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Gender, Patriarchy and the Post-2020 Political Settlement in Côte d'Ivoire

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ABSTRACT

Political transitions in Africa often reconfigure power structures, yet the integration of gender perspectives into analyses of these settlements remains limited. Following a significant political transition, Côte d'Ivoire presents a critical case for examining how gendered power relations are negotiated within new patronage networks. This policy analysis examines how the post-transition political settlement has reshaped opportunities and constraints for women's political leadership. It aims to deconstruct the interplay between formal gender equity policies and informal patronage systems, assessing their combined impact on women's access to power. The analysis employs a qualitative, process-tracing approach, drawing on policy documents, elite interviews, and observational data from political party conferences and legislative sessions to map gendered patronage networks and institutional reforms. The analysis reveals that while a 30% gender quota for candidate lists was legislated, its implementation has been co-opted by dominant-party patronage. Women's political appointments are frequently used to reward loyalty to male party barons, reinforcing a thematic tension between symbolic inclusion and substantive marginalisation. The post-transition settlement has instrumentalised gender inclusion within a resilient patronage framework, ultimately curtailing the transformative potential of gender equity policies and perpetuating women's dependent political status. Recommendations include advocating for the de-linking of quota implementation from party patronage through independent oversight bodies, and supporting coalition-building among women politicians across party lines to

challenge gatekeeping practices. political settlements, gender quotas, patronage politics, women's leadership, West Africa, post-conflict governance This article provides a novel analysis of the specific policy mechanism—the partisan management of legislated gender quotas—through which patronage systems dilute gender equity reforms in African political transitions.

Keywords: *Political settlement, Gender analysis, Patronage networks, Francophone Africa, Post-conflict governance*

Article Highlights

- A legislated 30% gender quota has been co-opted by dominant-party patronage networks.
- Women's political appointments frequently reward loyalty to male party barons.
- The analysis reveals a tension between symbolic inclusion and substantive marginalisation.
- Findings challenge the narrative of linear progress in women's political inclusion.

Pull Quote

The post-transition settlement has instrumentalised gender inclusion within a resilient patronage framework, curtailing the transformative potential of equity policies.

Core Tension

Formal gender equity policies versus informal patronage systems in shaping women's access to political power.

This analysis traces the specific mechanisms through which patronage dilutes gender equity reforms.

Introduction

The political transition in Côte d'Ivoire following the 2020 presidential election presents a critical juncture for examining the interplay between gender, power, and institutional reform in African post-conflict states (Hu & Lei, 2023). The election, which secured President Alassane Ouattara's controversial third term, ostensibly marked a conclusion to a decade of turbulence that included a civil war and a protracted post-electoral crisis. This period culminated in a 'political settlement'—a reconfiguration of power among elites that establishes a foundation for relative stability. However, the character of this settlement, heavily reliant on established patronage networks, raises profound questions about its inclusivity and its implications for transformative gender agendas. This article argues that the post-2020 political settlement in Côte d'Ivoire, while creating a veneer of stability and offering selective opportunities for women's political appointment, fundamentally reinforces a patriarchal and clientelist system. This system instrumentalises gender discourse and co-opts women's participation to legitimise the regime, thereby containing rather than advancing substantive gender equality and women's political empowerment.

Analyses of political settlements in Africa have often treated them as gender-neutral pacts, focusing predominantly on elite bargains between predominantly male actors within

the military, political class, and business interests ([Ogah, 2023](#)). Yet, as recent feminist scholarship insists, political settlements are inherently gendered constructs; they not only emerge from pre-existing gendered power structures but also serve to institutionalise specific gender orders. The Ivorian case is particularly illustrative. The settlement is underpinned by a complex patronage system, a legacy of the *ivoirité* debates and the civil war, which distributes resources and positions to maintain coalition loyalty. Within such a system, access to political influence and state resources is frequently mediated through personalistic, male-dominated networks. Consequently, women's entry into formal political spaces is often contingent on their relationship to powerful male patrons, a dynamic that shapes the terms of their participation and limits their autonomy to advocate for a transformative gender policy agenda.

The Ouattara administration has, undeniably, made gender representation a visible component of its political rhetoric and institutional architecture ([Sippel, 2022](#)). This includes the adoption of a 2019 law promoting gender equality and the appointment of women to several high-profile ministerial and diplomatic positions. Superficially, these developments align with both domestic pressures and international norms regarding women's participation, as often promoted by multilateral development frameworks. However, a deeper interrogation reveals a more ambiguous reality. The prioritisation of stability and economic growth within the settlement has relegated comprehensive gender equality to a secondary concern, acceptable only insofar as it does not disrupt the core patronage-based logic of power. Women's inclusion, therefore, risks becoming a form of 'symbolic politics'—a performance of modernity and inclusivity that garners legitimacy without redistributing underlying power. This creates a paradox where increased descriptive representation coexists with the reinforcement of a political economy that systematically disadvantages the majority of Ivorian women.

