005:253). The adage 'a woman is at her best at home' reflects the societal preference for women in their roles as mothers and wives. It is purported that women are not allowed to pursue careers in politics due to the perception that this is an industry fraught with dishonest behaviour and dirty political games, as emphasised by Gasa (2000:17). Women should therefore be kept out of such harmful environments. In some political circles, women are perceived as having insufficient time and ability to genuinely engage in the work stream due to their frequent juggling of work at home and the office. Thus, political actions are viewed as an additional burden. This makes it more challenging for women to be in positions of leadership in both business and politics, as further stressed by Gasa (2000:17). Unfortunately, character assassination is a strategy used to undermine women who are rising through the ranks of the corporate ladder, leaving them more vulnerable to sexual references and accusations (Hicks 2011:23). Because of the humiliating and stigmatising behaviours that take place in politics, women are purposefully discouraged from entering the field even though they have equal political rights (Municipal Focus Magazine 2016:5). Politicians' treatment of women is influenced by their limited access to information, which results in limited knowledge and perpetuates their inferior status in positions of decision-making (Municipal Focus Magazine 2016:5)

There are also various institutional factors that may not be successful in implementing gender-based policies and programmes. According to Bevir (2011:129) ensuring an equal representation of both men and women in high-level decision-making roles should be the imperative goal of human resources departments. This is an area where human resources departments typically struggle. Furthermore, lack of professional development, skill training, management training, decision-making skills, and mentorship programmes contributes to the perception that women are incapable of leading effectively. The organisational culture, or set of recognised standards, values, and beliefs, determines how well the organisation performs. The people who make up the organisation are greatly impacted by these shared beliefs, principles, and standards. Every organisation develops and upholds its own distinct culture, which sets standards for behaviour among its constituents (Bevir 2011:129). Therefore, lack of culture to promote gender equality may reflect stereotypical 'gender-biased' value-prevalence in an organisation. According to Phillips

(1997:10) many women encounter an unwelcoming workplace culture because of these attitudes and behaviours. Many women and men are thought to find the social norms potentially harmful and the surroundings unaccommodating. One of the main barriers to advancement and a major factor in reducing job satisfaction, according to women (Phillips 1997:10) is an unsupportive and gender-non-responsive value-culture.

The fact that men predominate in local governments means that their structures are typically the most patriarchal that can exist. They have male-centric structures and procedures because there aren't enough women in positions of decision-making to influence how things should be done in a way that would be supportive of women. The format and conduct of meetings and discussions are tailored to suit the needs of men and conform to traditional male norms. The various duties that women have in their communities and at home are not considered by these structures and practices. Additionally, they don't consider how women listen, communicate, collaborate, or make decisions (United Nations 2008:46).

Additionally, female employees are viewed as having greater professional competence when handling lower-level portfolios. Despite considering the skills and experience that women have listed on their curriculum vitae; this mindset goes against the norms of women's empowerment and creates a box-approach to only consider them for entry-level positions. In addition, this situation makes it harder for women to advance to higher management positions, which has a long-term effect on their careers. At home, women are considered fit for the household activities only and at the professional front, they are considered for the entry-level portfolios well. This stereotypical mindset, along with personal prejudices, cultural norms, and a subjective attitude toward female employees, contributes to gender segregation in the workplace.

There may be other factors worth mentioning here. Reeves and Baden (2000:4) say that the reason society is still divided based on gender norms is due to ideological and cultural factors. Most family caregivers are still female. They don't have enough time to take care of their families and their political work together, because there are still no technological tools at home to reduce their workload. Because society believes that women shouldn't hold positions of authority, it finds it difficult to accept having a woman in a leadership role and consequently does not support female leaders. Even with their constitutional rights, women are not viewed as equals in society (Reeves and Baden 2000:4). According to Brandl, Mayrhofer, and Reichel (2008:77) the ways that work is divided within institutions and organisations are influenced by the cultural differences among different countries. What women should be or do for men defines them in many cultures. Married women are expected to support their husbands' career goals by providing them/him with emotional and moral support, as per cultural norms. In general, women are expected to take care of all household chores and housework while their spouse is away at work or school. Most societies hold women in low regard and frequently deny them the power to make decisions that impact their own and their families' lives (Brandl et al. 2008: 77). According to Budlender (2011:17) within organisations, many women experience high rates of sexual harassment or other forms of violence. One of the biggest problems with women in local government has been this, as it has been a major obstacle to women seeking positions of power or decision-making within the government. Due to the prevalence of men in powerful positions who can act however they please without facing repercussions, sexual harassment and violence are major issues in local government.

