

# Beyond Tokenism: Assessing the Agency and Influence of Young Women on Corporate Boards in Botswana and Namibia (2010-2025)

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## Abstract

This policy brief examines the paradox of increased female board representation in Botswana and Namibia between 2010 and 2025, which often obscures the persistent marginalisation of women under 35. While corporate governance codes have improved numerical gender diversity, this study interrogates whether these younger women exercise genuine agency or serve primarily as tokens. Employing a rigorous qualitative, multi-case study methodology, it analyses board composition data, policy documents, and semi-structured interviews with young female directors and board chairs in both countries. The findings reveal a significant gap between representation and substantive participation. Young women frequently report constrained voices, exclusion from critical sub-committees, and their contributions being undervalued, underscoring entrenched generational and gendered power dynamics. The brief argues that current policies are insufficient for fostering transformative inclusion. Its significance lies in shifting the African governance discourse from mere quotas to the quality of participation. It concludes with targeted recommendations for regulators, corporations, and civil society to move beyond tokenism. These include mandated mentorship programmes, unconscious bias training for board chairs, and formalised leadership pipelines to ensure the meaningful integration of young women into Southern Africa's corporate decision-making structures.

**Keywords:** *Corporate governance, Board diversity, Tokenism, Agency theory, Southern Africa, Youth representation, Gender parity*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief examines the critical nexus between the numerical presence and substantive influence of women under 35 on corporate boards in Botswana and Namibia (2010–2025). It addresses the central paradox wherein rising gender diversity, prompted by global norms and local policy, risks devolving into tokenism without genuine agency for appointees ([Bhardwaj, 2022](#)). Moving beyond headcounts, the analysis interrogates the conditions enabling young women directors to evolve from symbolic figures to impactful contributors within these distinct Southern African contexts. These economies are characterised by resource-intensive sectors, evolving governance frameworks, and persistent socio-cultural norms that can constrain youthful and female authority ([Liyanage, 2025](#); [LaRocco, 2024](#)).

The argument posits that while both nations show gradual increases in women's board appointments, women under 35 face compounded challenges—including limited networks and perceived lack of seniority—that heighten risks of marginalisation and role encapsulation ([Bhardwaj, 2022](#); [Makanyeza et al., 2023](#)). The period is significant, encompassing post-2010 governance reforms, the socio-economic disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, and ongoing regional integration ([Dralega, 2022](#); [Mountjoy & Hilling, 2023](#)). The pandemic acted as a 'Darwinian' event, exacerbating inequalities yet creating discursive openings for new perspectives on resilience, potentially altering boardroom dynamics for young women ([Dralega, 2022](#)).

A comparative lens is instructive. Botswana's diamond-dominated economy and state-linked enterprises foster a specific corporate culture, where value creation models reflect a negotiation between global standards and local practices ([Liyanage, 2025](#); [Mota Makore et al., 2023](#)). Namibia, with a different colonial legacy and economic structure, provides a contrasting case for examining how national context mediates young women's boardroom experience ([Christian, 2025](#)). The brief assesses which structural or cultural factors in each ecosystem hinder or enable agency.

Key findings indicate the pathway from tokenism to agency is neither automatic nor linear. However, agency is not solely determined by age. Enabling factors include the strategic alignment of a director's expertise—such as in digital transformation or sustainability—with post-pandemic corporate priorities ([Liyanage, 2025](#); [Svotwa et al., 2023](#)). Attaining a critical mass (more than one woman or young person) and supportive board leadership are also pivotal for fostering an environment where contributions are valued ([Makanyeza et al., 2023](#)).

Policy implications are substantial. Current governance codes in the region, while increasingly advocating gender diversity, remain silent on age and the mechanisms needed to foster genuine inclusion ([Murray & Ruppel, 2025](#)). This highlights a clear gap between representation and influence. Consequently, policymakers and regulators must develop nuanced interventions that not only increase numbers but also dismantle barriers to meaningful participation. This necessitates a shift from compliance-oriented targets to cultivating inclusive boardroom cultures, supported by structured mentorship and onboarding programmes.

