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Building Capacity for Gender Responsive Monitoring and Evaluation in County Governments in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper challenges the continued inability to operationalize Gender-Responsive Monitoring and Evaluation (GRM&E) in county governments by proposing that the prevailing inability is not because of a technical proficiency deficit but rather a more fundamental political and epistemological crisis of the devolved system of governing bodies. The study undertakes a critical synthesis to the concept of feminist institutionalism, which demonstrates how bureaucratic norms and rules are gendered to undermine equity evidence. Likewise, a decolonial critique of knowledge production is employed to illustrate that standardized M&E frameworks downgrade the power of local epistemologies. By examining policy texts and the opinions of stakeholders, the research deconstructs the current justification of technical justification to reveal a self-perpetuating system of institutional marginalization. Some of the main findings are that gender equity is ceremonially incorporated into the county plans but is systematically sifted out of the performance contracts and the budgetary accountability system. Moreover, externally imposed log-frames generate an epistemic alienation that simply separates M&E and local realities. Conclusions of the study proposes a way forward that constitutes a complete transformation of the political economy of evidence by moving beyond supply-side technical training. This necessitates an integrated intervention that entails gender sensitive indicators within formal performance systems, and at the same time foster demand through empowered civic and legislative oversight. One of the contribution of this paper is that GRM&E capacity should be conceived as a fundamental practice of democratic accountability and feminist institutional reform in Kenya, and that credible vision and response to inequality is the essential key to fulfilling the constitutional promise of equitable devolution in Kenya.

Keywords: Feminist Institutionalism, Political Economy of Evidence, Gender-Responsive Monitoring & Evaluation, Ceremonial Adoption, Devolved Governance.

INTRODUCTION

The radical reformulation of governance to reverse past injustices and provide a more responsive, inclusive, and equitable state was the driving premise of Kenya's devolution promises that became operational with the Constitution in 2010 (GoK, 2010; Wanyande & Wanyande, 2016; Mbori, 2021). In its very essence, it is committed to gender equality and social justice. The Constitution proclaims that these value are not only aspirational ideas principles of justice which are enshrined in legislation (Kinyanjui & Kameri-Mbote, 2018; GoK, 2010). But, ten years into this experiment, the mechanisms of governance such as Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) systems, have been found to be mostly unable to recognize, much less resolve, the gendered process and outcomes of development (Kinyanjui & Kameri-Mbote, 2018; Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). It is not a technical issue but rather an epistemological crisis of popular project management (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). Standard M&E models, which usually assume the values of neutrality and aggregate efficiency, have a gender-blind spot. Thus, they perpetuate a systematic invisibility in differing access, control, and power that constitute lived experiences of affected genders and populations (Parkhurst, 2016; Morse, 2016; Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). As a result, county governments unwillingly operate in a feedback loop of ignorance where policy and projects are measured in metrics that are unable to diagnose structural inequality, thus continuing to reinforce the gendered disparities that devolution was supposed to address (Roulston, 2016; Mackay, 2016).

The current literature indicates that this challenge is institutional, and goes beyond proclaimed technical skill fissures (Kemboi, 2025; Iradukunda et al., 2024). Critical reviews suggest that the gender mainstreaming agenda in sub-national governments is startlingly and often limited to ad hoc and donor-financed initiatives, without being integrated in the persistent practice of governance (Novovic, 2021; Kariuki, & Mwangi, 2024). This indicates what institutional theory define as 'isomorphism', where organizations ritualistically embrace structures such as M&E units to receive legitimacy in their operations, without internalizing their transformative role (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Kanyamuna et al., 2019; Naidoo, 2022). M&E procedure is mostly transformed into a compliance ritual, in which there is an upward sense of accountability around resource distribution, as opposed to a downward sense of accountability and social learning. Experiences in the context of the public sector demonstrates that these politically conscious elements of M&E are frequently overlooked in favor of technical requirements of reporting. Equally, the gathering of

gendered information is considered a fringe effect of county projects unless it is explicitly required (IFRCRCS & UNICEF, 2021). This results in a precarious ambiguity between the constitutional mandate of equity and the operational ability to monitor its attainment, where inequality is not quantified and thus remain practically unresolved (Mousmouti, 2023; van Eerdewijk, 2016).

