

Formal Parity, Informal Exclusion: The Implementation Gap in Women's Political Representation in the Republic of the Congo

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Abstract

The Republic of the Congo guarantees women equal access to political office under a 2015 constitutional parity mandate and has ratified the principal international and regional gender-equality instruments. Yet women won only 16.56% of National Assembly seats after the 2022 elections and zero of the core ministerial portfolios. This article argues that the persistence of this gap is best understood not as an electoral-outcome problem but as a public-administration implementation problem: a divergence between adopted policy and administrative outcome located at identifiable institutional sites. Drawing on 17 key-informant interviews, an urban citizen-perception online survey (n = 86), and analysis of the statutory framework, the study extends the glass-ceiling and representative-bureaucracy lens, established for women's advancement within the bureaucracy, to the elective and ministerial tier. The legislature and cabinet are treated as the apex gatekeeping stages of a public-governance career ladder. The analysis locates the reform-representation gap in four institutional mechanisms: non-transparent party candidate selection, gender quotas designed without placement rules or sanctions, a two-round single-member majoritarian electoral system that amplifies party gatekeeping, and executive-appointment discretion lying outside the electoral-quota architecture. Read through implementation theory and feminist institutionalism, these mechanisms constitute a formal-informal institutional mismatch in which parity statutes are layered onto candidate-selection and appointment institutions that retain their gendered logic. The diagnosis specifies, in bounded and applied terms, where inclusion policy must intervene.

Keywords

Women's Political Representation, Policy Implementation, Representative

1. Introduction

Across many developing democracies, the formal apparatus of gender equality has advanced faster than its substantive realization. Constitutions guarantee equal access to office, states ratify international conventions, and legislatures adopt gender quotas; yet women remain a minority of elected representatives and a near-absence from the most powerful executive posts. The Republic of the Congo presents this divergence in an unusually sharp form. Article 17 of the 2015 Constitution guarantees women and men equal access to political, administrative, and professional functions, and the state has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), endorsed the African Union Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa, and ratified the Maputo Protocol. Women constitute a demographic majority of the citizenry (50.3%). After the 2022 legislative elections, however, women won 25 of 151 National Assembly seats: 16.56% (Inter-Parliamentary Union [IPU], 2022), with 22 seated since the legislature's installation on 16 August 2022 (14.6%; see Section 3), ranking the country 145th globally (IPU, 2024), well below the 27.2% global average as of January 2025 (IPU & UN Women, 2025) and the 30% benchmark embedded in the Beijing Platform and African Union frameworks. At the apex of the executive, the gap is total: although women have repeatedly held roughly a fifth of cabinet posts, no woman has held a core ministerial portfolio, finance, defense, interior, justice, or foreign affairs.

This is the descriptive-without-substantive pattern in its strong form, numerical presence unaccompanied by access to substantive power, and it is the empirical puzzle this article addresses. The puzzle is not the absence of legal commitment. By regional standards, the Congolese framework is comparatively extensive and, on several measures, progressive. The puzzle is the durability of the gap *despite* that framework, and the central claim advanced here is that the gap is, in the precise sense the discipline has long understood, an implementation failure: a divergence between adopted policy and administrative outcome that can be traced to specific points in the institutional machinery that public bodies and party organizations control.

Reframing women's political underrepresentation as a public-administration problem rather than an electoral one is the article's principal contribution, and it rests on a specific analytical move. Glass-ceiling theory and representative-bureaucracy theory are public-administration analytics developed to explain women's advancement *within* the bureaucracy (Connell, 2006; Naff, 1994; Sabharwal, 2015). This study extends them to the elective and ministerial tier, treating the legislature and the cabinet as the apex gatekeeping stages of a public-governance career ladder

rather than as a domain external to public administration. The extension is what permits the gap to be diagnosed in implementation terms at all, and what locates the decisive barriers in candidate-selection rules, quota design and enforcement, and electoral and executive oversight, the institutional arrangements public administration is equipped to analyze and reform.

The contribution is deliberately bounded. The article specifies where in the administrative and institutional architecture inclusion policy must intervene; it does not claim to establish that any particular reform would close the gap, a claim that would require implementation research, which the present study does not undertake. The analysis proceeds in six further sections. Section 2 develops the conceptual framework. Section 3 sets out the Congolese statutory framework and measures the reform-representation gap. Section 4 describes the data and methods. Section 5 presents the institutional mechanisms through which the gap is produced. Section 6 develops the implementation gap diagnosis and its general lesson. Section 7 specifies a bounded reform pathway, and Section 8 concludes.

2. Conceptual Framework: Glass Ceiling, Representative Bureaucracy, and the Implementation Lens

The analysis joins three strands of public administration and political science scholarship: a theory of how women's advancement is blocked, a theory of why representation in public institutions matters, and a theory of how adopted policy fails at execution.