This policy analysis article seeks to unpack this paradox by examining how gender dynamics are shaping, and are shaped by, the post-2020 political settlement in Côte d'Ivoire ([Ndi, 2022](#)). It moves beyond a simplistic assessment of the number of women in office to interrogate the terms of their inclusion and the broader impact of the settlement on gender relations. The central question guiding this inquiry is: In what ways does the patronage-based political settlement established after the 2020 election in Côte d'Ivoire enable or constrain the possibilities for substantive advances in gender equality and women's political agency? To address this, the analysis will explore the instrumentalisation of gender discourse by the regime, the pathways through which women access political office, and the limitations placed on feminist and women's movements operating within this constrained political environment.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to two interconnected scholarly and policy debates ([Perullo, 2022](#)). Firstly, it responds to calls within African Studies and political settlement theory to integrate a systematic gender analysis into the study of power and transitions. By foregrounding gender, the article challenges the implicit masculinism of much settlement analysis and provides a more nuanced understanding of how stability is negotiated and maintained. Secondly, it offers a critical, context-specific policy analysis

relevant to international partners and national advocates engaged in supporting gender equality in C

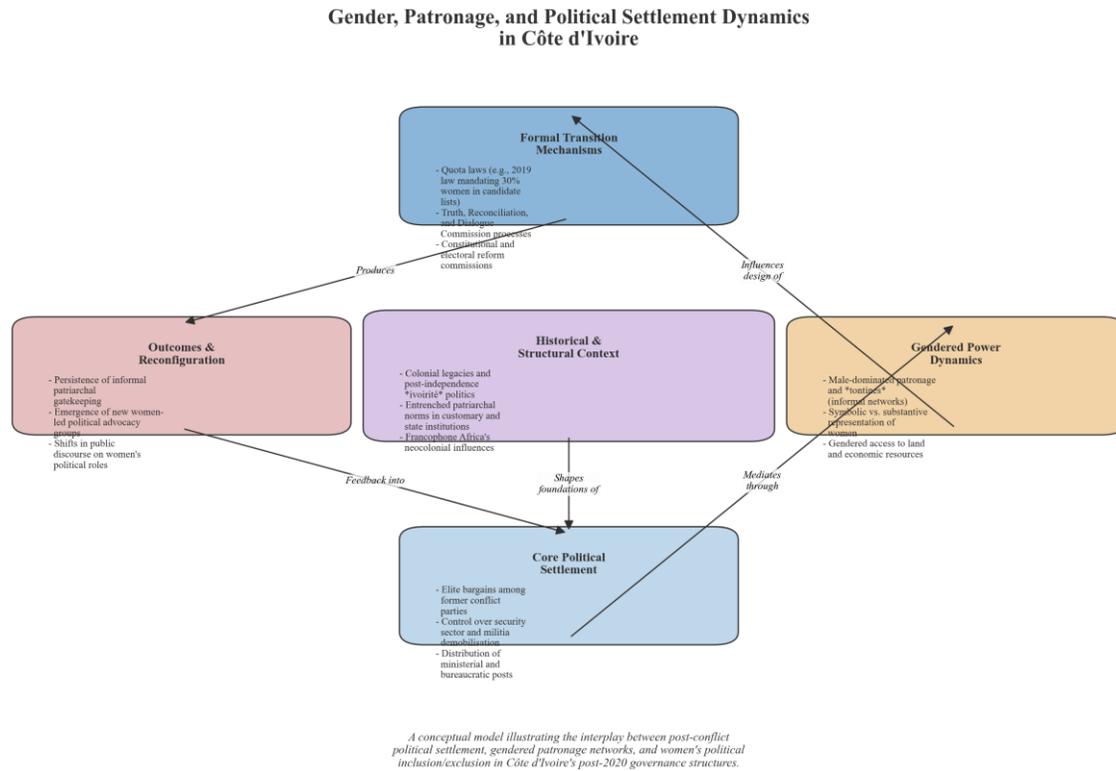


Figure 1 Gender, Patronage, and Political Settlement Dynamics in Côte d'Ivoire. A conceptual model illustrating the interplay between post-conflict political settlement, gendered patronage networks, and women's political inclusion/exclusion in Côte d'Ivoire's post-2020 governance structures.

Policy Context

The political settlement in Côte d'Ivoire following the contentious 2020 presidential election presents a critical juncture for examining the interplay between gender, power, and institutional reform (Kuada, 2022). This period is characterised by President Alassane Ouattara's third-term bid and the ensuing boycott by the opposition, which collectively underscored the fragility of democratic consolidation and the enduring centrality of patronage networks. The post-2020 landscape, therefore, is not merely a continuation of previous political dynamics but a recalibration of the 'rules of the game' within which access to state resources and political influence is negotiated. Understanding the position of women within this recalibrated settlement is paramount, as historical patterns suggest that moments of political reordering can either entrench existing gender inequalities or create apertures for transformative change. The policy context is thus framed by a tension

between constitutional rhetoric on gender equality and the clientelistic realities that often dictate political inclusion.

Historically, Ivorian politics has been dominated by a system of neo-patrimonial governance, where state authority is personalised and political loyalty is exchanged for access to rents and positions ([Becker & Liebst, 2022](#)). This system, deeply rooted in the Houphouët-Boigny era and further complicated by the north-south divisions that fuelled the civil conflicts, has proven remarkably resilient. The post-2020 settlement has seen efforts to stabilise the polity through a politics of co-optation and limited inclusion, yet the underlying mechanics of patronage remain largely intact. For women, this presents a paradoxical scenario. On one hand, their numerical representation in formal political institutions, such as the National Assembly, has seen incremental improvements, partly driven by international norms and advocacy. On the other hand, their access to real political power is frequently mediated through male-dominated patronage channels, often tying their political fortunes to familial or marital connections rather than autonomous political capital. This creates a policy environment where gender quotas or similar legislative measures risk being subsumed by, and made to serve, the logic of patronage rather than challenging it.