The pivotal question as investigated in this study is how can the sustainable capacity to build GRM&E within Kenyan governmental counties be established and shifted beyond cyclical training and guarantee institutionalized, authoritative frameworks that enforce evidence-based action around gender equality? The main hypothesis is that current methods are structurally inadequate due to their arguments that the void being witnessed in terms of capabilities is purely a technical one (Ochen-Ochen, 2025; Kanyamuna et al., 2019). Rather, the discordance lies in an opaque political economy of evidence, where decision-makers show little interest in gender information, due to no obligatory requirement on the utilization of that information (Marx, 2024; Kabeer, 2016; Goulart et al., 2021; Berik, 2022). Such a dynamic generates a space in which technically valid GRM&E proposals are frequently overlooked or seen as politically annoying since they disrupt the status quo in the allocation of resources and power within counties (Wright, 2016; Unger, 2022; Acharya & Zafarullah, 2024; Anthony & Arslan, 2020). It is an agency and power problem as the executive agents do not have strong incentives to use findings that may complicate their administrative or political paths unless there is a countervailing force of empowered principals, including effective county assemblies, civil society watchdogs, and groups of citizens (Spehar, 2018; Trequattrini et al., 2025; Ngigi & Busolo, 2019; Opiyo, 2017).

In order to break this stalemate, the study proposes a conceptual platform that details capacity building as a political and technical undertaking, which takes place in three interdependent levels of the individual, organization, and institution (Munive et al., 2023). At an individual level, capacity would need to develop beyond fundamental aptitude demands related to data disaggregation to more intense praxis involving critical assessment and purposeful communication, thus turning M&E officers into as “gender evidence brokers” (Irakunda et al., 2024). At the organizational level, capacity also demands the hardwiring of GRM&E into the very circuitry of government by making gender-sensitive indicators mandatory in performance contracts, standardized reporting templates, and gender-responsive budget coding, which changes the incentive structure of bureaucrats (Cheeseman et al., 2019; Tambe Endoh, & Mbaio, 2016;

Theissen et al., 2017). The deepest capacity, though, should be institutional, and this can be developed by actively building up an enabling environment that authorizes and requires gendered evidence (Decataldo & Ruspini, 2016). It includes institutionalizing citizen-driven gender audits and enhancing the expertise of oversight institutions to impose penalties where GRM&E results are not integrated in budgetary and policy process (Edwards-Jauch, 2022; Oyugi, 2024).

This study presents a substantive contribution to the theory and practice of feminist institutionalism, public management, and the political economy of devolution through synthesizing the literatures (Cramer et al., 2020; Canen & Wantchekon, 2022). It shifts the focus from a normative proponent on gender-sensitive tools to the serious examination of the institutional conditions that allow their authoritative and persistent use. The inquiry will show that investments into technical GRM&E capacity are bound to be subverted, sidelined, or simply turned into ceremonial undertakings unless the power politics surrounding the use of gender evidence is confronted (Kenyatta, 2024; Kemboi, 2025; KNBS, 2022). Finally, this study demonstrates that the Kenyan devolution rests on its capability to envisage gender inequality. The critical process to realize the constitutional promise of equity is not fixed but as a living, working, and operational phenomenon. The development and mainstreaming of effective GRM&E capacity in the post-2010 state is not simply administrative to hereditary inequalities but actually designs their elimination.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

The scholarly inquiry on the development of capacity regarding GRM&E within the county governments of Kenya is placed within the space of unfulfilled constitutional mandate and transforming governance praxis (Ouma & Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025; Iradukunda et al., 2024). The transformative Constitution of 2010 underscores the historical imperative of devolution not as an administrative reengineer undertaking that solely addressed historical ills, but a fundamental social contract to amend ancient inequities through participatory localized governance (GoK, 2010; Bhatia, 2025; Kanyinga, 2016). It was a constitutional moment that created a clear gender equality and equitable allocation mandate that officials in county governments were required to lead the implementation of these ideals (GoK, 2010). Nevertheless, the centralized, top-down planning and a culture of gender-blind policy implementation that was historically followed by public administrations in Kenya established a path dependency that is proving difficult to overcome

(Alande, 2017; Achiba & Lengoiboni, 2020). Initial research on devolution was optimistic about structural and fiscal decentralization and tended to assume gender equity as the natural consequence of greater local engagement. However, growing evidence has strongly refuted this assumption, showing that in the absence of specifically designed institutions to monitor divergent effects, decentralization may just reproduce or even increase extant imbalances of power at the sub-national level (Rettig & Hijmans, 2022; Ewerling et al., 2020). This historically informed void is not intentional, but instrumental (Saka, 2023; Thomson, 2018). The devolved units also received a model of governance that lacked the dedicated instruments to diagnose and act upon the gendered inequalities that were unique to their setting (Muwonge et al., 2022; Ngigi & Busolo, 2019).

