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Gender Responsive Monitoring and Evaluation of Devolution Policy Harmonization Programs in Kenya: A Conceptual Study

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual research paper examines the imperative breakdown in converting Gender-Responsive Monitoring and Evaluation (GRM&E) into Kenya devolution policy harmonization initiatives. It postulates that the constant gender disparities at the county-level are explained by systematic exclusion of a gender lens in intergovernmental systems designed to harmonize national and county policies in such a way that these coordination systems ultimately became complicit in reinforcing inequality. The study uses a conceptual design that integrates both GRM&E theorization and an institutional analysis of the Kenya devolution policy harmonization architecture, incorporating some particular programs, such as the Kenya Devolution Support Programme (KDSP) and the Agricultural Sector Development Support Programme (ASDSP). The study breaks down the process of how harmonization processes embrace gender-evasive measures through critical evaluation of policy documents, joint sector review reports, and program evaluations. The major finding indicate that instruments including intergovernmental performance contracting, conditional grant schemes, and platforms like the electronic County Integrated Monitoring and Evaluation System (e-CIMES) do not use mandatory gender-sensitive indicators, whereas platforms like the e-CIMES platforms have been demonstrated to be ceremonial, with 34% of counties not complying with indicators reporting. The study concludes that harmonization which is supposed to promote coherence, instead institutionalizes gender inequity in cases where its fundamental accountability instruments are not gender responsive. It advocates a fundamental change in the ways of harmonizing instruments by requiring performance agreements to integrate gender sensitive indicators and developing capacity of oversight bodies to consistently mandate and use gendered evidence. The contribution of this study is a new practically applicable framework in which GRM&E can be integrated into the actual circuitry of intergovernmental relations with gender equality as the quantifiable, non-negotiable component of a truly harmonized and equitable devolved state.

Keywords: Gender-Responsive Monitoring and Evaluation, Devolution Policy Harmonization, Intergovernmental Relations, Kenya, Institutional Accountability

INTRODUCTION

With the promulgation of the Constitution of Kenya in 2010, there was a two-tier system of governance inaugurated, and a radical restructuring that was expressly aimed at breaking up past

foundations of concentrations of power, facilitating balanced development, and integrating marginalized groups (Government of Kenya, 2010). Such constitutional vision requires a complex process of harmonization of the development agendas of 47 semi-autonomous counties with the priorities and principles of the country (Omweri, 2024; Ouma, 2021). As a result, an intricate network of devolution policy harmonization programs has become the engine that drives Kenyan devolution (Muwonge et al., 2022; Ngigi & Busolo, 2019).

They are not isolated projects, but systems of intergovernmental coordination that continue over time, including systems such as the Kenya Devolution Support Programme (KDSP), Intergovernmental Sector Forums, conditional grant schemes with stringent conditions and nationally-led projects, such as the rollout of the "Big Four" Agenda at the county level (World Bank, 2022; Council of Governors, 2024). Such harmonization activities can be seen as the critical conduits of the state, which aims at aligning the planning, budgeting, implementation, and reporting of levels of government (Muwonge et al., 2022; Ngigi & Busolo, 2019; Government of Kenya, 2010).

Nevertheless, there is a deep-seated and paradoxical implementation gap at the core of this system. Although harmonization programs are effective at coordinating what is completed, such as making counties develop health facilities or support farmers plant cash crops, their in-built Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) elements mainly fail to question 'how' and 'to whom' these actions apply, and their relative effects (Nyawira et al., 2023; Ministry of Health., 2020; Banzi & Tumuti, 2024). It has been shown that the M&E frameworks in these harmonization programs are still stuck in gender-evasive, technocratic paradigms, whereby aggregate indicators of measures such as fiscal absorption rates, physical output figures, and uniform access to services are given precedence over sensitive accounts of gendered outcomes (Kmwela & Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025; Nyawira et al., 2023; Banzi & Tumuti, 2024; Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). This results in risky accountability lapse whereby the same systems designed to consolidate and enhance governance are methodically removing gender inequality off the formal books of performance by devolution. Consequently, the harmonization process is at risk of becoming an administrative alignment exercise, which is also subject to involuntarily codifying and reinforcing existing disparities, through the failure to diagnose them (Nyawira et al., 2023; Banzi & Tumuti, 2024; Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025).