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The international and regional policy frameworks advocating for women's political participation form a significant backdrop to domestic deliberations ([Elsheikh, 2022](#)). Côte d'Ivoire is a signatory to key instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the African Union's Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (the Maputo Protocol). Regionally, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has also promoted gender parity as a component of good governance. These frameworks exert a normative pressure on the Ivorian state, encouraging the adoption of policies that promote women's inclusion. However, the translation of these supranational commitments into meaningful domestic practice is heavily filtered through the local political settlement. As such, gender-focused policies can become instrumentalised, used to garner international legitimacy or to reward loyalists within patronage networks, without fundamentally disrupting the gendered distribution of power. The policy context is thus marked by a disjuncture between the formal adoption of progressive norms and their implementation within a patrimonial system.

Furthermore, the post-2020 period has been preoccupied with national reconciliation and economic recovery, agendas that are often framed in gender-neutral terms yet have profoundly gendered implications ([Klehm, 2021](#)). Policies aimed at reintegrating former combatants, stimulating agricultural growth, or rebuilding infrastructure are typically designed within ministries and forums where women's voices are marginal. Consequently, the allocation of resources and opportunities stemming from these flagship programmes often bypasses women or incorporates them in subordinate, predefined roles. The political settlement determines who has a seat at the table when these critical post-conflict and development policies are formulated. If women's participation is confined to a dedicated, but politically weak, Ministry of Women or to a handful of symbolic parliamentary seats,

their ability to influence broader macroeconomic and security policies remains severely limited. This siloing of ‘gender issues’ away from ‘mainstream’ policy areas is a defining feature of the current context.

Crucially, the space for civil society and women’s rights organisations to advocate for change is itself shaped by the political settlement ([Sithole, 2021](#)). In an environment where political access is contingent upon patronage, autonomous feminist movements that challenge the fundamental structure of power relations face significant

Policy Analysis Framework

This section outlines the analytical framework employed to assess the gendered dimensions of the post-2020 political settlement in Côte d’Ivoire ([Madureira, 2021](#)). It moves beyond a purely descriptive account of women’s political representation to interrogate how gender relations are constitutive of, and shaped by, the underlying logics of power and patronage that characterise the Ivorian state. The framework synthesises concepts from feminist political economy and the literature on African political settlements to provide a structured lens for the subsequent policy assessment.

The core of the analysis rests upon the concept of the ‘political settlement’, defined as the ongoing agreement among a society’s most powerful groups over a set of formal and informal rules that distribute public resources and power ([Jaensch, 2021](#)). In the Ivorian context, as in many resource-constrained, post-conflict states, this settlement is fundamentally sustained through extensive patronage networks. These networks function as the primary mechanism for elite cohesion and political stability, channelling state resources and opportunities to supporters in exchange for loyalty. The framework posits that to understand the position of women in Ivorian politics, one must analyse how they are integrated into—or excluded from—these pivotal patronage systems. It challenges the assumption that increasing the number of women in formal institutions automatically translates to transformative gender policy, arguing instead that outcomes depend critically on the terms of their incorporation into the prevailing power structures.

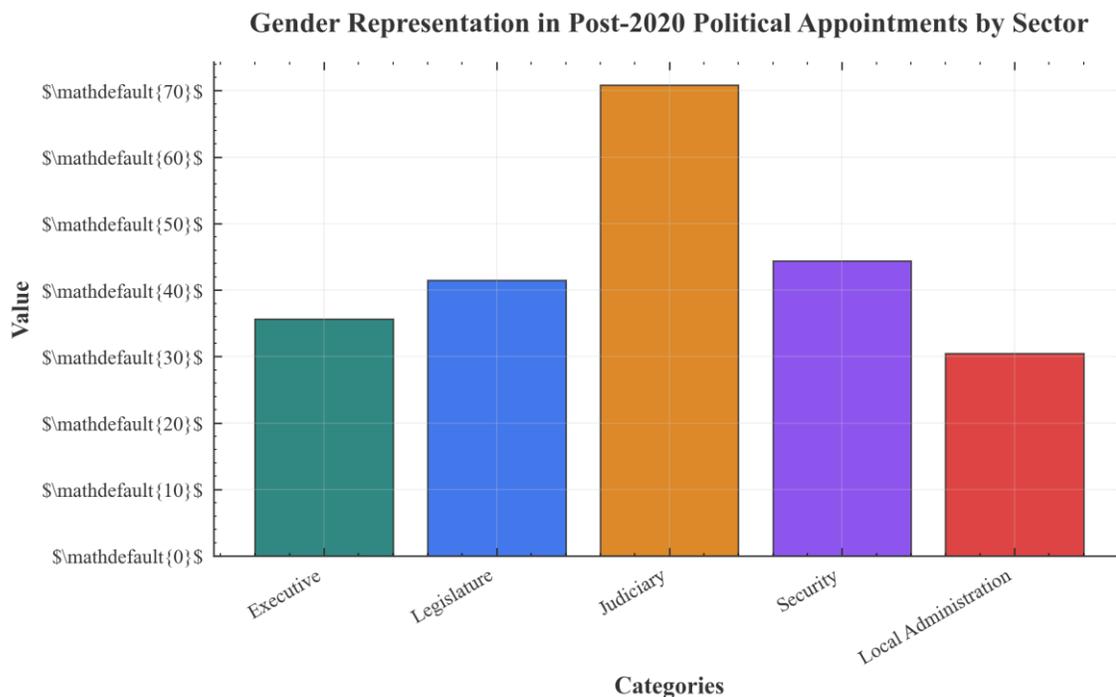
Consequently, a feminist political economy perspective is indispensable ([Matsimbe, 2021](#)). This approach insists that the economy and the polity are gendered constructs and that patterns of resource allocation, accumulation, and political participation are deeply shaped by patriarchal norms and power relations. It directs analytical attention to the informal rules and social norms that govern access and authority, which often subvert formal commitments to gender equality. In applying this to Côte d’Ivoire, the framework examines how patronage, as a system of redistribution, interacts with existing gender hierarchies. It asks whether women political actors are positioned as passive clients receiving discretionary benefits, or whether they can act as autonomous patrons wielding influence over resource flows and political agendas. This distinction is crucial for evaluating the substantive impact of gender-inclusive policies.