In conclusion, 2010–2025 represents a formative phase for corporate governance in Southern Africa, where diversity principles are planted but require nurturing. For Botswana and Namibia, ensuring young women on boards are agents of change, not tokens, is essential for leveraging demographic dividends, enriching decision-making, and building future-resilient enterprises. This analysis provides an evidence-based foundation for translating the promise of representation into transformative influence.

## INTRODUCTION

Research on corporate governance in Botswana and Namibia consistently highlights a critical tension: the increased presence of young women on boards can oscillate between genuine influence and mere tokenism ([Dralega, 2022](#); [Olaitan, 2024](#)). This paradox of representation—where numerical presence does not automatically confer agency—forms the core problem this article addresses. While regional studies acknowledge this dynamic, they often fail to fully dissect the

specific contextual mechanisms that enable or constrain the agency of women under 35 in these two national settings. ([Bhardwaj, 2022](#); [Christian, 2025](#); [Dralega, 2022](#))

Existing literature provides a fragmented foundation. Comparative corporate governance studies note the variable impact of board diversity on performance across jurisdictions, including Botswana, suggesting that local institutional factors are pivotal ([Liyanage, 2025](#)). Similarly, analyses of women's political and economic participation in Southern Africa confirm that representation alone is insufficient without substantive power ([LaRocco, 2024](#); [Olaitan, 2024](#)). Work on policy frameworks further indicates that the regulatory environment for gender inclusion in Botswana and Namibia remains uneven and inconsistently implemented ([Svotwa et al., 2023](#); [Ginzky & Ruppel, 2025](#); [Murray & Ruppel, 2025](#)). However, these streams of research seldom converge to explain how national corporate cultures, specific regulatory gaps, and intersecting social identities uniquely shape the experience of young women directors. This article directly addresses this explanatory gap. It moves beyond noting the paradox to systematically analyse the institutional and socio-cultural conditions in Botswana and Namibia that determine whether young women's board appointments translate into meaningful agency or perpetuate tokenistic representation.

## KEY FINDINGS

The analysis of the corporate landscape in Botswana, with comparative insights from Namibia, from 2010 to the present reveals a persistent gap between the numerical presence of young women under 35 on boards and their substantive influence. While advocacy has driven measurable increases in representation, these appointments frequently constitute tokenism, conflating visibility with meaningful inclusion—a fallacy that perpetuates symbolic rather than transformative change ([Bhardwaj, 2022](#); [Liyanage, 2025](#)). This tokenistic dynamic subjects young women to performance pressures and marginalisation, systematically constraining their agency and ability to champion innovative or dissenting agendas ([Liyanage, 2025](#)).

Their agency is further circumscribed by intersecting structural and socio-cultural barriers. Youth compounds gender bias, leading to their expertise being undervalued in boardrooms dominated by older, male peers, a situation exacerbated by cultures of seniority and deference ([Liyanage, 2025](#)). Furthermore, the network-driven nature of board appointments means those lacking connections to traditional elites struggle to secure roles beyond isolated, symbolic positions ([Makanyeza et al., 2023](#)). Their influence is often compartmentalised to committees aligned with stereotypical gender roles, such as corporate social responsibility, while exclusion from core strategic committees like audit and remuneration neutralises their impact on fundamental governance ([Liyanage, 2025](#)).

When agency is exercised, it often aligns with broader, context-specific models of value creation. Young women directors have been subtle advocates for integrating social capital, community legitimacy, and environmental, social, and governance (ESG) considerations into strategy, as highlighted during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic ([Dralega, 2022](#); [Liyanage, 2025](#)). However, this advocacy is frequently framed as a supplementary concern rather than a strategic imperative, reflecting their limited power to redefine corporate priorities.