The traditional M&E in these harmonization settings is typified by an upward-oriented accountability model that is based on adherence to national norms and donor guidelines (Mahmoud Saleh & Karia, 2024; Ospina et al., 2021). It is reflected in standardized templates of county reporting, agendas of joint sector reviews, which mostly involve financial and infrastructural updates, and measures of success like kilometres of road paved, or classes built instead of changes in girls staying in school or women empowerment and control over agricultural income (Kanyamuna et al., 2020; County Government of Taita Taveta, 2023; Ministry of Transport, 2022; NEPAD/APRM Kenya Secretariat, 2025). This mechanism relies on a homogenizing logic that makes gendered realities of power, access, time-use, and resource control appear deeply invisible to accountability systems of county and national government levels (Mackay et al., 2010; Yasmin & Ghafran, 2025). A radical paradigm change is therefore much needed from gender-neutral to Gender-Responsive Monitoring and Evaluation (GRM&E) that is specifically developed and incorporated into the very DNA of harmonization processes.

GRM&E goes beyond the simplistic, and in many cases, inconsistent, disaggregation of data to sex (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025; Tirivanhu & Jansen van Rensburg, 2018). It is a transformative practice based on the principles of feminist evaluation, and it actively examines how power relations, social constructs, and institutional biases influence how policies and programs have differential impact on women, men, girls, boys, and gender minorities (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025; Podems, 2024; Kalpazidou Schmidt et al., 2023; Greaves, 2025).

When directed at the policy harmonization arena, GRM&E presents an alternative set of fundamental questions such as 'Will the harmonized performance contract between the national Ministry of Health and counties enhance maternal health outcomes equally among the adolescent girls and older women?' 'Are conditional grants in agricultural development effective in reaching and empowering smallholder women farmers compared to male farmers?' It also aims at making harmonization an effective and evidence-based tool of substantive policy compatibility on gender equality rather than a technical-compliance process (Ministry of Planning and Development, 2025; Greaves, 2025). And yet amidst this clear imperative, there is a great conceptual and practical divide. Whereas the premises of GRM&E are set in the literature of development, and the political

structure of Kenyan devolution is widely researched, there is an unbelievable dearth of academic sources that address the question of GRM&E integration into the context of concrete, routine operations of policy harmonization (Odhiambo-Abuya, & Owuor, 2025; Manyala, 2021; Iradukunda et al., 2024). Likewise, it applies to the shared design of joint planning, conditional funding, benchmarking of performance, and inter-governmental dialogue that constitutes the Kenyan state reality on the ground (Odhiambo-Abuya, & Owuor, 2025; Manyala, 2021; Iradukunda et al., 2024; Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025).

Conceptually, therefore, this research examines how a GRM&E approach can be incorporated in Kenya devolution policy harmonization programs in an integrated and systematic manner. Its main aim is to create a holistic model that converts GRM&E from a project-level instrument into an obligatory element of intergovernmental accountability. The research premise is that to ensure that the concept of devolution meets its original promise of equity, the harmonization apparatus as a whole will have to be re-engineered in a gender-responsive manner. It claims that this effort needs to face not only gaps in technical data but the actual political economy of intergovernmental relations, in which negotiations tend to discount the more politically charged ‘soft’ social indicators in favor of ‘harder’ infrastructural and financial indicators that can be less politically controversial. This paper offers a comprehensive, practical roadmap by taking into consideration the feminist theory of evaluation in conjunction with the multi-level governance, feminist institutionalism, and intergovernmental policy-making literature (Kenny and Verge, 2023; Gotte et al., 2025). The roadmap targets national and county policy-makers, Sector Working Group secretariats, development partners and Civil Society in providing a concise way of achieving gender equality as the quantifiable, auditable and non-negotiable essence of a harmonized and indeed transformative devolved state in Kenya.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

The scholarly discourse on Kenyan devolution has developed quite drastically, shedding the initial analytical focus on legal frameworks and fiscal decentralization in favor of more detailed study of its effect on outcomes, political economy, and the quality of governance in reality (Cheeseman et al., 2020; Omweri, 2024; Ouma, 2021; Muwonge et al., 2022). There is an increasingly large sub-field of research that specifically examines the harmonization of policy of devolution, studying the