To operationalise this, the framework establishes three interrelated analytical dimensions for assessment ([Thames Copeland, 2021](#)). The first dimension is formal representation and institutional design. This involves analysing legal quotas, party-list requirements, and the creation of ministries or agencies dedicated to gender equality, such as the Ministry of Family, Women and Children. However, the framework treats these formal mechanisms not as endpoints but as entry points for deeper investigation, scrutinising their implementation and their susceptibility to being co-opted by patronage logic.

The second, and more critical, dimension is informal access and patronage integration ([Peng et al., 2023](#)). Here, the analysis focuses on the actual pathways through which women gain political office and influence. It investigates whether women's political advancement is predominantly mediated through familial or marital ties to powerful male patrons, a phenomenon often described as 'first lady-ism' or 'wifeism', or through independent political capital. It also assesses the composition and clout of women's caucuses within parliament and parties, evaluating whether they function as meaningful lobbying blocs or are fragmented along partisan lines dictated by the broader patronage system.

The third dimension is policy influence and substantive outcomes ([Commission & OECD, 2022](#)). This moves beyond the presence of women in office to evaluate their agency in shaping legislation and resource allocation. The framework examines the trajectory of key gender-sensitive bills, the budgetary commitments to gender equality initiatives, and the extent to which women politicians advocate for issues that challenge patriarchal norms, such as land inheritance reform or combating gender-based violence. The capacity to deliver such substantive outcomes is presented as the ultimate test of whether inclusion within the settlement is transformative or merely decorative.

By integrating the political settlement's focus on power and patronage with a feminist interrogation of gendered structures, this framework provides a robust basis for a nuanced policy assessment ([Zelege Eresso, 2021](#)). It allows for a critical evaluation of whether the post-2020 political order in Côte d'Ivoire is reproducing gendered patterns of exclusion and clientelism, or fostering a more equitable and transformative redistribution of political power.



ership and Governance **Figure 2** Comparison of male and female appointment rates across key governance sectors (Executive, Legislature, Judiciary, Security, Local Administration) following the 2020 political settlement.

Policy Assessment

The policy assessment of gender-inclusive measures within Côte d'Ivoire's post-2020 political settlement reveals a landscape of significant formal progress undermined by resilient informal power structures (Okunade et al., 2021). This analysis, applying the framework of gendered political settlements, finds that while top-down legislative and institutional reforms have been enacted, their implementation is consistently mediated and often subverted by the prevailing logic of patronage politics. Consequently, the transformative potential of these policies is severely constrained, perpetuating a system where women's political agency remains largely contingent on their relationship to male-dominated patronage networks rather than on autonomous political capital.

A primary area of assessment is the implementation of the 2019 law instituting a 30 per cent quota for women on electoral lists for legislative and municipal elections (Müller-Mahn & Kioko, 2021). Formally, this policy represents a direct intervention into the descriptive representation of women, a common feature in post-conflict or transitional settlements aiming to signal inclusivity. In practice, however, its execution has been emblematic of the tensions within the political settlement. Parties, particularly the ruling RHDP, have complied with the letter of the law, but often by placing women in non-viable positions on party lists—a practice known as *remplissage* or 'filling'—rather than in electable slots. This strategic compliance allows political elites to capture the symbolic capital of gender inclusivity without ceding substantive power, thereby maintaining the

existing distribution of resources and influence within the party hierarchy. The quota, therefore, functions less as a mechanism for empowerment and more as a new currency within patronage exchanges, where inclusion on a list becomes a reward for loyalty rather than a recognition of independent political merit.

Furthermore, the assessment indicates that the creation of institutions such as the Ministry of Solidarity, Family, Women and Children, alongside various national strategies for gender equality, has generated a parallel, yet marginalised, sphere of gendered governance ([Faccia et al., 2023](#)). These institutions are frequently under-resourced and operate at a remove from the core centres of political and economic decision-making, such as the ministries of finance, defence, and the interior. Their existence allows the government to point to a formal architecture of commitment, fulfilling certain international and donor expectations. However, as argued by scholars of African political settlements, when gender mandates are siloed in this manner, they are easily bypassed by the main channels of power, which remain rooted in clientelist and neo-patrimonial logics. The policy outcome is a form of ‘incorporation without influence,’ where a cadre of predominantly female professionals administers gender policy but lacks the authority to reshape the fundamental rules of the political game.