A sense of dissonance between high-level national policy commitments and underdeveloped county-level mechanisms of implementation characterizes the present-day situation in which the study is undertaken. Recent discussions show that there is a high disparity in gender integration in the policy and that this process depends on fluctuating political and institutional conditions. Empirical evidence of this variability is rigorous and found in a seminal 2025 policy analysis of Kenyan health strategies using the Shiffman and Smith framework, showing that meaningful gender integration is only possible when there are strong actor coalitions offering focused leadership; strategic framing of issues that are seen as inherently gendered; and where and when there exists strong, disaggregated data (Shiffman & Smith, 2007; Suchman et al., 2020; Kabia et al., 2018). As an example, the Kenya AIDS Strategic Framework (KASF II 2020) was gender-sensitive and motivated by actors such as the National AIDS Control Council, whereas the tuberculosis strategy was insufficiently integrated because of lack of advocacy and ambiguous framing (Sherwood et al., 2017; Adbullahi et al., 2024; Suchman et al., 2020; Kabia et al., 2018). This trend highlights a basic truth behind GRM&E capacity which is technical systems cannot operate in an institutional vacuum (Kanyamuna et al., 2019; Wokadala, 2016). The mediation of their functionality lies in what feminist institutionalism describes as the “gendered character of institutions” with formal regulations and deep-seated informal rules, that are frequently guided by masculine influences that order institutionalized power dynamics and define what knowledge is deemed essential and scaled in action (Wagle et al., 2020; Portillo & Humphrey, 2018; Holmes, 2020). The present situation in the majority of counties is that M&E systems are run under a format of “ceremonial adoption”, to meet statutory reporting responsibilities to national treasuries and

donors. This is seen in the production of data that is mostly out of touch with local planning and budgetary cycles, especially data that illuminates gender disparities (Staudt, 2017; Otero-Hermida & Lorenzo, 2020).

Theory and conceptual backgrounds on the elucidation of this impasse should, thus, not be limited to traditional theory of public management. Feminist institutionalism offers an important framework in assuming that institutions are not gender-neutral, but are actually made by and reproduce gendered power relationships (Mackay et al., 2010). Using this consideration to county M&E systems, it can be seen that the capacity shortfall is more than just technical, but epistemological and political (Caitlin & Madri, 2017; van Rensburg & Mapitsa, 2017). Even the architecture of mainstream M&E models continues to be built on unconscious and androcentric assumptions about evidence, value, and success (Chambers, 1997). This is criticized by epistemological gender frameworks that examine the influence of gender on knowledge production and ratification (Wotha, 2016; Leal Filho et al., 2022). They claim that the attempt to seek a state of neutral objectivity, inherent in traditional M&E, can conceal the realities of women and the marginalized through its inherent focus on quantifiable results over transformative outcomes about power and control (Moser, 2012). The Shiffman and Smith policy prioritization framework provides a powerful tool to diagnose the justification of why GRM&E cannot gain momentum, capturing this theoretical critique with four domains of actor power, ideas, political context, and issue characteristics (Shiffman & Smith, 2007; Wokadala, 2016; Tirivanhu & van Rensburg, 2018). It discusses how ‘gender weak’ actor coalitions regarding gender accountability; the repositioning of M&E as a technical compliance process as opposed to a governance mechanism; a hostile political climate; and lack of credible gender-sensitive indicators all stifle sustainable and meaningful capacity development.

These theoretical concerns are supported by a review of related empirical research, which also indicates a fragmented evidence base. On the one hand, there exist advanced technical instructions on how to integrate gender into M&E systems, including the mechanics of gender-sensitive indicators, data collection, and analysis (GoK, 2019). Meanwhile, such interventions as the gender-responsive health program in Trans-Nzoia County named ‘Chamas for Change’ indicates the practical effect of community-based and gendered interventions and the importance of modified monitoring in emergencies, like the COVID-19 pandemic (Adeyini et al., 2025). Nevertheless, this

initiative also demonstrated constraints in influencing the general economics, indicating the need to balance project-scale M&E and system-level policy impact (Adeyini et al., 2025; Chilisa & Mertens, 2021; Coultas, 2020). Even at the structural level, with nascent legislative initiatives, including the 2025 Senate bill of a decadal audit of county performance in providing public services, signifies a growing political awareness about the necessity to increase and enhance the long-term responsibility of devolved units, though not necessarily specifically gender-informed (Senate of Kenya, 2025). On the other hand, an audit by the National State Department on Gender Affairs on Gender-Based Violence response reveals that the state itself is struggling to implement and monitor gender policies, which underscores the gap of capacities as a multi-level governance challenge (Auditor-General, 2023). The critical review of this body of literature demonstrates that there is a continued disconnection. Although micro-level programmatic tools and macro-level accountability rhetoric are advancing, the meso-level institutional capacity of county governments to systematize and obligate GRM&E of all their planning and budgetary processes is underdeveloped and under-researched (Mohamud, 2018; Kimaro et al., 2018).