complicated institutions and processes that are established to oversee vertical and horizontal integration (Ngigi & Busolo, 2019; Kenya Human Rights Commission, 2010; Ang'ana & Lempereur, 2024). It entails a thorough examination of the Summit, the Council of Governors (CoG), Technical Working Committees, and Sector Working Groups that are required to promote coherence in policies across governmental levels (Odhiambo-Abuya, & Owuor, 2025; Manyala, 2021; Laichena et al., 2022; Republic of Kenya, 2019). The fundamental conflict between county autonomy and national standard-setting in this field is regularly described by the existing studies that have actively reported the conflict in terms of resources distribution, administrative delimitation, and the definition of overlapping functions (World Bank, 2022; World Bank, 2023; Kenyatta, 2024). At the same time, strong and unique Gender-Responsive Monitoring and Evaluation (GRM&E) literature has developed as a result of the feminist development literature and practice (Podems, 2024; Kalpazidou Schmidt et al., 2023; Greaves, 2025).

GRM&E is strictly defined as a methodology, which focuses on entrenching a gender lens and feminist approach throughout the entire M&E cycle, including planning and design, data collection, analyzing, reporting, and using results, to evaluate differential impacts and generate transformative change toward gender equality (Mackay et al., 2010; Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025; Tirivanhu & Jansen van Rensburg, 2018; Ministry of Planning & Development, 2025). The main principles, such as intersectionality, participatory inclusion, and the critical attention to power relations and dynamics, are already established in the literature (Collins, 2019; Wheeler et al., 2020; Lott, 2012; UN Women, 2025; Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025).

Critical perspective shows that the two essential bodies of literature overlap, and in fact, there is a vast gap in scholarly literature (Novovic, 2021; Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). Much of the existing research on harmonization tends to view gender as a cross-cutting or peripheral concern instead of a fundamental determinant of policy effectiveness and equity, because fiscal disbursement and utilization, institutional mandates, as well as political negotiating are prioritized (Kanyamuna et al., 2020; Onyango, 2020; Ang'ana & Lempereur, 2024). On the flipside, the literature on GRM&E in Kenya tends to be confined to the analysis of individual initiatives or sectors, such as health or education, and seldom extends its analytical perspective to the intergovernmental systems that operate across all the counties and establish the principles of accountability (Iradukunda et al.,

2024; Wambua, 2019; Banzi & Tumuti, 2024). This is a conceptual and practical disconnection (Kunz, 2017; Goetz, 2020). The harmonization apparatus, which includes performance contracting, conditional grants with prerequisite reporting indications, joint sector reviews, and national digital platforms, such as e-CIMES is an effective but highly underused institutional point of entry regarding the mainstreaming of gender accountability throughout the devolved system (Warinda, 2019; National Treasury, 2021; Duba, 2024; Monitoring and Evaluation Directorate, 2022). Such a lack of integration implies that coordination apparatuses are not utilized to achieve equity and utilization of gendered data (Oyugi, 2024; Magalhaes et al., 2025; Onyango & Akinyi, 2023).

Empirical studies present significant though fragmented pieces of evidence on integration (Chelimo, 2023; Nyonje & Kidombo, 2024). The study of Joint Sector Review (JSR) meetings in major devolved departments such as health and agriculture makes it clear that the agendas and performance data are heavily built around the aggregate service coverage, the rate of the budget execution, and procurement schedules, with no or very little modeled analysis of sex-disaggregated performance or gender obstacles to the availability of the services in question (Council of Governors, 2024; Ministry of Health, 2020; Chipeta et al., 2015). Moreover, major conditional grants that are designed as a cornerstone of harmonization by targeting priorities of counties do not contain, in many cases, mandatory, gender-responsive output and outcome indicators (OEDC, 2019; World Bank, 2023; Commission on Revenue Allocation, 2021). Therefore, counties lack the financial incentives and technical prerequisites to monitor, document or attain gender-equitable outcomes, with studies highlighting the systematic approach to identify and manage grant structures in relation to healthcare, infrastructure, and climate action (OEDC, 2019; World Bank, 2020; Institute of Public Finance, 2024). This empirical fact is consistent with theoretical perspectives on feminist institutionalism, which assumes that institutions are not gender-neutral and are gendered through formal rules and informal norms, which frequently favor masculine-coded values and practices (Mackay et al., 2010; Dryzek, 1996; Kunz, 2017). The meta-institution of the harmonization system is already rooted in such norms of placing the quantifiable, material deliverable and fiscal compliance over sophisticated social transformation, thus ingraining gender bias across the two levels of government (Goetz, 2020; Onyango, 2020; Novovic, 2021).