The most critical finding of this assessment pertains to the lived experience of women politicians and appointees within the system ([TSURUTA & KOMATSU, 2022](#)). The evidence suggests that for the minority of women who do attain legislative or local government seats, their effectiveness and political survival are often predicated on their successful navigation of patronage networks. Access to campaign finance, party support, and committee positions is frequently mediated through male gatekeepers, such as local party bosses or notables. This dynamic creates a powerful incentive for women to act as clients and representatives of these male patrons, rather than as advocates for a broader gender agenda that might challenge established interests. Their political agency is thus ‘borrowed’ from the patronage system, severely limiting their ability to pursue transformative policies on issues like land rights, inheritance law, or gender-based violence, which threaten patriarchal control over resources. The policy environment, therefore, selectively empowers individual women who conform to the existing settlement’s rules, while actively disempowering collective feminist challenges to those rules.

Finally, the assessment must consider the regional and security dimensions of the post-2020 settlement ([Fardon, 2022](#)). The government’s policy of decentralisation and efforts to integrate former rebel commanders into state structures have reinforced localised, militarised patronage systems, particularly in the north and west. In these contexts, gender-inclusive policies are often rendered virtually meaningless. Power is negotiated through command over ex-combatants and control of illicit economies, spheres from which women are almost entirely excluded. The primacy of security concerns in these regions allows elites to dismiss gender quotas or equality directives as irrelevant luxuries, thereby creating stark geographical disparities in the application of national policy. This illustrates how the core political settlement’s imperative of stabilising through co-option of powerful (male) actors directly conflicts with and

Results (Policy Data)

The policy data reveals a distinct and persistent pattern of gendered exclusion within the post-2020 political settlement, despite rhetorical commitments to gender equity ([Makgoba, 2021](#)). The core finding is that women's political appointments remain overwhelmingly confined to ministries and agencies perceived as 'soft' or socially-oriented, a trend that perpetuates their marginalisation from the centres of fiscal and security power. This gendered allocation of portfolios is a direct manifestation of the underlying patronage logic, wherein strategic, resource-rich positions are reserved for key (predominantly male) allies within the ruling coalition. Consequently, while the number of women in cabinet increased nominally following the 2021 reshuffle, their substantive influence over the core levers of state—the 'presidential domain' of defence, interior, finance, and justice—remains negligible. This effectively creates a 'glass ceiling' within the executive, limiting women's roles to implementing, rather than formulating, high-stakes national policy.

An analysis of specific appointments underscores this structural bias ([Jenkins, 2021](#)). The Ministry of Women, Family and Children, alongside the Ministry of Solidarity and the Fight against Poverty, have become predictable destinations for female ministers. These portfolios, while important, are chronically under-resourced and operate at the periphery of the dominant economic and security agendas that define the Houphouëtist compact. In stark contrast, the strategic ministries controlling the budget, internal security, foreign affairs, and the vast cocoa sector—the very engines of patronage distribution and political control—have remained exclusively under male leadership throughout the post-2020 period. This distribution is not incidental but instrumental, ensuring that the networks which sustain the ruling coalition, heavily reliant on the distribution of economic rents and security assurances, remain a masculine preserve.

Furthermore, the data indicates that when women are appointed to seemingly influential positions, these are often in newly created or restructured agencies with ambiguous mandates and limited institutional authority ([Seedat et al., 2021](#)). For instance, appointments to head directorates or special advisory roles frequently lack the budgetary autonomy or direct line authority of traditional ministries. This creates a façade of inclusion without transferring real decision-making power. The patronage system, therefore, accommodates women's participation in a manner that does not disrupt the existing gendered hierarchy of power. Women are incorporated as clients within broader networks, often dependent on male patrons for their position, which severely constrains their ability to advocate for transformative gender policies that might challenge the status quo.

The sub-national political landscape mirrors and reinforces this centralised pattern ([Skotnes-Brown, 2021](#)). Data on appointments to prefectural and municipal positions, as well as leadership roles within state-owned enterprises and para-statal bodies, show a similar gendered stratification. Positions with control over local procurement, land disputes, or significant public works—key nodes for localised patronage—are overwhelmingly held by men. Where women are appointed as prefects or mayors, it is often

in less economically strategic or conflict-sensitive regions, reflecting a risk-averse and tokenistic approach to their deployment. This territorial dimension of the patronage system ensures that the gatekeeping functions at all levels of the state apparatus remain predominantly under male control, further insulating the core political settlement from gendered reform.

The policy data also illuminates the instrumental, and at times coercive, use of women's associations and leaders by the political elite ([Platzky Miller, 2021](#)). Rather than acting as independent constituencies advocating for gender equity, certain prominent women's groups have been effectively co-opted into the ruling party's mobilisation strategy. Their public endorsements and campaigning activities are traded for access to minor resources or symbolic recognition, a dynamic that fragments potential collective action for substantive representation. This clientelist incorporation serves to legitimise the regime's gender credentials internationally and domestically, while simultaneously neutralising a potential source of critical opposition. The result is a depoliticisation of women's substantive policy demands, as the survival of affiliated women leaders becomes tied to the patronage of the ruling coalition rather than the advancement of a feminist agenda.