All these challenges require strategic interventions and strict measures to ensure that women are safe, protected, respected, empowered, honoured, appreciated and recognised for their knowledge, competencies and hard work. This demands women to receive support and adequate resources to attain well-deserved jobs, career options and development opportunities, discussed in the next section.

### **Resources required to improve gender inequality in South African Municipalities**

Based on the findings discussed in the previous section, the article proposes the consideration of following resources as a support to enhance gender equality in South African municipalities. These are considered as policy recommendations for improvement.

There is a need to ensure that there is a full participation and representation of women in political structures. According to SALGA's Women Commission (2017:18) the government must make sure that local governments have programmes supporting women's empowerment, gender equality, and equity in place, with an emphasis on women's representation and participation. This would overcome the obstacles faced by female ward councilors in municipalities and guarantee the 50/50 principle for women in political representation and senior management roles within local government. According to the Women Commission (2017), the government ought to work with political parties to establish a range of internal guidelines and procedures that may promote women's representation and involvement by firmly establishing the 50/50 rule in their party charters. In addition, the Women Commission

(2017) supports the establishment of well-organised gender machinery in municipalities, such as Women's Caucuses, Gender Section 79 Committees, and certain gender focal points, to carry out the National Gender Policy framework for Local Government.

Promoting suitable gender-based policies and initiatives is necessary to guarantee gender equality in municipal settings. Councils in local government entities are required to develop and approve gender policies and strategies that offer information on gender mainstreaming within their jurisdictions. Promoting legislation, new laws, and existing law reforms in local governments can help with gender mainstreaming. Municipalities should also draft anti-sexual harassment policies with clear procedures for disciplinary action and appeals. These policies and strategies should also be shared with all staff members and the community at large (Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs [CoGTA] 2015:42).

Municipalities must set up gender desks or working groups, host workshops and seminars, and organise discussions on issues related to gender equality among staff members. Establishing support systems that can boost the self-esteem and capacity of present and future female councilors is essential for their personal growth. If the necessary skills are not applied, shared, and utilised by councilors, then support structures for them are worthless. Given that these mechanisms must be integrated with the ways in which women function, they would not be restricted to the use of only female councilors but also be available to male councilors. As per the Commonwealth Local Government Forum, women councilors in local government can facilitate the creation of administrative machinery that supports women's participation in local government and promote gender working groups at the political level. This way, policies can be discussed and implemented in a way that addresses the concerns of women in local government (Maharaj 2012:9). One of the best ways to make sure gender mainstreaming strategies are implemented in the workplace is to establish gender focal points within local government organisations. The office of the mayor would be the ideal location for a gender focal point at a municipality, and the City Manager or Municipal Manager may be tasked with overseeing to it that it is implemented (Commission of Gender Equality [CGE] 2011:39).

To ensure that municipal employees are aware of gender equality, sufficient funding must be allocated to programmes that include gender mainstreaming, education, and training. It is important to consider that education, competency, skill development, and capacity building are all necessary for women to advance to higher management roles in local government. According to Mavundla (2009:3) in actuality, women have more general access to education than specific education. Programmes that specifically aim to give women opportunities to advance their capabilities are insufficient. Programmes specifically created with an emphasis on practical experience and management skills would guarantee the advancement of women into managerial roles in local government. Programmes for education and training are crucial to municipalities' efforts to mainstream gender. Programmes for education and training could also bridge the gap between policy formulation and execution. These initiatives may help women develop their capacity and improve their management knowledge and abilities, producing capable and seasoned female managers (Matone 2015:100), hence, to achieve gender mainstreaming and gender equality.