This discussion thus reveals a number of interlinked and substantive gaps of the present extant body of literature that this study seeks to fill. To begin with, there is a critical conceptual research gap about the adaptation of feminist institutionalism and epistemological critiques to designing sub-national M&E systems (Ahmad, 2021; Browne, 2023). Although these theories are anchored in political science and gender studies, their application to the technical sphere of performance management in a devolved setting is a new development. Second, the contextual gap is considerable. The majority of policy prioritization studies are also concerned with policy formulation on the national level, and the majority gender-M&E guidance is sector-agnostic (Joshi et al., 2023). A body of literature that explanatively contextualizes GRM&E capacity challenge to the specific political economy of Kenyan counties, their particular fiscal capacity, political competition and legacies of their administration is lacking (Onyango & Akinyi, 2023). Third, there is a methodological gap in research. The body of evidence does not include systematic, comparative analyses of M&E units in the county, in an institutional manner. Research has been either systematic observations of governance or intensive analyses of individual health or education initiatives, lacking the organizational ethnography of how gender evidence is or is not produced and used in the everyday practices of county bureaucracies (Mbijiwe, 2021; Adeyini et

al., 2025).

Fourth is a theoretical research gap about the intersection of agency and structure in capacity building (Ong'era & Musili, 2019; Kelemba, 2021). The literature swings between individual competency ineptitudes and complaints on structural impediments, with little solid theoretical models that clarify how change agents in counties, such as gender champions or M&E officers, can negotiate and even overhaul the gendered institutional logics constraining them (James & Van Thiel, 2016; Hyden, 2016). Lastly, there is an empirical evidence gap concerning the effectiveness of various models of capacity building. In addition to the listed flaws, longitudinal, comparative evidence of what interventions, whether tool-based, incentive-based, or network-based, actually result in the sustainable institutionalization of GRM&E practices and, ultimately, more equitable policy outcomes is lacking (Suchman et al., 2020; Kabia et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2020; Vincent, 2024). By addressing those five gaps, the research will go beyond a one-dimensional description of the issue to produce a more balanced, evidence-based, and theoretically-driven framework of establishing GRM&E capacity that is politically informed, as well as actionable at practical levels in the context of devolved governance in Kenya.

METHODOLOGY

To critically examine the substantiation of a sustainable capacity to build GRM&E in the Kenya county governments, this study uses a rigorously conceptual research design (Jaakkola, 2020). Its methodological basis includes analytical critique and synthesis, which is geared not at producing new empirical data, but at dissecting the current architectures of knowledge, power, and practice that permits GRM&E institutionalization as an implicit, systematic act in a system (Jaakkola, 2020; Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). It is thus a theoretical and analytic design, and will rely on a systematic investigation into discourses, policies, and documented experiences to construct a new framework of interpreting capacity, including the use of political economy and epistemic contestation, not just simple technical inadequacy of GRM&E capacity (Jaakkola, 2020; Marx, 2024; Kabeer, 2016). It includes a methodical synthesis of feminist institutionalism and decolonial critique which are taken as the guiding theoretical compass (Smith, 2021; Mackay et al., 2010; Smith and Lester, 2023). Feminist institutionalism offers the analytical prism to deconstruct how the rules, routines, and norms of county bureaucracies, performance contracting to informal culture of meetings, are lived

in gendered ways. This includes actively constructing what is monitored, whose evidence is valuable, and whose outcomes are legitimized (Holmes, 2020). This shifts the question to the institutional logics in which people live rather than the perspectives of individuals.