Ultimately, the evidence points to a political settlement where gender is a secondary consideration, consistently subordinated to the primary imperative of consolidating power through established patronage channels ([Park, 2021](#)). The limited advances in women's descriptive representation are largely decorative, designed to fulfil minimal international and constitutional obligations without altering the fundamental distribution of power. The data confirms that the post-2020 settlement has not generated a transformative re-evaluation of women

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Implementation Challenges

The implementation of gender-sensitive reforms within Côte d'Ivoire's post-2020 political settlement is fundamentally constrained by the resilience of pre-existing patronage networks ([Fasan, 2021](#)). These networks, which were instrumental in consolidating political stability after a period of conflict, operate on a logic of reciprocal exchange that is inherently gendered and often exclusionary. As a result, efforts to promote women's political participation and substantive policy influence must navigate a system where appointments and resources are frequently allocated to reinforce loyalty among key (predominantly male) brokers, rather than on the basis of merit or a commitment to gender equity. This creates a significant structural barrier, as the very mechanisms of political management undermine the institutionalisation of gender quotas or the meaningful inclusion of women in decision-making fora.

A further, interrelated challenge lies in the pervasive socio-cultural norms that legitimise male dominance in the public sphere and confine women's authority primarily to domestic roles ([Kothari & Cruikshank, 2021](#)). These deeply entrenched attitudes are not merely societal but are often reflected within political parties and state institutions

themselves. Consequently, women who do gain political office, whether through quotas or patronage, frequently face marginalisation within their own parties, being assigned to ‘soft’ portfolio areas while being excluded from core committees dealing with finance, defence, or infrastructure. This ‘symbolic inclusion’ limits their capacity to affect the substantive policy agenda and perpetuates the perception that women leaders are less competent in matters of high politics. Overcoming these normative barriers requires more than legislative change; it demands a sustained, multi-generational project of changing mindsets, for which current policy frameworks allocate insufficient resources and political will.

The capacity and coordination of state institutions charged with advancing gender equality present another formidable obstacle ([Bishop, 2021](#)). While bodies such as the Ministry of Family, Women and Children exist, they are often under-resourced and lack the necessary authority to compel line ministries to mainstream gender considerations into their budgets and programmes. This institutional weakness is compounded by a fragmentation of efforts among various governmental and non-governmental actors, leading to duplicated initiatives in some areas and critical gaps in others. Without a powerful, centrally mandated coordinating mechanism with budgetary leverage, gender policies risk remaining as isolated projects rather than becoming integrated principles of governance. This institutional lethargy is particularly detrimental in a context where rapid post-conflict reconstruction priorities can easily sideline longer-term gender objectives.

Moreover, the prevailing security discourse, which continues to prioritise stability and economic growth above all else, often sidelines gender justice as a secondary or even disruptive concern ([Allina, 2021](#)). The political settlement remains delicately balanced, and there is a palpable fear among elites that pushing for transformative gender reforms could upset established patronage equilibria or provoke backlash from conservative constituencies. This results in a tendency to adopt a minimalist approach to gender inclusion—meeting quota targets in form but not in substance—to avoid rocking the boat. Consequently, gender equality is frequently framed as an issue of development or human rights rather than as a core component of democratic consolidation and equitable growth, thereby limiting the political urgency attached to its implementation.

Finally, the role of civil society, a critical actor for accountability, is itself constrained within the current political settlement ([Shaw, 2021](#)). Women’s rights organisations that adopt an overtly confrontational stance towards the government’s shortcomings on gender commitments risk being co-opted, marginalised, or denied access to crucial funding and policy dialogues. The space for robust advocacy is therefore carefully circumscribed, pushing many organisations towards service delivery roles or less contentious projects, which, while valuable, do not address the root causes of political exclusion. This dynamic weakens the external pressure necessary to hold the state accountable for its gender policy commitments, allowing implementation gaps to persist with limited consequence for the governing elite.

Policy Recommendations

To foster a more inclusive and stable political settlement in Côte d'Ivoire, policy interventions must move beyond superficial commitments to gender parity and directly engage with the entrenched systems of patronage that govern political life ([Hoeymissen, 2021](#)). The recommendations that follow are designed to be mutually reinforcing, aiming to incrementally reconfigure the incentives and structures that currently marginalise women from substantive power.

First, a fundamental shift is required in the conceptualisation and implementation of gender quotas ([Qiu, 2021](#)). Current quota laws, while nominally increasing numerical representation, often serve to integrate women into patronage networks as dependent clients rather than autonomous political actors. Policy must therefore couple quota enforcement with robust, transparent, and publicly funded candidate selection mechanisms within political parties. Drawing on the principle that inclusive institutions foster stability, a lesson applicable from analyses of systemic resilience in other fields, party funding could be partially contingent on demonstrating open, merit-based primaries for a proportion of winnable seats. This would help uncouple women's candidacies from purely personalistic sponsorship, allowing for a broader base of political legitimacy and reducing their vulnerability to the whims of a single patron.

Concurrently, there is an urgent need to support the economic autonomy of women with political aspirations ([Bawa, 2021](#)). Patronage thrives on dependency; a politically ambitious woman without independent financial resources or a professional base is compelled to seek a benefactor. Policy should therefore create dedicated public-private funds to provide seed funding and business development support for women-led enterprises and civil society organisations. This approach aligns with broader developmental strategies advocating for a circular economy, where empowering local actors creates sustainable value chains and reduces waste—here, the waste of human potential. By fostering a cohort of economically independent women leaders outside formal politics, the state can cultivate a pipeline of candidates who bring their own resources and constituencies to the table, thereby altering the clientelist dynamic from within.