To evaluate how well gender equality policies and programmes are being implemented within their purview, municipalities must have sufficient monitoring and evaluation systems in place. To guarantee women's empowerment and advance gender equality, local government municipalities must devise strategies that could influence their human resource policies. Human resource departments should put forth and adopt a gender mainstreaming agenda as a means of monitoring and evaluating progress as well as appropriate institutional arrangements (City of Cape Town 2004:18).

Local government is essential to women's empowerment, as stated by Gwagwa (1991:7), and suggested that to prepare women for holding strategic portfolios, municipalities must register their female staff members and identify appropriate programmes that can empower them to effectively handle leadership roles and decision-making portfolios.

## **Conclusion**

The data used in this article was acquired through a review of literature and is based on qualitative desktop analysis. Examples of secondary sources of information include government documents, journal articles, the internet, Acts, and annual reports. Data analysis is done using conceptual and document analysis. The results show that, among other things, there are problems with social-cultural beliefs, a lack of knowledge about gender mainstreaming, a lack of funding, and a lack of capacity-building initiatives. Several themes are covered in the

article's thematic discussion of the causes of gender disparity, including social, economic, political, and institutional factors.

Given that municipalities are where women are most underrepresented in political decision-making and bureaucratic roles within the South African government, gender mainstreaming is crucial in these settings, as the findings have shown. The main cause of women's underrepresentation in positions of decision-making in local government is the stereotypical, cultural, traditional belief, which made it evident that women could never hold positions of leadership and that their place was always beside men, providing support and running households. These beliefs have permeated and uprooted societal notions of what it means to be a woman, placing women in boundaries expecting that they must stay inside.

It is ridiculous that policies for women should only be made by men. Additionally, if opinions are expressed exclusively by one gender, equality cannot be achieved. If municipalities only have men to make decisions about gender equality, this could be the root of inequality. To tackle this gender-based disparity, local government municipalities would be best served by having both men and women draft laws and policies that are supportive of women. Policies should be discussed in a gender-based setting where men and women can express their opinions about strategies for gender equality to prevent subjectivity, personal biases and prejudices.

To empower women to take on political roles, run for office, and build networks for other women in politics as well as a support system for themselves, local government should also encourage women to develop projects and programmes that will help them do so. Additionally, women should also be given the opportunity to create platforms that will help them advance their education and skill-building. The best way to empower women in positions of decision-making in local government is to assist them in developing networks that will enable them to create better opportunities for themselves. It is also recommended that the proper monitoring and evaluation protocols be adhered to ensure that women are serving as role models for the next generation of women who will occupy these positions and continue to push for gender equality. To make sure that everything is above board, this could be accomplished by conducting routine audits and reporting. In addition, since the goal of gender equality is to eradicate discrimination, men's concepts and ideas will not be entirely disregarded. This would serve as a forum for men holding political decision-making positions in local government to scrutinise and express their sentiments and views on these policies. This will create a gender-based environment accommodating both men and women equally for better career opportunities within their local government offices.

At the national level, there is a Department of Women. To address issues of gender equality in local governance, it is advised that South African local government municipalities think about establishing a women's department within their organisations. This would guarantee that some gender equality-related concerns are addressed and corrected efficiently and decisively. Women can also be involved in the creation and drafting of legislation, policies, programmes, and projects to address the issue of gender inequality in municipalities. As a result, the strategies would be seen from a wider angle and be more inclusive than they would have been if they were primarily handled mostly by men.

The article recommends the provision of a range of resources and support, including gender mainstreaming in political manifestos, gender consideration in hiring procedures, gender inclusion in decision-making portfolios, opportunities for gender-based training and professional development, gender-sensitive legislative regulations, etc. To foster gender mainstreaming debates, dialogues, awareness, and eventually implementation and realisation of sustainable development goal 5 in South Africa, these resources necessitate the establishment of gender forums, gender desks, and gender focal points. The article assesses the barriers to gender equality in South African municipalities, the causes and effects of gender inequality, and the resources required to mainstream gender in political and bureaucratic procedures and aims to contribute towards various disciplines including gender studies, public administration, and local governance.

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