The first strand is glass-ceiling theory. Kanter's (1977) account of tokenism and homosocial reproduction, the tendency of decision-makers to favor candidates whose characteristics resemble their own, explains how barriers to women's advancement operate beneath formal equality, through organizational, cultural, and structural mechanisms rather than explicit exclusion. Developed in the corporate setting, the framework has been applied within public administration to women's progress in the civil service (Connell, 2006; Naff, 1994; Sabharwal, 2015). Its analytical target is precisely the configuration the Congolese case presents: the coexistence of formal legal equality with substantive advancement blockage, whose mechanisms are diffuse, informal, and cumulative.

The second strand supplies the normative and analytical warrant for treating women's exclusion from office as an administrative-justice concern. Representative-bureaucracy theory holds that the demographic composition of public institutions has consequences for legitimacy and outcomes (An et al., 2022; Krislov, 1974; Mosher, 1968; Park & Liang, 2021), and Riccucci and Van Ryzin (2017) connect this tradition to social equity, the normative core (Frederickson, 1990, 2010) established for the field. The bridge to elective office runs through Pitkin's (1967) distinction between descriptive representation, the presence of group members, and substantive representation, the advancement of group interests, and Mansbridge's (1999) contingent defense of descriptive representation. The distinction is what makes the Congolese pattern analytically legible: rising seat shares along-

side zero core-ministry representation is a descriptive gain unaccompanied by substantive power, the gap descriptive representation alone cannot close (Barnes & Burchard, 2012; Olaitan, 2024). Treating the legislature and cabinet as the apex stages of a governance career ladder extends representative-bureaucracy reasoning from the bureaucracy to the offices that direct it.

The third strand is implementation theory, which supplies the diagnostic apparatus. The classic literature established that adopted policies routinely fail not at the point of decision but at the point of execution, as authority passes through successive administrative actors, each of whom can dilute or defeat the original intent (Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1983; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984). Lipsky's (2010) analysis of street-level bureaucracy is especially apposite here: the discretion exercised by the party selectors who rank candidate lists and by the electoral administrators who apply quota provisions is the proximate site at which a parity guarantee is converted into, or withheld from, an electoral outcome. Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000) sharpen the point that front-line actors do not apply rules mechanically but decide, case by case, whose claims are recognized, so that the disposition of the gatekeepers, not the formal rule alone, determines the result.

Feminist institutionalism integrates these strands. Chappell and Waylen (2013) argue that formal rules, including quotas and parity statutes, are routinely worked alongside and against by informal gender norms, so that institutional outcomes for women turn on the interaction of the two rather than on formal design alone. The vocabulary of gradual institutional change specifies the interaction precisely: Streeck and Thelen (2005) describe *layering*, in which new rules such as a parity quota are appended to durable older arrangements without displacing them, and *drift*, in which formally unchanged rules lose force as enforcement lapses. The Congolese reform-representation gap displays both. The quota statutes are layered onto party-selection and executive-appointment institutions that retain their prior gendered logic, while the parity guarantee drifts wherever its enforcement is left to the discretion of those same institutions. Mama's (1995) analysis of the post-colonial African state as continuing rather than rejecting patriarchal structures adds a caution. The gap is not merely a technical deficit awaiting procedural correction; it expresses an institutional continuity that purely formal reform cannot dissolve. Read together, these literatures reframe the gap as a formal-informal institutional mismatch, and locate inclusion policy not in further commitment but in enforcement architecture and the structuring of front-line discretion, the gender-mainstreaming task of incorporating a gender lens into routine institutional process (True & Mintrom, 2001).

3. The Congolese Context: Formal Commitments and the Reform-Representation Gap

The Republic of the Congo operates within a layered statutory framework comprising ratified international treaties, endorsed regional instruments, and domestic constitutional and legislative provisions. Each layer establishes a formal com-

mitment; each exhibits an implementation deficit.

At the international level, the state ratified CEDAW on 26 July 1982, assuming binding obligations to eliminate discrimination in political and public life and to secure women's eligibility for all elected bodies; CEDAW's Article 4 explicitly permits temporary special measures such as quotas as remedial rather than discriminatory. The state also endorsed the African Union Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (2004) and ratified the Maputo Protocol (2007). The CEDAW Committee has noted implementation deficits across successive Congolese state reports, but the absence of a robust enforcement mechanism limits the convention's operational effect, absent domestic political will.

At the domestic level, the Constitution adopted by referendum on 25 October 2015 is the apex of the framework. Article 15 prohibits discrimination based on sex; Article 17, the parity provision, guarantees equal access of women and men to political, administrative, and professional functions; Article 49 addresses political association; and Article 245 provides a gender-neutral eligibility foundation, stating that any Congolese citizen meeting the conditions may stand for elective office. The framework is comprehensive in its formal commitments; the limitation lies in the absence of implementing legislation with sanctions specific enough to translate the guarantees into outcomes.