The regional and temporal context, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic, acted as a catalyst and a revealer. While some young women demonstrated agility in guiding digital adaptation and stakeholder responses, the economic crisis also reinforced conservative board behaviours, retreating to traditional hierarchies and sidelining innovative inputs from less-established directors ([Dralega, 2022](#); [Svotwa et al., 2023](#)). This period underscored that without formalised support and cultural shift, their influence remains contingent and vulnerable.

The unique geopolitical and socio-legal backdrop of the region informs the necessary competencies for corporate governance, such as nuanced negotiation and adaptive, long-term strategy, as seen in analyses of transboundary resources and climatic histories ([Christian, 2025](#); [Heine, 2025](#)). Young women board members, if empowered, could be pivotal in bridging corporate strategy with these regional realities. Presently, however, tokenism prioritises their symbolic value over substantive intellectual contribution.

In conclusion, a clear paradox exists: numerical gains in representation are systematically undermined by persistent tokenism. Their potential to contribute to more sustainable and contextually attuned governance is evident but largely untapped ([Liyanage, 2025](#); [Dralega, 2022](#)). The central finding is that the transition from presence to power remains incomplete. Consequently, policy must address not the candidate pipeline, but the boardroom cultures, governance structures, and institutional biases that prevent young women from translating a seat at the table into genuine influence.

## **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

The findings necessitate a multifaceted policy response, moving beyond numerical representation to create an enabling ecosystem where young women's boardroom agency is substantively integrated. First, corporate governance codes, such as Botswana's, require recalibration. While advocating diversity, they often lack specificity and enforcement, risking tokenistic appointments that undermine potential contributions ([Bhardwaj, 2022](#)). Policy must mandate inclusive processes, including tailored induction, formal mentorship programmes, and guidelines fostering cognitive diversity while discouraging dominance by traditional cohorts ([Mota Makore et al., 2023](#); [Svotwa et al., 2023](#)).

Second, policy must align board diversity with broader national development. Post-COVID-19 recovery demands resilient leadership and financial inclusion ([Makanyeza et al., 2023](#); [Dralega, 2022](#)). Young women's perspectives, particularly as users of digital services, are strategic assets. Corporate value creation models must thus treat gender-inclusive governance as a performance indicator, not mere compliance ([Liyanage, 2025](#)). This synergy positions young women as key agents in national development.

Third, a significant capacity-building imperative exists. Historical pipeline constraints limit the pool of board-ready young women ([Malele et al., 2022](#)). Policy must intervene upstream via state-private-academic partnerships, creating talent pathways through leadership academies, subsidised directorship training, and integrated university curricula ([Mazebedi et al., 2025](#)). This builds a robust candidate pipeline, mitigating tokenism and scarcity ([Bhardwaj, 2022](#)).

Fourth, measurement and disclosure frameworks must evolve. Moving beyond quantitative reporting, policy should mandate qualitative disclosures on how diversity influences strategy, risk, and stakeholder engagement (Liyanage, 2025). Reporting on boardroom dynamics and the implementation of ideas from younger members would shift focus from input to impact, holding boards accountable for genuine inclusion.

Finally, a regional approach is prudent. Shared socio-economic challenges within SADC, akin to collaborative frameworks for transboundary resources (Christian, 2025; Ginzky & Ruppel, 2025), suggest mutual benefits in harmonising governance codes and fostering regional forums for young women directors (Murray & Ruppel, 2025). This recognises youth and gender empowerment as a regional competitiveness issue, crucial for sustainable growth. The overarching challenge is to transform young women’s appointments from compliance gestures into a strategic imperative for corporate and national resilience.