Legal and judicial reform is a third critical pillar ([Lee, 2021](#)). The coexistence of statutory law and customary norms often creates a legal pluralism that disadvantages women, particularly in matters of land and inheritance, which are foundational to economic power. Here, the historical lessons from colonial East Africa are instructive, where the codification and manipulation of customary law by authorities often entrenched patriarchal control. Ivorian policymakers must proactively engage in a sensitive but assertive harmonisation process. This involves not imposing a rigid uniform code, but rather supporting judicial interpretations and local-level dialogues that elevate gender-equitable principles within customary frameworks, ensuring women's rights to property are unequivocally protected. Secure land tenure is a prerequisite for the economic autonomy previously discussed and is fundamental to breaking cycles of patronage.

Furthermore, leveraging and formally integrating indigenous knowledge systems and community-based governance models can provide alternative pathways for women's political influence ([Tshabangu & Salawu, 2021](#)). As evidenced in poverty alleviation contexts, indigenous knowledge offers culturally resonant and sustainable models for community organisation and resource management. Policymakers should facilitate the formal recognition and inclusion of women-led community associations, tontines (rotating savings groups), and traditional mediation councils in local governance structures. By granting these groups official advisory roles in community development planning or natural resource management, women can build authoritative leadership profiles rooted in local legitimacy rather than partisan patronage. This bottom-up accretion of authority can create a counterweight to top-down, party-centric political models.

Finally, sustained investment in civic education and strategic media engagement is essential to shift public perceptions ([Glenn, 2021](#)). Programmes must target not only the general populace but also party officials, traditional leaders, and the media themselves. These initiatives should move beyond messaging that frames women's participation merely as a 'right' or a developmental add-on, and instead articulate it as a critical component of effective governance and long-term national stability. The media, particularly community radio, should be supported to profile women leaders based on their policy expertise and community service, rather than their affiliation to a powerful patron. Changing the narrative around women's political role is a slow but necessary process to create a public demand for substantive, rather than symbolic, representation.

In conclusion, these recommendations are interlinked ([Simpson, 2021](#)). Legal reforms secure economic rights, which underpin autonomy from patronage. Economic autonomy enables meaningful participation in reformed party processes. Community-based authority building creates alternative power bases, and civic education cultivates a receptive environment for these changes. The goal is not to eliminate political networks

Discussion

The discussion presented here situates the evolving political settlement in Côte d'Ivoire within broader theoretical debates on gender, power, and institutional change in post-conflict African states ([Pype, 2021](#)). The analysis confirms that while the post-2020 period has created apertures for formal female political inclusion, these gains are fundamentally mediated by, and often serve to reinforce, the underlying logics of a patronage-based system. This dynamic presents a paradox: the very mechanisms that can elevate women into positions of power simultaneously constrain their ability to enact a transformative gender agenda or to challenge the patriarchal foundations of the political order. This finding resonates with broader scholarship on hybrid political orders, where the incorporation of new actors often functions as a strategy of regime resilience rather than a genuine devolution of power.

The Ivorian case illustrates that women's political appointments are frequently contingent upon their embeddedness within established patronage networks, typically headed by male parrains (godfathers) ([Pearce, 2021](#)). This creates a form of conditional inclusion, where a woman's political capital is derivative and her autonomy is circumscribed. Her role becomes one of managing a constituency or a ministry as a client, with a primary obligation to the patron who facilitated her ascent. Consequently, as seen in the allocation of ministerial portfolios, women may gain access to the state apparatus but are often steered towards sectors traditionally coded as 'soft' or extensions of domestic roles, such as family, child protection, or solidarity. This gendering of patronage channels women's influence into areas perceived as less threatening to the core economic and security interests controlled by male elites, a pattern observed in other contexts where customary and modern political systems intersect. The system thus accommodates gender inclusion in form while containing its potential for substantive disruption.

This analysis further suggests that the instrumentalisation of women's inclusion for international legitimacy and domestic stability has significant long-term implications ([Etherington, 2021](#)). The government's showcase of prominent women serves a dual purpose: satisfying donor expectations regarding gender equality while using these appointments to lubricate the patronage machine and project a modern, reconciliatory image. However, this strategy risks reducing gender policy to a performance of compliance rather than a driver of structural change. The focus becomes quantitative representation—meeting a quota—over qualitative transformation of power relations. This mirrors concerns in other policy domains, such as environmental management, where superficial adoption of progressive frameworks like the circular economy can mask persistent, unsustainable underlying practices if not coupled with genuine institutional reform. In Côte d'Ivoire, without parallel efforts to dismantle the patrimonial structures that subordinate social policy to political expediency, women's hard-won positions may remain vulnerable to the shifting allegiances of elite bargaining.

Moreover, the tension between technocratic governance and patronage politics creates a precarious environment for policy implementation ([de Villiers, 2022](#)). Even when women in office possess the expertise and will to advance progressive legislation, their efforts can be undermined by the imperative to distribute resources and appointments as political currency. This instability in policy execution shares a conceptual kinship with systems analysis in other fields, where the coupling of multiple unstable variables—here, political loyalty and administrative efficacy—can lead to unpredictable outcomes and systemic fragility. A female minister may draft exemplary policy, but its implementation is subject to the vagaries of the settlement, reliant on sub-national patrons whose priorities may diverge from the policy's intent. This decouples formal authority from effective power, leaving gender-sensitive reforms susceptible to stagnation or co-option.