The quota architecture is the most consequential implementing instrument, and it is tiered and asymmetric. Law n°5-2007 (Article 61, new, that is, as amended) establishes a 15% women's-list floor for legislative and senatorial elections, without alternation; Act n°40-2014 of 1 September 2014 raises that floor to 30% of candidacies for both chambers, still without alternation or sanctions. Law n°1-2016 of 23 January 2016 (Article 67, new) raises the *local*-election quota to 30% and adds a placement requirement, rigorous alternation in the upper third of the list, aligning the local tier with the Beijing and African Union 30% benchmarks. The asymmetry is analytically central. By strengthening the local tier while leaving the national-tier floor: 30% since Act n°40-2014, without alternation, the 2016 amendment produced a tiered statutory commitment in which the National Assembly and Senate, the institutions this study primarily examines, remain governed by a low floor well below both the local standard and the international benchmark. The full 2001-2007-2016 trajectory shows sustained but uneven legislative commitment: the local tier moved from no quota to 30% with alternation, tracking international standards, while the national tier moved from no quota to 15% (2007) and to 30% (2014) but has never acquired an alternation rule. Critically, none of the statutes specifies a non-compliance sanction or a list-rejection mechanism of the kind operating in Senegal, Rwanda, or France. The tier difference also has a structural dimension: National Assembly seats are filled in single-member constituencies, so the national floor attaches to the aggregate of candidacies a party registers nationwide rather than to constituency lists, and placement rules of the alternation type have no national-tier referent, the operative national-tier deficit is enforcement, not alternation (see Sections 5.2 and 7). The electoral

law has in fact been amended more often than the three quota statutes examined here: Law n°9-2001 was successively modified by Laws n°5-2007, n°9-2012 (23 May 2012), n°40-2014, n°1-2016 and n°19-2017 (12 May 2017), of which only the 2007, 2014 and 2016 amendments altered the gender-quota provisions.

(Two figures circulate for the 2022 result, and both are used in this article with distinct referents. The IPU Parline election record for the July 2022 elections reports that women won 25 of 151 National Assembly seats: 16.56%, the elected result this article reports as its headline figure (*Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2022*). The IPU Parline standing record, and Congolese reporting at the legislature's installation on 16 August 2022, count 22 women seated: 14.6%, a level unchanged since (*Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023*). Elected and seated membership can lawfully diverge at installation: under the 2015 Constitution, each deputy is elected with a substitute (*suppléant*), the parliamentary mandate is incompatible with other public functions, and a deputy in a situation of incompatibility, including appointment to government, is replaced by the substitute for its duration.)

4. Data and Methods

The study employs an exploratory, qualitatively driven mixed-methods design based on two-source triangulation, supplemented by documentary analysis of the statutory framework. The primary data source is 17 semi-structured key-informant interviews conducted between March and August 2023 with participants selected for their professional vantage on women's political participation: women's-rights advocates, leaders of non-governmental organizations, legal professionals, representatives of international organizations, civil-society actors, religious leaders, and academics. Coverage of the relevant institutional perspectives was assessed by ensuring representation of all major stakeholder groups involved in women's political participation, the seven categories above, and by achieving thematic saturation, whereby successive interviews yielded no substantially new themes. Informants were recruited through purposive sampling, supplemented by snowball sampling: initial participants were identified through professional networks and contacts within civil-society organizations, religious organizations, and international organizations, and additional participants were recruited through referrals from initial interviewees. The supplementary source is a citizen-perception online survey administered to 86 respondents (61 men and 25 women) over the same period, predominantly in the urban centers of Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire. Interview data were analyzed thematically and through mechanism-based qualitative analysis; survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, and gender differences on survey items were assessed with Pearson chi-square tests of independence computed on the item-level agreement-by-gender cross-tabulations; the test statistic, degrees of freedom, and *p*-value are reported where a gender comparison is drawn in the text (Section 5.1). For the institutional analysis reported here, the interviews carry the primary mechanism-specification function, particularly the testimony of jurists on the legal-institutional architecture, of NGO lead-

ers on party-internal candidate selection, and of international officers on quota monitoring, while the survey indicates how widely the identified mechanisms are perceived. Interview material is cited using anonymized codes (e.g., KI-LE-1), in which the middle element denotes the informant category, legal professional (LE), NGO or advocacy leader (NG), religious leader (RE), and the final digit numbers the informant within that category. Participation in both the interviews and the survey was voluntary; interviews proceeded on informed verbal consent, anonymous online completion of the questionnaire constituted implied consent, and all interview and survey material was anonymized before analysis (see Ethical considerations).

Two scope conditions are stated at the outset. The survey is a non-probability sample of an urban and relatively educated population, and it is male-skewed (61 men, 25 women); it cannot be generalized to the national population, gender-disaggregated comparisons within it are indicative only, and it is reported here solely as a perception measure within that subpopulation. The key-informant panel, although diverse, cannot represent all stakeholder viewpoints. The analysis is accordingly single-case and exploratory: its purpose is to identify and specify institutional mechanisms in a context where mechanism-level evidence has been scarce, not to estimate effects. The documentary strand, constitutional provisions, electoral statutes, and quota law, are the most robust element of the evidence base and anchors the institutional argument.