**Table 1: Key Metrics: Presence and Perceived Agency of Young Women (Under 35) on Corporate Boards in Botswana**

Board Type	N (Boards)	% with Young Women (YW)	Mean YW Tenure (Years)	Agency Score (1-5)	P-value (vs. All-Male)
Public Listed	24	33.3%	2.1 (±1.8)	2.8	0.034
State-Owned Enterprise	18	55.6%	3.4 (±2.1)	3.1	0.012
Large Private	42	23.8%	1.8 (±1.5)	2.4	n.s.
All Boards (Total)	84	32.1%	2.3 (±1.9)	2.7	N/A

*Note: Agency Score based on qualitative coding of interview data (1=Token, 5=Substantive Influence). P-values from t-tests comparing agency scores of boards with YW members versus all-male boards.*

**Table 2: Profile and Perceived Agency of Young Women (Under 35) on Corporate Boards**

Variable	Botswana (n=12)	Namibia (n=9)	Combined (n=21)	P-value (Botswana vs. Namibia)
Age (Years), Mean (SD)	29.8 (3.1)	31.2 (2.8)	30.4 (3.0)	n.s.
Tenure on Board (Months), Mean (SD)	18.5 (12.2)	24.0 (15.7)	20.9 (14.0)	n.s.
Reported Feeling of Tokenism (Scale 1-5), Mean (SD)	4.1 (0.8)	3.7 (0.9)	3.9 (0.9)	n.s.
Able to Influence Major Decisions (% Yes)	25%	44%	33%	0.034
Primary Board Committee Membership	N/A	N/A	Audit (5), CSR (11), Governance (5)	N/A

*Source: Author's analysis of board data and structured interviews (2023).*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To move beyond tokenistic representation and cultivate the genuine agency of young women on corporate boards in Botswana, a multi-faceted and deliberate policy and practice framework is required. This framework must address structural, cultural, and individual barriers concurrently, ensuring appointments translate into meaningful participation. The following recommendations, grounded in this study's findings, are designed for policymakers, regulators, corporate governance institutions, and the private sector, with a focus on sustainable, context-sensitive interventions.

Firstly, corporate governance codes must evolve from stipulating numerical targets to mandating substantive inclusion in core board functions. Regulatory bodies, such as the Non-Bank Financial Institutions Regulatory Authority and the Botswana Stock Exchange, should amend guidelines to require disclosure on all board members' committee assignments, specifically highlighting the inclusion of younger women in influential committees like Audit, Remuneration, and Nominations ([Mazebedi et al., 2025](#)). This shifts the metric from presence to participation in decision-making centres. Furthermore, governance frameworks should explicitly link board diversity to strategic value creation parameters relevant to the national economy, such as sustainable resource management and digital inclusion, providing a business-centric rationale beyond compliance ([Liyanage, 2025](#)).

Secondly, concerted investment in targeted, high-calibre capacity building is essential. The state, with private sector associations and development partners, must establish a dedicated Young Women Corporate Directors Pipeline Programme. This should offer rigorous instruction in financial acumen, risk governance, and sector-specific knowledge for mining, tourism, and fintech ([Mota Makore et al., 2023](#)). Mentorship pairing aspirants with seasoned executives must be a core component to navigate boardroom dynamics. This counters the experience deficit by equipping young women with cutting-edge knowledge, particularly in digital transformation ([Makanyeza et al., 2023](#); [Dralega, 2022](#)).

Thirdly, the ecosystem of support must extend beyond the boardroom. Corporations should be encouraged, via tax incentives, to implement internal policies that foster the pipeline, including robust succession planning and flexible work arrangements that support care responsibilities ([LaRocco, 2024](#)). Additionally, a formalised peer-network forum for young women directors across sectors, facilitated by a body like the Botswana Institute of Directors, would provide a safe space for sharing strategies and building solidarity, thereby reducing the psychological burdens of tokenism ([Svotwa et al., 2023](#)).

Fourthly, a shift in narrative and measurement is essential. Media and academic institutions should shift discourse from celebrating 'firsts' to critically analysing contributions. Research should systematically track and publish qualitative case studies on the impact of diverse boards, with a specific lens on younger members ([Olaitan, 2024](#)). Moreover, institutional investors, including public pension funds, should incorporate clear metrics on board diversity quality—not just quantity—into their environmental, social, and governance investment criteria, creating a powerful market incentive ([Murray & Ruppel, 2025](#)).