It is necessary, however, to prevent the replication of the same, top-down, extractive knowledge paradigms that have frequently defined capacity-building efforts. This is why this study combines different institutional perspectives of feminism and a decolonial approach to the methodology (Smith, 2021; Smith & Lester, 2023; Edwards-Jauch, 2022; Oyugi, 2024). At the base level, decolonial critique guides against the prevalent belief that externally constructed, standardized M&E toolkits are either impartial or universal solutions (Chambers, 1997; Smith & Lester, 2023). It conceptualizes the existing gap in standards of GRM&E capacity, instead, as a variant of epistemic marginalization, where in-place knowledge systems, localized perceptions of gender, and grassroots-determined measures of equity are systematically reduced for, and replaced by, donor-inspired or centrally-directed reporting models (Chilisa & Mertens, 2021; Coultas, 2020; Mousmouti, 2023; van Eerdewijk, 2016). Thus, the methodology is not a template of data extraction but rather it is a pledge to dialogic and reflexive praxis (Parkhurst, 2016; Morse, 2016). It tries to comprehend capacity by examining the tensions between imported forms of bureaucracy and local governance realities; considers county actors not as passive subjects with technical gaps but as local actors interacting within an intricate field of power (Cramer et al., 2020; Canes & Wantchekon, 2022). This hypothetical amalgamation dictates a methodology that is necessarily critical, self-reflective, and geared toward explaining the circumstances in which transformative as opposed to technical change is possible (Saka, 2023; Thomson, 2018).

The main data on this analysis is derived from systematic and critical search of secondary sources and policy documents which is not presented as a neutral piece of information but as a discursive artifact that demonstrates the existence of the innate underlying power relations. The review of the documents is tactically multi-layered, which includes the national constitutional and policy framework of Kenya on devolution and gender equality, purposive sample of representative County Integrated Development Plans (CIDPs) and Annual Development Plans (ADPs), and available program evaluations or sector reports, which explicitly or implicitly interacts with gender and M&E (GoK, 2010; Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). At the same time, the literature review of the research is conducted in the field of public administration, feminist political economy,

development studies, and African governance, forming an interdisciplinary evidence base (Munive et al., 2023). The choice of materials is made to adhere to the concepts of critical salience and not comprehensiveness. It focusses on documents that either represent the definitions of dominant technocratic styles to M&E or, on the contrary, demonstrate faults, inconsistencies, and oppositions within those styles (Cheeseman et al., 2019; Tambe Endoh, & Mbaio, 2016). This involves examining language of gendered mainstreaming in policy texts, visual or numerical structure of the county reporting templates, and the nuances of where gendered power structure would not be measured or discussed (Decataldo & Ruspini, 2016).

The analytic operation is based on a critical hermeneutic perspective, which understands these texts in the context of two theoretical perspectives of feminist institutionalism and decolonial thought (Wagle et al., 2020; Portillo & Humphrey, 2018; Wotha, 2016; Leal Filho et al., 2022). This transcends thematic coding by including discourse analysis and ideological critique (Moser, 2012). The process includes a number of iterative steps. Initially, a deconstructive reading that seeks to determine how various concepts such as evidence, performance, gender, and capacity are defined and operationalized in the bureaucratic lexicon and whose interests the definitions benefit (Iradukanda et al., 2024). Second, a relational analysis would chart the relationships between the formal rules, flows of resources, and accountability machinery to track the process of incentivization (or lack thereof) of gender-responsive evidence into the county system (Theissen et al., 2017; Spehar, 2018; Trequattrini et al., 2025). More importantly, this analytic protocol involves a reflexive and iterative journaling practice, that positions the researcher as an analyst who may be outside research ecosystem, but still within the broader academic and development discourses. The research is thus a subject of, and subjects continuous scrutiny in relation to the study's impact on the interpretation (James & van Thiel, 2016; Hyden, 2016). This reflexivity is not a secondary issue but a methodological mandate which recognizes that all analysis is a practice which the critique of epistemic extraction should start with the practice of the researcher (Ong'era et al., 2019; Kelemba, 2021).

The final result of this methodological process is a unified, cynical conceptual framework (Wokadala, 2016; Tirivanhu & van Rensburg, 2018). This framework will define the interrelated facets of GRM&E capacity (including epistemic, institutional, and political), and simulate the relationships between these dimensions as dynamic (Wright, 2016; Unger, 2022). It will also

define under what circumstances technical tools can work or fail, not as a checklist, but as a diagnostic instrument of probing impediments which may happen in any single county (Kenyatta, 2024; Kemboi, 2025). Strict adherence to this methodology will make the study generate a scholarly contribution that will redefine the problem of capacity building itself. It shifts the arguments from one-dimensional training and toolkit prescription to the subtle, evidenced-based, and reflexive examination of the manner in which gender-responsive accountability could be genuinely integrated into the very fabric of Kenya's devolved state, provides a way forward to research and policy that is politically savvy as it is technically informed (Acharya & Zafarullah, 2024; Anthony & Arslan, 2020).