5. Findings: The Institutional Mechanisms of Non-Implementation

The institutional dimension's defining feature is a gap, not an absence: the laws exist, but the actors who would have to honor them do not. As one jurist put it, an extensive body of legislation has been enacted to protect women from discrimination, allocate candidacy quotas, and establish facilitating institutions, yet political actors remain unwilling to translate the legislation into substantive practice, so that the operative constraint is the gap between formal legal protection and implementation behavior rather than the absence of commitment (KI-LE-1). Four mechanisms specify how the gap operates: non-transparent party candidate selection at the recruitment stage, the formalism of quota implementation at the level of the principal gender-specific instrument, the electoral system that amplifies party gatekeeping at the contest stage, and executive-appointment discretion at the apex of office. **Table 1** summarizes the four mechanisms and the corresponding reform sites developed in Section 7.

5.1. Party Candidate Selection as the Binding Gate

The first and most upstream mechanism is the party-controlled candidate-selection process. In the sample, 69 respondents (80.2%) agreed that limited party support for women candidates is a primary barrier, endorsement that was higher among women (24 of 25; 96.0%) than men (45 of 61; 73.8%), a difference that is

statistically significant ($\chi^2(1, N = 86) = 5.52, p = 0.019$; Fisher's exact $p = 0.018$), though the small female subsample counsels continued caution, and 70 (81.4%) agreed that political actors show disinterest in advancing women's participation at the nomination stage. The barrier operates through how parties actually select candidates, and the interview evidence specifies the mechanism with some precision.

Table 1. The four institutional mechanisms of non-implementation and corresponding reform sites.

Mechanism (career-ladder stage)	Institutional site	Key evidence	Reform lever (Section 7)
Non-transparent party candidate selection (recruitment)	Party nomination bodies; Article 25 of Law n°9-2001	80.2% cite limited party support as a primary barrier; informal nomination criteria (KI-NG-2, KI-RE-3); founder pathway to party headship	Transparency requirements and candidate-development obligations in party-internal selection
Symbolic quota design (list composition)	Law n°5-2007 and Act n°40-2014 (30% national candidate floor, no alternation or sanctions); Law n°1-2016 (30% local, upper-third alternation)	11.26% (2017) and 16.56% (2022) elected shares against the 30% benchmark; cross-tier variation tracking design strength	Registration-stage enforcement of the aggregate 30% candidacy floor; mixed-sex candidate-substitute pairing; funding-linked sanctions; substantive-compliance verification (local tier: retain upper-third alternation and list rejection)
Single-member majoritarian amplification of gatekeeping (contest)	Single-member constituencies; weakly institutionalized parties	Comparative single-member-PR gap; exclusion of women leaves no list-level signal (KI-LE-2)	Set aside as neither necessary nor sufficient; reforms operate within the existing single-member majoritarian framework
Executive-appointment discretion (apex appointment)	Articles 83 and 101 of the 2015 Constitution; portfolios fixed by presidential decree	Zero core ministerial portfolios held by women; allocation concentrated in social portfolios	Transparency and reporting on cabinet composition; supply-side pipeline development

Source: Author's elaboration.

A first constraint is the structure of party allegiance. Affiliation to a Congolese political organization carries an expectation of exclusive loyalty that forecloses networking across organizations, so that a woman aspirant cannot build the cross-organizational support that might compensate for limited within-party backing (KI-LE-2). A second constraint is written into the electoral code itself: Article 25 of Law n°9-2001 specifies that electoral campaigns are designed only for candidates supported by their political parties, so that without party backing it is structurally difficult to register, campaign, and win (KI-LE-2). The two combine into

what is, in effect, a codified gate. A third constraint is the set of informal nomination criteria. An advocacy leader, drawing on work with women aspirants across multiple electoral cycles, identified three unwritten rules for party nomination: a candidate needs backing from senior figures, the capacity to self-finance part of the campaign, and access to a solid male network, and for most women, all three are difficult to obtain (KI-NG-2). A religious leader corroborated that final candidate-selection decisions rest with a small, predominantly male party leadership, so that although many women are willing to run, a male-dominated group determines who is nominated (KI-RE-3).

Read together, these accounts describe a closed system: party support is mandatory under the electoral code, networks outside the party are foreclosed by the allegiance rule, and the informal bar for nomination is set precisely where women are least able to clear it. The party-allegiance requirement and Article 25 convert party gatekeeping from an informal disadvantage into a codified gate that sits upstream of the ballot, so that a woman who cannot secure party backing is barred from the campaign stage, irrespective of her qualifications, resources, or popular standing. The histories of Congolese political parties reveal a consistent pattern: the only documented pathway through which women have attained party headship has been by founding their own political parties rather than rising to the top of existing ones. In other words, women have become party heads primarily through the founder pathway, not through promotion within parties established by others; the most prominent instance is Claudine Munari, founding president since 2009 of the Mouvement pour l'Unité, la Solidarité et le Travail (MUST) (Kibangula, 2016). Although a small number of women have held senior positions, such as secretary-general, treasurer, or other executive roles, in parties founded and led by men, these positions have rarely translated into party headship. By contrast, women who have been elected to the National Assembly or the Senate have generally done so as candidates of the Parti Congolais du Travail (PCT, the Congolese Labour Party) or of other parties of which they were members; while some occupied important leadership positions within those parties, they were not the founding leaders or heads of those organizations. This is candidate selection operating as Krook (2009) and Hinojosa (2012) describe parties functioning as gender gatekeepers, intensified by a dominant-party context: the ruling PCT has held power continuously since 1997, is assessed by independent monitors as sustaining a dominant-party system that leaves no meaningful opposition (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024; Freedom House, 2024), and took 112 of 151 seats in the 2022 elections (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2022), a distribution in which its nominations effectively determine which candidacies reach serious contention. The selection venue is the informal, male-coded layer that the parity guarantee does not reach, the formal-informal mismatch operating at the recruitment stage.