Intersectionality lens contributes to the further complexity and enhancement of this analysis in the context of harmonization (Runyan, 2018; Collins, 2019). The diversity of the counties in Kenya is very high, both in the terms of ethnicity, religion, poverty rate, geography, and exposure to the effects of climate change (County Government of Taita Taveta, 2023; Ministry of Transport, 2022; NEPAD/APRM Kenya Secretariat, 2025). An integrated national policy even with a simplistic gender lens will produce radically different effects on, say, an elderly woman living with a disability in a marginalized arid region such as Turkana compared to a young woman living in an informal settlement in Nairobi (Shafik, 2025; Yasmin & Ghafran, 2025; Richards et al., 2022).

The existing harmonization M&E approaches, which overly insist on nationally comparable, standardized indicators, are not intellectually and methodologically prepared to appreciate, comprehend, or act in response to these convergent, hyper-localized realities (Mapitsa & Churchill, 2023; Leslie et al., 2022; Waldman, 2023). This indicates that one of the major contradictions in both theory and practice of harmonization is the requirement to provide national coherence and comparability with the demand to provide context-based and responding measurement that captures compounded inequalities (Caruana, 2023; Abbott and Snidal, 2021; Guido et al., 2023). The current literature does not contain strong models of the GRM&E approach which can effectively mediate this tension, and suggest mechanisms that can reconcile nationally-determined gender equality indicators with locally-created indicators of change (Marsden et al., 2025; Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025; Mahmoud Saleh & Karia, 2024).

Multiple interrelated and substantive research gaps emerge as a result of this literature synthesis. The first is a constitutional-operational chasm. Whereas the constitution has always required both meaningful devolution and substantive gender equality, the operationalization tools created to achieve this dual objective are not explicitly geared towards being gender responsive (Government of Kenya, 2010; Omweri, 2024; Onyango & Akinyi, 2023). Second, there is also an instrumental-design gap. Specific effective harmonization tools such as intergovernmental performance contracts, Medium-Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF)-based guidelines, and conditional grant manuals have not been audited or redesigned creatively with a GRM&E lens (World Bank, 2023; National Treasury, 2021; Oyugi, 2024). Third, there is also a processual-politics gap. The lived politics, power dynamics, and discursive politics of intergovernmental forums in which M&E

data is evaluated, discussed, utilized and actioned have not been thoroughly studied as the basis of facilitating or obstructing gender-responsive dialogue and accountability (Bache et al., 2016; Kenny & Verge, 2023; Götze et al., 2025).

This paper attempts to fill these gaps by developing a comprehensive conceptual framework that explicitly combines both the technical and ethical principles of GRM&E with the political, fiscal, and institutional realities of the Kenya devolution policy harmonization system with an aim of creating a roadmap towards its transformation into a true instrument of equitable development (Beach, 2018; Bouyousfi & Sabar, 2022; Meydan & Akkaş, 2024; Almusaed et al., 2025).

METHODOLOGY

The study is based on the conceptual research design that is directly appropriate when synthesizing existing knowledge across divergent fields to construct new integrative models, elucidate complex phenomena, or advance new theoretical correlations when empirical data is poorly integrated or in a research subject that is abstract in nature (Jaakkola, 2020; Gilson & Goldberg, 2015). The main research question is how the principles and practices of GRM&E can be systematically institutionalized in the particular architecture, processes, and political economy of the devolution policy harmonization of Kenya to ensure that the coordination mechanisms actively pursue gender-equitable results. In order to give a full response to this question, the methodology is a critical multi-layered analysis of the interpretation of a broad spectrum of secondary sources in order to triangulate three overlapped domains. These spheres are gendered M&E, Kenya harmonization architecture, and the documented interface, or lack thereof, between them.

The initial analytical level is that three variables of GRM&E, feminist institutionalism, and intergovernmental relations are synthesized theoretically (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025; Guido et al., 2023; Bache et al., 2016). This stage is based on the original and recent literature on feminist assessment, feminist institutionalism, and multi-level governance and attempts to synthesize the main, non-negotiable principles of GRM&E, including intersectionality, participatory inclusion, and power analysis (Mackay et al., 2010; Mackay et al., 2010; Collins, 2019; Wheeler et al., 2020; Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). It also analyses the theoretical challenges of these principles that clash with or can be reconfigured to reflect the prevailing demands of harmonization to policies that tend

to give precedence to standardization, administrative effectiveness, political compromises, and vertical accountability (Hooghe & Marks, 2016; Caruana, 2023; Abbott & Snidal, 2021). This theoretical foundation is critical to the creation of a principled but politically practical model.