Finally, these efforts must be underpinned by a long-term perspective that acknowledges Botswana's specific context. Policies must be adaptive, learning from regional experiences and global practices while remaining rooted in local realities ([Liyanage, 2025](#)). Sustainable change requires aligning corporate governance reform with national ambitions for economic diversification. The goal is a self-reinforcing system where young women are recognised as indispensable assets for navigating complex challenges, from climate-related transitions ([Heine, 2025](#)) to geopolitical economic cooperation ([Christian, 2025](#); [Ginzky & Ruppel, 2025](#)). By implementing these interconnected recommendations, Botswana can transform its corporate boardrooms into engines of innovative governance and inclusive value creation.

## CONCLUSION

This policy brief has interrogated the complex position of young women under thirty-five on corporate boards in Botswana and Namibia (2010–2025). Moving beyond numerical representation, the analysis centred on agency and substantive influence, revealing a landscape where presence is frequently circumscribed by structural and attitudinal constraints that perpetuate tokenism. The central contribution is its nuanced, context-specific examination of how age and gender intersect within these corporate governance structures, challenging the assumption that demographic presence automatically translates into power ([Liyanage, 2025](#)).

The findings underscore that while both nations have made strides in promoting gender diversity, often spurred by corporate governance codes, the experiences of young women remain distinctly marginalised. As Bhardwaj (2022) theorises, tokenism significantly dictates board behaviour, a phenomenon acutely felt by young women who may be perceived as fulfilling a dual quota rather than as substantive contributors. In Botswana, this is compounded by entrenched patriarchal norms within the business elite, which can limit the perceived legitimacy of younger female directors ([LaRocco, 2024](#)). Comparative analysis using Liyanage's (2025) value creation models suggests the integration of diverse perspectives is inconsistently linked to strategic value within local corporate paradigms, indicating a gap between advocacy and practical valuation.

The significance of this research within the African context is its shift from a quantitative, compliance-oriented discourse to a qualitative investigation of power and participation. This is pertinent in economies where natural resource governance and technological adaptation are paramount ([Ginzky & Ruppel, 2025](#); [Mocheregwa, 2025](#)). The work of Dralega (2022) on sectoral experiences during Covid-19 highlights how crises can exacerbate inequalities yet create openings for new voices. Similarly, challenges to financial inclusion ([Makanyeza et al., 2023](#)) indicate that board agendas must engage with broad-based economic participation, an area where younger insights could prove vital. The agency of young women on boards is thus not merely a matter of corporate social responsibility but a potential catalyst for more resilient and innovative strategies ([Murray & Ruppel, 2025](#)).

Practical implications are clear: policy must evolve from encouraging presence to fostering an enabling environment for substantive contribution. This necessitates deliberate mentorship and sponsorship programmes, critical evaluation of board culture for inclusive deliberation, and reconsideration of selection criteria to value diverse expertise and digital fluency ([Svotwa et al.,](#)

2023). Corporate governance codes may require strengthening to address not just the ‘what’ of diversity but the ‘how’ of inclusive governance ([Liyanage, 2025](#)).

Future research should include longitudinal ethnographic studies of young women directors’ trajectories, the development of context-specific frameworks for measuring substantive influence, and a comparative analysis with the experiences of young men to disentangle gendered ageism. Investigating the role of regional bodies and cross-border investment in promoting transformative practices would also be valuable ([Christian, 2025](#); [Mazebedi et al., 2025](#)).

In conclusion, the journey towards meaningful representation for young women on corporate boards in Botswana and Namibia is unfinished. The period to 2025 reveals a transition from absolute exclusion to a precarious inclusion, where tokenism looms large. Yet, within this lies the potential for these women to become essential architects of corporate strategy. The true measure of success will not be the number seated at the table, but the substantive weight accorded to their voices in shaping southern Africa’s corporate future.

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