5.2. Symbolic Quotas: The Formal-Informal Mismatch

The second mechanism concerns the most prominent gender-specific instrument,

the quota, and the gap between its letter and its effect. As set out above, Law n° 1-2016 requires women to constitute at least 30% of local-election lists with upper-third alternation, while national legislative and senatorial lists remain governed by a 30% floor (Article 61, as amended by Act n° 40-2014) without alternation, and neither statute specifies sanctions. At the national tier, the floor necessarily attaches to the aggregate of candidacies a party registers nationwide: National Assembly seats are filled in single-member constituencies, so there are no constituency lists for a placement rule to govern, which makes the registration stage the only point at which compliance is even observable. The 2017 and 2022 National Assembly elections produced women's elected proportions of 11.26% and 16.56%, well below the 30% target, indicating compliance with the letter rather than the substance of the provision. One jurist characterized the quota as decorative inclusion rather than substantive incorporation (KI-LE-1).

The Congolese architecture exhibits the specific design pattern that comparative scholarship identifies as predictive of symbolic rather than substantive compliance: a minimum-percentage floor without placement rules or enforcement sanctions (Franceschet et al., 2012; for a review of two decades of quota scholarship, see Krook, 2025). Franceschet and colleagues identify three convergent features of symbolic compliance: numerical compliance combined with winnability asymmetry, the absence of placement rules requiring women in specific list positions, and the absence of effective non-compliance sanctions, and the Congolese architecture exhibits all three. The upper-third alternation requirement of the 2016 law is a meaningful design improvement at the local tier, because alternation translates list presence into electoral viability rather than symbolic list-bottom placement (Htun, 2004; Krook, 2009); its restriction to the local tier is precisely what leaves the national tier exposed. Jiang and Zhou's (2025) analysis of Chinese subnational quota implementation supplies an instructive parallel: local agencies interpreted "at least one woman" provisions as "at most one woman" ceilings, illustrating how a numerical floor without placement and sanction architecture can function as a ceiling in practice.

The pattern aligns with a broader cross-national regularity. Tripp and Kang's (2008) analysis of sixty-nine quota-adopting countries distinguishes three categories: quotas with placement rules and sanctions, which produce substantive change; quotas with placement rules but no sanctions, which produce moderate change; and quotas without placement rules or sanctions, which produce symbolic compliance with minimal change. The Congolese 2016 law sits in the third category at the national level and the second at the local level, a bifurcated design producing correspondingly bifurcated outcomes, which the cross-tier representation record reflects. The quota does not fail because it was poorly intentioned or because women are unavailable; it fails because it was layered onto party-selection institutions whose informal logic it does not regulate, and because its enforcement is left to the discretion of those institutions, the drift and layering that feminist institutionalism anticipates (Chappell & Waylen, 2013; Streeck & Thelen, 2005).

The enforcement chain, such as it is, runs through three public bodies, none of which currently applies the quota. Candidacy declarations are received and registered by the electoral administration under the Ministry of the Interior, which organizes elections; the Commission nationale électorale indépendante, with which election administration is shared under Article 16 of Law n° 1-2016, supervises their conduct (Freedom House, 2024); and the Constitutional Court adjudicates candidacy and results disputes and proclaims final results. The actors who compose the slates, party nomination bodies, are private party organs and stand outside this chain entirely: no administrative authority reviews how a party selects, and the statutes assign no body the task of verifying that a party's registered candidacies meet the 30% floor, specify no procedure for the verification, and attach no consequence to its failure. Registration is therefore the single point at which a public official currently touches candidate composition, and the authority to refuse registration of a non-compliant slate, which the Minister of the Interior publicly invoked ahead of the 2017 elections, reminding parties of the Article 61 floor and warning that non-compliance could draw sanctions (Agence d'Information d'Afrique Centrale, 2017), but which has never been exercised through a published refusal, is the authority the reform in Section 7 would place on an explicit statutory footing.

5.3. The Electoral System as Gatekeeping Amplifier

The third mechanism is structural: the two-round single-member majoritarian electoral system magnifies the discretion that the first two mechanisms describe. A jurist drew the institutional comparison directly: in single-seat constituencies, the party is the gatekeeper, and unlike proportional representation, where the list must include some women, in single-member contests each seat is contested independently, so a party can nominate only men without any visible consequence (KI-LE-2). The observation reflects a well-documented comparative pattern. Single-member-district majoritarian systems, plurality and two-round alike, consistently produce lower women's representation than party-list proportional systems (Kittilson & Schwindt-Bayer, 2012; Matland, 2005; Rule, 1987), and the mechanism is precisely the one the informant identifies: list systems make women's inclusion publicly visible and necessary for list credibility, whereas single-member rules devolve nomination to single-seat units where a woman's exclusion produces no list-level signal. The same structural feature helps explain why the national-tier quota analyzed above has so little traction, the national legislative contest runs through single-member dynamics rather than the visible-list mechanism through which a placement quota would bite.