The second layer involves a critical policy and document analysis of the harmonization ecosystem of Kenya. This includes a methodical review of major legal and policy documents including the Intergovernmental Relations Act (2012), the framework documents of certain harmonization programs such as Kenya Devolution Support Programme documents, Agricultural Sector Development Support Programme manuals (World Bank, 2023; Chipeta et al., 2015). Others include official guidelines on conditional grants and performance contracts between national and county governments and annual reports by the Council of Governors and sampled minutes or agendas of Joint Sector Reviews of sectors such as health and agriculture (World Bank, 2023; Chipeta et al., 2015). The aim is to carefully map the official M&E requirements, reporting customs, incentive systems, and informal review processes within these harmonization procedures, developing a comprehensive blueprint of the system as it is.

Integrative conceptual framework construction is the third and the most important layer. In this case, synthesized GRM&E principles are applied systematically as an analytic prism through which the mapped harmonization processes are interrogated, critiqued, and redesigned. This is not a linear and mechanical application but an iterative and critical interaction that envisions novel institutional arrangements. The methodology uses a kind of process-tracing logic to develop plausible and detailed integration pathways (Beach, 2018; Bouyousfi & Sabar, 2022). This pathways analysis goes between the first design of harmonization instruments (e.g., co-designing gender-responsive terms of reference to grant agreements), and the process of data generation and county reporting (e.g., redesigning the e-CIMES system to mandate and support the submission of intersectional data). It culminates in the essential phase of intergovernmental review, feedback and corrective action (e.g., organization of high-level political dialogue based on annual assessments of the gendered performance gaps).

The ultimate product is a multi-layered coherent conceptual framework which is theoretically grounded in both GRM&E and feminist institutionalism and carefully customized with the

political, fiscal and administrative circuitry of Kenyan intergovernmental relations. The triangulation between the three domain of sources and the logical coherence and a reflexive examination of the power interactions between the two genders and intergovernmental bargains ensure the validity and the strength of this conceptual methodology (Tracy, 2010; Meydan & Akkaş, 2024; Almusaed et al., 2025).

FINDINGS

Conceptual analysis shows that the policy harmonization programs of the Kenya devolution programs have structurally disconnected M&E systems that in many ways oppose the implementation of gender equality, thus making the coordination mechanisms active in perpetuating gender-evasive governance (Oyugi, 2024; Chelimo, 2023). The results have found a dissonance that is systemic and reinforcing, in which harmonization, geared towards integration and enhancement, systematically ignores and consequently permits the differential gendered effects (Oyugi, 2024; Chelimo, 2023). One of the main and most fundamental discoveries is the gender-neutral architecture of core harmonization instruments (Onyango et al., 2023; Magalhaes et al., 2025; Oyugi, 2024; Chelimo, 2023). The key instruments of enacting intergovernmental alignment, including the Performance Contracting Framework between the national and county executives and the extensive specifications of a large conditional grant such as the County Development Fund or the Kenya Urban Support Programme, are flooded with indicators on financial compliance, physical output, and aggregate access to services (National Treasury, 2023; World Bank, 2022). An observant analysis of these documents reveals that there is almost no prescribed, gender-sensitive outcome or impact indicators. As an example, a performance contract to the Department of Agriculture can trace the acreage of a new crop variety but does not include indicators on the share of female-headed households utilizing the technology, or the rise in female incomes attributed to its sale. This initial design flaw makes sure that, right at the very beginning, harmonization purposefully drives the county planning process and reporting to the sex-neutral deliverables, legally and financially discouraging an emphasis on equitable results.