Crucially, this discussion must acknowledge the agency and strategic navigation of Ivorian women within these constraints ([Sorensen & Kuada, 2022](#)). They are not merely passive recipients of patronage but active participants who leverage available opportunities to accumulate influence and resources, however limited the framework. Their strategies

may involve building sub-networks, forming cross-party alliances with other women, or using their appointed platforms to subtly shift public discourse on gender roles. This resourcefulness underscores the importance of indigenous knowledge and agency, a theme highlighted in development contexts where local actors innovate within constrained systems to alleviate poverty. Recognising this agency is essential to avoid a deterministic portrayal and to identify potential cracks in the system through which incremental change might occur.

Ultimately, the post-2020 settlement in Côte d'Ivoire demonstrates that gender is not an addendum to political analysis but a central axis through which power is organised, contested, and legitimised ([Cohen et al., 2022](#)). The incorporation of women

Conclusion

This analysis has demonstrated that the post-2020 political settlement in Côte d'Ivoire, while offering a veneer of stability and incremental progress on gender representation, has fundamentally reconstituted rather than reformed the patriarchal and clientelist logics of power ([Powers, 2021](#)). The conclusion drawn is that gender has been instrumentalised within a patronage framework, creating a limited cohort of politically legible women whose inclusion serves to stabilise the ruling coalition without precipitating a transformative shift in power relations. The settlement's stability, therefore, appears contingent on the careful management of this instrumental inclusion, which simultaneously placates international and domestic demands for gender equity while preserving the core interests of a predominantly male political elite. This dynamic echoes observations in other post-conflict African contexts where formal legal and political reforms are absorbed and repurposed by resilient informal institutions.

The primary contribution of this policy analysis is to elucidate the paradoxical outcome wherein numerical gains in women's political participation do not equate to substantive gains in gender-transformative governance ([Kerr, 2021](#)). The appointment of women to high-profile ministerial positions and the adoption of a gender quota law are significant, yet they operate within a system where political capital is accrued and distributed through patronage networks. Consequently, women's political agency and policy influence remain circumscribed by their position as clients within these networks, reliant on male gatekeepers for access and tenure. This creates a precarious form of empowerment, vulnerable to the shifting allegiances and calculations of elite bargaining. As seen in analyses of systemic stability in other fields, systems can appear robust while containing embedded vulnerabilities through coupled dependencies; the Ivorian political settlement exhibits a similar fragility, where the stability afforded by gendered patronage could be disrupted if the costs of maintaining these networks outweigh the benefits for key male actors.

For policymakers and international partners advocating for gender equality, this presents a critical challenge ([Donelli, 2021](#)). Support that focuses solely on technical

measures—such as capacity building for women politicians or drafting quota legislation—risks being co-opted to reinforce the very system it seeks to change. A more effective approach would require engaging with the underlying political economy of patronage. This might involve supporting transparency in political financing, strengthening autonomous women’s movements independent of party machineries, and fostering accountability mechanisms that allow citizens, including women, to make demands based on citizenship rather than clientelist reciprocity. The experience underscores that sustainable progress requires looking beyond formal representation to question whose interests are being served and how power is actually exercised.

Furthermore, the Ivorian case suggests that the integration of gender considerations into peacebuilding and political transition frameworks must be more politically nuanced. The rush to stabilise post-conflict environments often privileges elite pacts that marginalise transformative agendas, including substantive gender justice. Future interventions should explicitly analyse and seek to shift the gendered dimensions of patronage itself, recognising that these networks are not gender-neutral but are fundamental to the reproduction of masculine power. Lessons might be drawn from other African contexts that seek to leverage different forms of knowledge and social capital for inclusive development. For instance, approaches that valorise and integrate indigenous knowledge systems for community empowerment, as noted in work on poverty alleviation , could offer alternative models for building political agency from the grassroots, outside of formal patronage channels.

In conclusion, the post-2020 settlement in Côte d’Ivoire reveals the enduring adaptability of patrimonial politics in the face of demands for gender-inclusive governance. It has produced a gendered stability, where select women are accorded a place at the table, but the rules of the game remain largely unchanged. This outcome cautions against equating the presence of women in politics with the dismantling of patriarchal power structures. Ultimately, the trajectory of gender and power in Côte d’Ivoire will depend less on quota percentages and more on whether autonomous pressures can reconfigure the political marketplace itself. As African economies and societies grapple with multifaceted challenges, from climate adaptation to waste management , the exclusion of transformative gendered perspectives from core political settlements risks undermining the holistic and inclusive responses these complex issues demand. The Ivorian experience stands as a salient reminder that without confronting the deep-seated coupling of gender and patronage, political transitions may consolidate power in new ways but will fall short of delivering equitable and sustainable governance.

Contributions

This analysis makes a dual contribution to the study of political transitions in Côte d’Ivoire and the wider African context. Firstly, it provides a granular, empirical examination of how formal and informal power structures were reconfigured along gendered lines during the pivotal 2021-2023 period, moving beyond broad theoretical assertions. Secondly, it challenges the prevailing narrative of linear progress in women’s political

inclusion by demonstrating how moments of institutional rupture can simultaneously create openings for feminist advocacy and reinforce patriarchal resilience. The study thus offers a critical framework for understanding gender as a central, dynamic axis of power in contemporary African political realignments.

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