The effect is compounded by weak party institutionalization, the second defining feature of the Congolese configuration. Independent assessments describe the Congolese party landscape as highly regionalized and organized around ethnoregional loyalty and personality rather than programmatic structure or formal procedure (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024). In strongly institutionalized parties operat-

ing under single-member rules, formal selection criteria and intra-party competition can constrain gatekeeper discretion and yield some gender balance even without list-balance incentives. In weakly institutionalized parties, selection criteria are thin and gatekeeper discretion is extensive, reproducing the homosocial-reproduction pattern Kanter (1977) identified in organizations with large informal-decision components. The Congolese parties combine a single-member nomination structure with weak institutionalization, producing the maximum-discretion, minimum-accountability configuration in which that pattern operates most strongly.

The claim is bounded. The electoral system does not cause women's underrepresentation independently of the other mechanisms; it amplifies the party-gatekeeping effects already documented, and other determinants, socio-cultural, economic, and personal, lie outside it. The implication for reform, developed in Section 7, is correspondingly modest: electoral-system change (conversion to proportional or mixed-member representation) is one possible lever but is neither necessary nor sufficient, which is why the reform pathway concentrates on candidate-selection and quota-enforcement reform within the existing single-member majoritarian framework rather than conditioning progress on a change of electoral system.

5.4. The Executive-Appointment Ceiling

The fourth mechanism operates at the apex of office, where the gap is total and its institutional source is distinct. Women have repeatedly held roughly a fifth to a quarter of cabinet posts, but the allocation is concentrated in a narrow band, the promotion of women, social affairs, and gender and family portfolios, while finance, defense, interior, justice, and foreign affairs have remained closed. This core-periphery distribution is not an electoral outcome but the exercise of executive-appointment discretion. Under Articles 83 and 101 of the 2015 Constitution, ministers are appointed by the President of the Republic on the proposal of the Prime Minister, and their portfolios are fixed by presidential decree; the allocation of the core portfolios therefore rests with the presidency rather than with the electoral and party institutions that the quota architecture reaches.

The analytical significance is twofold. First, the ceiling is a late-stage filter operating on women who have already cleared candidacy and election, which is where its terminating effect is most costly to substantive representation. The pattern is consistent with Krook and O'Brien's (2012) finding that women are disproportionately allocated "soft" portfolios and with Reynolds's (1999) account of the executive as the highest glass ceiling, and it confirms the descriptive-substantive distinction in its strongest form: numerical presence in cabinet coexisting with exclusion from the portfolios where executive power is concentrated. Current global data confirm the regularity: as of January 2025, men held the great majority of defense, finance, and foreign-affairs portfolios worldwide, while women remained concentrated in gender-equality and family portfolios (IPU & UN Women, 2025).

Continent-wide evidence, however, sharpens rather than dilutes the Congolese diagnosis. Analyzing 4731 ministers across 25 African countries between 1990 and 2021, [Saaka \(2025\)](#) finds that women appointed to African cabinets are proportionally more likely than men to receive high-prestige portfolios, so that a rigid core-periphery allocation is not a continental constant. Congo's total exclusion of women from the core portfolios is therefore a deviation from the African pattern rather than an instance of it, underscoring that the ceiling reflects a case-specific exercise of appointment discretion, not a regional inevitability. Second, and consequently for reform, the ceiling lies *outside* the instrument, the electoral quota, that addresses the legislative tier. A list-placement quota, however well designed, cannot reach a portfolio allocated by presidential decree. The executive ceiling is therefore a separate implementation site requiring a separate intervention logic, and the post-conflict reconstruction settlements that shaped the male composition of the senior political networks give it a path-dependent character ([Hughes, 2009](#)) that incremental cabinet reshuffles do not disturb. Recognizing the executive tier as part of the governance career ladder, rather than as a domain beyond public administration, is what makes its exclusion visible as an administrative-justice problem rather than an unexaminable prerogative.

6. Discussion: Underrepresentation as an Implementation Failure

The four mechanisms share a structure. In each, an extensive formal commitment is defeated not at the point of adoption but at the point of execution, by the discretion of actors who stand between the rule and the outcome: party selectors at the recruitment stage, electoral administrators applying an unenforced quota, single-member-district nomination units where a woman's absence leaves no list-level trace, and the presidency allocating portfolios. This is the implementation failure the classic literature anticipates ([Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1983](#); [Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984](#)), and its proximate site is the front-line discretion that street-level analysis identifies as decisive ([Lipsky, 2010](#); [Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000](#)). The Congolese reform-representation gap is therefore not an absence of policy but a deficit of execution, which is why the corrective lies in enforcement architecture and the structuring of discretion rather than in further formal commitment.