This gap is further deeply embedded by the harmonization process of digital and bureaucratic reporting systems (Nyonje & Kidombo, 2024; Onyango & Ondiek, 2021; Ong'era & Musili, 2019). The official state platform that allows monitoring the performance of counties in relation to

harmonized national goals is the electronic County Integrated M&E System (e-CIMES) that shows a deep-rooted ceremonial approach and the culture of compliance (Warinda, 2019; National Treasury, 2021; Duba, 2024). Formal statistics reveal that 34 percent of counties failed to either revise their e-CIMES profiles or to submit the success stories they were required to do during the 2022 /2023 financial year (Duba, 2024), showing that there is a pervasive lack of engagement with the very system itself that is intended to streamline and unify reporting (Council of Governors, 2022; National Treasury and Economic Planning, 2021). More importantly, the design of the platform, its data fields, drop-down lists, and templates of the reporting, are not designed to record, require, or even readily accept gender-disaggregated data or narrative analysis of gender issues (Monitoring and Evaluation Directorate. 2022; National Treasury, 2021). This technical design renders cumbersome, or impossible, even the willing county officer, to report purposefully on gender equality/ inequality under the formal harmonized system, putting what ought to be a vibrant knowledge platform into a process of checking off boxes to justify their high-level accountability.

The review, dialogue, and accountability of intergovernmental forums are institutionally inadequately prepared and frequently perpetually restrictive of gender-responsive inquiry (Republic of Kenya, 2019; Hyun et al., 2020; UN Women, 2025). Critical reviews of agendas, minutes and summary reports of Joint Sector Reviews (JSRs) in major sectors of devolved government including health, agriculture, and education indicate that debates are largely dominated by technical reports of financial absorption rates, procurement delays, infrastructure development and logistical exemplary issues (Council of Governors, 2024). Limited evidence is available of organized agenda points that aim to examine sex-disaggregated performance, examine the various gendered restrictions to service use (e.g., cultural barriers, time poverty, safety issues), and argue about collaborative remedial actions that would mitigate the observed disparities (Republic of Kenya, 2019; Hyun et al., 2020; UN Women, 2025). These forums, rendered as constituting the central assembly spaces for national and county technocrats and policymakers to co-evaluate performance, therefore repeat and reproduce the gender-evasiveness of the underlying data systems. The time pressure and informal rules of these sessions actively deter the introduction of contentious or divisive social issues such as gender inequality by prioritizing less politically perilous negotiations over technical issues and financial aspects.

Moreover, the capacity, incentive frameworks throughout the entire chain of policy harmonization are deeply out of harmony with GRM&E goals (Kenya Human Rights Commission, 2010; MEASURE Evaluation, 2017; Monitoring and Evaluation Directorate, 2022). Officers of the national government who lead or serve as secretariat of a Sector Working Group as well as those leading harmonization programs are seldom trained, appraised and/or required to use a gender lens in their leadership and facilitation functions (MEASURE Evaluation, 2017; Monitoring and Evaluation Directorate, 2022). Likewise, the county officers who prepare the quarterly and annual reports of such harmonized systems do so within a framework that does not require gender analysis; therefore, none of them have a formal directive, incentive, or resource to create, gather, or provide such analysis (Commission on Revenue Allocation, 2021; Institute of Public Finance, 2024; World Bank, 2020). Such a disparity in capacity is augmented by the observation that the stakeholder engagement towards harmonization M&E is highly restricted and symbolic. Although civil society organizations, such as women rights groups, are sometimes invited as observers, or on consultative basis, no formal institutionalized, resourced mechanisms exist to facilitate their formal and continued input into the design of harmonization indicators, the interrogation of performance data during JSRs, or even to evaluate the harmonization programs themselves. This marginalization silences the very constituencies that may offer grounded, gendered evidence and political pressure to continue an insulated technocratic circuit across the levels of government which is out of touch with the realities that people experiencing equalities live under.

DISCUSSION

The results are all the evidence of the deep institutional crisis of Kenyan devolution. The policy harmonization to enhance consistent, efficient and responsible governance is institutionalized in a manner that systematically marginalizes gender accountability in Kenya (Novovic, 2021; Kenyatta, 2024). It is not an accidental omission, but rather a rational strategy of institutional structure and political rationales, which deliberately favors some types of knowledge and deliverables over others (Dryzek, 1996; Onyango, 2020). The lack of conception of gender in the design of harmonization tools such as performance contracts and grant manuals is indicative of what feminist institutionalism refers to as the valorization of masculine coded ‘hard’ deliverables like infrastructure, budgets, and quantifiable outputs over feminized ‘soft’ deliverables like gender and social equity, relational power shifts and wellbeing (Mackay et al., 2010; Acker, 1990). With

such values being drilled in the legal and financial directives of intergovernmental control, the state proactively creates harmonization as a technocratic and supposedly apolitical act. This depoliticisation essentially makes the intensely political issue of resource distribution and gender inequality invisible and beyond the legitimate interest of the field of intergovernmental negotiating and accountability (Kunz, 2017; Goetz, 2020).

Direct effects of this underlying institutional logic in its operational manifestations are the ceremonial underutilization of systems such as e-CIMES and the restrictive agendas of Joint Sector Reviews. M&E systems that do not facilitate knowledge creation or retention about equity and inclusion are bound to become obsolete to the purposes of the authentic managerial learning and adaptive policy-making, thus degenerating into empty compliance rituals (Shafik, 2025; Mapitsa & Churchill, 2023). The substantial non-reporting percentage on e-CIMES is an alarming performance measure of such systemic irrelevance. These harmonization-data review forums do not actually interact with gender due to the lack of gathering of gender evidence in the data systems and the political and professional culture of intergovernmental relations, which discourage confrontation on issues of distributive justice (Leslie et al., 2022; Richards et al., 2022). This forms a vicious and self-sustaining cycle in which the absence of gendered data in reviews is associated with the absence of demand in its production, and the absence of demand leads to the further lack of gendered data and related skills (Marsden et al., 2025; Waldman, 2023). This means that devolution policy harmonization is a self-perpetuating mechanism of managing intergovernmental conflict over resources while simultaneously avoiding conflict over social and gender outcomes and equity.

The implications on theory and practice in GRM&E is substantial and requires a redefinition of intervention strategy. It shows that it is not sufficient to execute GRM&E at the individual county level alone and expect it to work because it can be overruled by the higher level systems. Though an individual county government might have a strong spirit of embracing GRM&E methodologies, they are compelled to report to national harmonization systems such as the Senate or Controller of Budget who might not be keen about such undertakings. Also, specially gathered gender-sensitive information lack a designated entry platform in e-CIMES, or an equivalent indicator in the Intergovernmental Performance Contract, or any exclusive, consequential place on the JSR agenda

where it can influence national policy. Consequently, the analysis and intervention unit of choice needs to decisively transition such an individual county towards the intergovernmental relationship and redefining of the M&E architecture. GRM&E will need to be embedded within the framework of the rules, templates, financial incentives, dialogue platforms, and accountability mechanisms through which the national and county governments are interconnected. This requires a two-way, self-enhancing policy. This requires, on the one hand, technical rewiring of formal harmonization mechanism, and on the other hand, the political restructuring of the culture of intergovernmental dialogue (Ang'ana & Lempereur, 2024; Laichena et al., 2022).

As a result, the existing methods of developing GRM&E capacity are fundamentally misplaced when they primarily involve training the county M&E officers in isolation (Wambua, 2019; Oyugi, 2024). It is necessary to develop capacity over the whole intergovernmental chain in a progressive manner. The officials at the National Treasury and Ministry of Devolution need the capacity and authority to prepare gender responsive guidelines to grants and performance contracting frameworks. The secretariats and chairs of Sector Working Groups should have the skills to gather, investigate, and facilitate discussion on sex-disaggregated information in JSRs. Chief Officers and County executives require assistance to interpret, negotiate and enact gender-sensitive performance contracts. Moreover, the procedural defect of the systematic exclusion of civil society on harmonization of M&E is not a mere gap in the procedure but of paramount concern is a genuine lack of democracy, which undermines accountability. Their systematic inclusion is critical not only for consultation but also to the establishment of a balancing source of accountability. They provide crucial brokering opportunities between community-level gendered experiences and the potential to provide the evidence to be scrutinized by intergovernmental authorities in breaking the self-referential circle of government-to-government reporting. Transformative harmonization GRM&E is thus not any technical upgrade of monitoring but a democratic, institutional and innovative project through which the intergovernmental system is made publicly accountable of the equitable outcomes ascribed by the constitution.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This conceptual analysis aimed at introspectively scrutinizing the internalization of GRM&E into Kenya's devolution policy harmonization initiatives. It has conclusively established that the

current harmonization structure, including performance contracts, conditional grants, digital reporting mechanisms such as e-CIMES, and review forums such as Joint Sector Reviews, are structurally based on gender-evasive principles. Such inherent weakness of structure actively limit harmonization as a possible power and impactful function of equalization, thus resulting in gender inequality, a core component and facet in the state. The paramount finding is that GRM&E cannot and should not be effectively established on the basis of single, county-level programs. It has to be established intentionally and mandatorily into the regulations, networks, and incentives that bind counties and the national level. Presently, the fundamental breakdown lies not at the county implementation end but at the point on the intergovernmental connection itself, where the short sightedness of technical and financial compliance regularly defeats the authentically social result. Thus, the constitutional articulation of gender equality comes to be administratively hampered via the performance management mechanisms of the government itself.