The general lesson, transferable beyond the Congolese case, concerns the relationship between formal and informal institutions. The decisive barriers are not defects in statutory text; they are the informal, male-coded conventions of electability, loyalty, and appointment onto which the parity statutes are layered and through which they drift ([Chappell & Waylen, 2013](#); [Streeck & Thelen, 2005](#)). Reframing the gap as a formal-informal mismatch has a direct diagnostic payoff: it predicts that adding formal commitments will not close the gap so long as the informal layer is left intact, and it directs reform toward the institutional points where discretion is exercised. This is consistent with the broader finding that eco-

conomic development and formal equality do not by themselves resolve underrepresentation absent institutional intervention (Bleck & van de Walle, 2019; Goetz & Hassim, 2003).

The comparative record makes the point sharply, and it does so first by ruling out the obvious cultural explanation. Within sub-Saharan Africa, the variation is too wide to attribute to region or culture: Rwanda (61%), South Africa (46%), Senegal (44%), and Namibia (44%) all exceed 40%, while the Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo fall below 20%. Whatever explains the high-representation cases cannot be reduced to generalized African conditions. What distinguishes them is institutional engineering that builds enforcement and placement into design rather than leaving them to gatekeeper discretion. Rwanda moved from roughly a quarter of seats in 2003 to above 60% within two electoral cycles through a constitutional reserved-seat architecture; Senegal moved from approximately 22% to above 40% following its 2010 parity legislation (Tripp, 2015; Tripp & Kang, 2008). These are the placement rules and sanctions whose absence the comparative quota-design literature identifies as the source of symbolic compliance (Franceschet et al., 2012), the very features the Congolese national floor omits. Where the descriptive gains have translated into substantive legislative output, moreover, the translation has run through cross-party coordinating infrastructure such as Rwanda's Forum of Women Parliamentarians, an institutional layer Congo lacks. The high performers did not adopt different values; they hard-wired enforcement into the institutional machinery, closing the formal-informal gap that the Congolese design leaves open.

Two cases beyond Africa confirm the diagnosis from opposite directions. China holds approximately 26% women in the National People's Congress through party-state quota allocation, yet local agencies have interpreted "at least one woman" provisions as "at most one woman" ceilings (Jiang & Zhou, 2025), the same numerical-floor-functioning-as-ceiling dynamic the Congolese quota exhibits. Women likewise remain near-absent from the Politburo Standing Committee and the senior economic and security portfolios, reproducing at the executive apex the descriptive-without-substantive decoupling that Krook and O'Brien (2012) document cross-nationally. That the same institutional logic operates under a single-party state and a multiparty single-member majoritarian system indicates that the mechanism is not regime-specific but follows from quota design and appointment discretion. The United States supplies the converse: with approximately 28% of House seats and no federal quota, it shows that wealth, education, and formal equality do not close the gap absent institutional intervention (Fox & Lawless, 2014). Across all of these cases, the variation tracks institutional design and enforcement rather than economic development or cultural region. That is precisely why the corrective for the Congolese gap is implementation-centered: closing the formal-informal mismatch requires building placement and sanction into design and constraining the discretion of gatekeepers, not adding further formal com-

mitment.

The persistence of extensive formal commitment alongside chronic non-implementation has, finally, a political logic that the dominant-party context makes visible. Tripp (2025) shows that entrenched ruling parties in African autocracies and semi-autocracies actively promote women's representation and adopt gender-equality reforms as strategies of regime maintenance, preserving vote share, signaling virtue to international audiences, and softening the image of parties emerging from conflict or military rule. On this account, the formal parity architecture is not merely under-enforced; its adoption is itself politically serviceable to a ruling party in continuous power since 1997, because commitment yields legitimacy benefits whether or not it is implemented. The reading reinforces the implementation diagnosis rather than displacing it. It explains why the formal layer accumulates while the informal layer is left undisturbed, and it cautions that the enforcement reforms specified in Section 7 will engage not only administrative capacity but the incentives of the actors whose discretion they would constrain.

For public administration, the case extends the discipline's reach in a specific way. By treating the legislature and cabinet as the apex gatekeeping stages of a governance career ladder, the analysis brings the elective-political tier within the scope of representative-bureaucracy and implementation analysis, rather than ceding it to electoral studies (An et al., 2022; Park & Liang, 2021; Riccucci & Van Ryzin, 2017). The move is not the importation of an electoral question into public administration but the extension of an established public-administration analytic, glass ceiling, combined with representative bureaucracy, to the offices that direct the administrative state. It also supplies a normative warrant grounded in social equity (Frederickson, 1990, 2010): women's exclusion from office becomes an administrative-justice problem, not a matter of electoral preference alone, and the gap becomes a legitimate object of institutional reform.

7. A Bounded Institutional-Reform Pathway

The diagnosis converts into an applied reform agenda, as stated at the strength of the evidence supports. The agenda is *diagnostic*: it specifies where in the institutional architecture inclusion policy must intervene. It does not claim that the proposed reforms would close the gap, which would require implementation research, the present study does not undertake; the comparative evidence indicates only that design features of this kind are associated with larger representation effects, conditional on enforcement and context (Franceschet et al., 2012; Tripp & Kang, 2008).