Being a conceptual paper, its main weakness is that it depends on the analysis of documentary and secondary sources instead of actual primary empirical evidence collected in the politically charged, frequently opaque negotiations of intergovernmental forums. Although it provides a strong analysis and prescription framework, the real political dynamics, informal opposition, and bargaining processes underpinning sector working group discussions or performance contract deliberation must be the focus of direct ethnographic and inter-personal research. Future studies should consequently utilize comparative, mixed-method case examinations of particular sectors to trace the exact political directions and alliance of actors with which the gender-responding indicators are either effectively promoted or systematically obstructed. Additionally, participatory action research which plans and tests the emerging harmonization tools jointly with national and county officials, and civil society and gender experts, would offer essential, rooted information about viable and contextually correct channels of institutional change that would shift the discussion beyond theoretical criticism to the world of tested innovation and action.

Policy implications of such an analysis give rise to the specific, interconnected and actionable recommendations that can be proposed to the policy-makers, the practitioners and advocates with the interest in enhancing devolution and intergovernmental relationships. One of the most noticeable and immediate suggestions is the compulsory redesigning of core harmonization tools

encompassing inbuilt GRM&E criteria. This will entail the National Treasury, in statutory consultation with the Council of Governors and sector ministries, revising the national framework of Intergovernmental Performance Contracts and the principles of all conditional grants. Those revisions should indicate a minimum number of gender-sensitive, results-oriented indicators as mandatory content. As an illustration, a health sector grant must also require measures on outcomes of adolescent maternal health and male participation in reproductive health, while an agriculture grant should measure women access and control to land, credit and extension facilities. Meanwhile, the National Monitoring and Evaluation Policy needs to be reviewed to lay down legally binding principles of gender-responsive and intersectional data collection and reporting across all intergovernmental systems, and require a technical upgrade of platforms such as e-CIMES to ensure that gendered evidence is generated to inform the decision-making process.

Secondly, there is an immediate necessity to re-engineer the culture, protocol and make-up of the intergovernmental dialogue platforms so as to legalize and prioritize gender accountability. The Council of Governors and the Ministry of Devolution must designate and implement formal regulations requiring that there be a standing, substantive item on the agenda in every Joint Sector Review and other such Summit meetings to review data on sex- disaggregated performance and discuss gender constraints on program effectiveness. Moreover, these forums need to formalize the institutionalized inclusion of the representatives of the constitutional bodies such as the National Gender and Equality Commission and accredited women rights bodies as permanent members and not occasional observers. This transformation has the potential of turning these reviews into open multi-stakeholder accountability discussions rather than more closed government-to-government technical deliberations that directly integrate community-asserted gender issues into the core of intergovernmental policy realignment and resource distribution discussions.

Lastly, capacity development programs need to be realigned and increased to develop GRM&E competence throughout the intergovernmental chain. The national government sector liaison officers, Treasury officials and Sector Working Group members require dedicated, ongoing programs to equip them with the skills to incorporate a gender lens in their oversight, negotiation, guideline-drafting and facilitation duties. Meanwhile, there should be a long-term and deliberate

investment in enhancing the technical audit and advocacy capabilities of County Assemblies, the Office of the Auditor-General and civil society groups. By empowering these oversight and demand-side actors, it is possible to create a strong external accountability ecosystem to complement internal reforms and hold the whole intergovernmental system accountable to its equity mandate.

More broadly, this enquiry hypothesizes that the true test of Kenyan devolution will be whether its elaborate systems of coordination are able to produce concrete justice and equity, not just administrative order. Integrating GRM&E into the deepest core of the policy harmonization process is a crucial irreplaceable measure needed to match the technical mechanism of the state with its constitutional essence and social contract. It is a vital continuum shifting from policy harmonization as a merely fiscal and administrative structure into harmonization as a binding, evidence-based and political commitment of sharing sustained growth. This extensive and integrative framework, therefore, presents practical guideline on how to shape devolution policy harmonization from a passive notion to a capable agent in eliminating inequality in a dynamic and comprehensive manner to enable the transformative potential that devolution promises to be brought to fruition and that all Kenyan citizens, of both sex will enjoy equality before the law.

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