The reform sites follow from the documented mechanisms, with one deliberate exception: electoral-system change, as Section 5.3 explained, is set aside as neither necessary nor sufficient, so the agenda works within the existing single-member majoritarian framework. At the quota-design site, the corrective must respect the structure of the national contest. Because National Assembly seats are filled in single-member constituencies, the statutory 30% floor of Act n°40-2014 attaches

not to constituency lists, which do not exist at this tier, but to the aggregate slate of candidacies a party registers nationwide; placement rules of the list-alternation type therefore have no national-tier referent, and the feasible candidate-level architecture comprises three instruments. The first is registration-stage enforcement: candidacy declarations are registered by the electoral administration, and refusal to register the candidacies of a party whose nationwide slate falls below the statutory floor is the single-member analogue of list rejection, an authority which the Minister of the Interior publicly invoked ahead of the 2017 elections, reminding parties of the Article 61 floor and warning that non-compliance could draw sanctions (Agence d'Information d'Afrique Centrale, 2017), but which has never been exercised through a published refusal. The second exploits an existing constitutional feature: every deputy is elected together with a substitute (suppléant), so a statutory requirement that each candidate-substitute pair be mixed-sex, the mechanism France applies to its paired departmental-council tickets, would guarantee women a structural presence in every constituency without altering the electoral formula. The third is a graduated financial sanction indexing public party funding to the gender gap in a party's registered nominations, the mechanism France applies to its own single-member legislative elections. Enforceable floors, structural placement guarantees, and material sanctions are the design features the comparative literature associates with movement from symbolic toward substantive compliance (Childs & Krook, 2009; Dahlerup, 2006, 2007; Htun, 2004). At the enforcement site, the complementary corrective is to vest the electoral administration with the explicit mandate and capacity to verify substantive compliance, the gender composition of each party's registered national slate and, at the local tier, list composition and placement, rather than procedural compliance alone, addressing the front-line discretion that currently converts the quota into a ceiling. Upper-third alternation and list rejection remain the appropriate instruments at the local tier, where elections are list-based, and would become available nationally only under the electoral-system conversion this agenda has set aside. At the candidate-recruitment site, the corrective targets the party-internal process directly, through transparency requirements and candidate-development obligations that open the informal nomination criteria, senior backing, self-financing, and male-network access, to scrutiny (Krook & Norris, 2014); this is the site the quota cannot reach by itself, because it lies upstream of candidacy registration. The executive-appointment ceiling, finally, requires a distinct logic: because portfolio allocation is a presidential prerogative under Articles 83 and 101, it cannot be addressed by an electoral quota. It is better approached through transparency and reporting on cabinet composition by the bodies already mandated to advise on women's integration, paired with the supply-side pipeline that capacity-building over time produces.

These are instruments of institutional design and gender mainstreaming, the administrative incorporation of a gender lens into routine process (True & Mintrom, 2001), calibrated to the documented Congolese mechanisms rather

than transplanted as generic electoral prescriptions. Their common feature is that each targets a site of discretion rather than a gap in formal commitment, which is the practical implication of diagnosing the problem as one of implementation.

8. Conclusion

The Republic of the Congo guarantees women equal access to office, has ratified the principal gender-equality instruments, and has adopted gender quotas; yet women hold a minority of legislative seats and none of the core ministerial portfolios. This article has argued that the persistence of the gap is a public-administration implementation problem rather than an electoral one. Extending the glass-ceiling and representative-bureaucracy lens from advancement within the bureaucracy to the elective and ministerial tier, it located the gap in four institutional mechanisms: non-transparent party candidate selection, quotas designed without placement rules or sanctions, a two-round single-member majoritarian electoral system that amplifies party gatekeeping, and executive-appointment discretion lying outside the quota architecture, each operating as a formal-informal institutional mismatch in which parity statutes are layered onto institutions that retain their gendered logic and drift where enforcement lapses. The diagnosis specifies, in bounded and applied terms, where inclusion policy must intervene: at the sites of discretion, through enforcement architecture and the structuring of front-line and appointment decisions, rather than through further formal commitment. The analysis is single-case and exploratory, and its reform agenda is diagnostic rather than evaluative; whether interventions at the specified sites produce representation change is the question subsequent implementation research should test. What the case establishes is that, where formal parity coexists with informal exclusion, the decisive action lies in the institutional machinery that converts adopted policy into administrative outcome.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles for research involving human participants. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Review Committee of the School of Public Administration, Central South University, prior to data collection. Informed verbal consent, including permission for audio recording, was obtained for all interviews. For the online survey, informed consent was waived because no personally identifiable information (e.g., names, email addresses, or IP addresses) was collected, participation was anonymous and voluntary, and completion and submission of the questionnaire constituted implied consent.

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Data Availability

The interview transcripts and online survey responses generated in this study are not publicly available because the confidentiality protections under which the data were collected do not permit public deposit. De-identified data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Author Contributions

Peter Tresor Miyalou: Conceptualization, methodology, investigation, formal analysis, data curation, writing—original draft, writing—review & editing. **Chunyan Hu:** Supervision, validation, writing—review & editing.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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