FINDINGS

The cognitive inquiry of the ability to engage in GRM&E in the county governments of Kenya generated results indicating that the environment is filled with many contradictions and inconsistent application, thus supporting the main thesis that capacity is a phenomenon of political economy and not just technical competence (Marx, 2024; Kabeer, 2016). The analysis of policy texts, institutional accounts, and anecdotal stakeholder discourses through the prism of systematic feminist-institutionalism and decolonial frameworks provided tangible results that the constitutional requirement of gender equity is defensively mediated and commonly neutralized by the internalized logics of devolved governance (GoK, 2010; Smith, 2021). It is possible to talk about the findings as a cascade of interrelated tensions, each demonstrating a particular breakdown between policy ambition and government action based on county government facts and up-to-date statistics (KNBS, 2022).

The main result revealed the glaring incongruence between the rhetorical integration of gender in county planning documents and its practical exclusion in quantifiable models of accountability (Decataldo & Ruspini, 2016). County Integrated Development Plan (CIDP) and Annual Development Plan (ADP) reviewed showed a recurring trend in which gender was strongly outlined in the introduction chapter as a cross-cutting issue, but remained absent in the results matrices of core indicators that receive budgeting (Mousmouti, 2023; van Eerdewijk, 2016). This was not an omission per se but rather an active design feature. As an example, although a CIDP may refer to the empowerment of women as the strategic objective, the performance contracts

attached by the department of Agriculture or Public Works included no reference to how many women have access to, or control, the agricultural inputs or procurement contracts (Theissen et al., 2017). This institutional practice is part of a larger national dynamic in health policy where gender integration has been found to either be inconsistent or reliant on advocacy, with some strategies such as the Kenya AIDS Strategic Framework (KASF II) exhibiting strong integration while others are developed under advocacy or donor pressure, resulting in limited inclusion of gender representation (Suchman et al., 2020; Kabia et al., 2018). This is reflected in the county planning paradigm which views gender as a decorative prelude, and not the structural determinant factor in the distribution of resources and effectiveness of programs (Goulart et al., 2021; Berik, 2022).

Another, more critical observation covered the reality of operability of ‘ceremonial adoption’, in which the M&E systems are persist as rituals of obedience and not as sources of social learning and impartial decision-making (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Naidoo, 2022; Mbijiwe, 2021). This syndrome was vividly manifested through dialogic interactions with county officers. Authorities often referred to the creation of gender-disaggregated data as a procedural delivery package to meet the National Treasury or a particular donor project, rather than as part of the executive committee requirement or budget revision. After being collected, the data was regularly placed under archives without any analytical debate about why inconsistencies were there or how they could be fixed (Kenyatta, 2024; Kemboi, 2025). This leads to a concrete utilization deficit that paralyzes GRM&E (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). This conclusion is empirically supported by literature on other settings, where weak M&E systems characterized by poor technical capacity and poor-quality data directly undermine the implementation of gender responsive projects and budgets (Kemboi, 2025; Iradukunda et al., 2024). This gap in the counties is increased by a political economy in which an apparent manifestation of sharp gender disparity can be viewed as a reputational risk or a threat to existing power relations in the county government, making a managerial outcome like benign neglect preferable vis-à-vis one of evidence-based challenge (Spehar, 2018; Trequattrini et al., 2025).

Moreover, the research produced tangible results on the epistemic and structural aspect of the capacity gap (Caitlin & Madri, 2017; van Rensburg & Mapitsa, 2017). The decolonial critique determined that the localized knowledge formations are actively silenced through the use of standardized, donor-prescription logical framework templates (Chambers, 1997; Smith, 2021).

Practically, this implied that county officers had to abandon community-generated outcomes, such as *'the perceived changes in the level of safety that women have when accessing a new water point at night'*, in favor of those that could be universally measured but lack contextual meaning, such as *'the number of water taps installed'* (Saka, 2023; Thomson, 2018). This epistemic violence makes sure that M&E systems are not connected to realities they claim they are quantifying (Chilisa & Mertens, 2021; Coultas, 2020). At the same time, it unveiled the political economy of knowledge production. According to anecdotal evidence, information about acute gender inequality, including how women were concentrated in precarious informal jobs or how they were not eligible to get county contracts, would often be sanitized to final reports in ways that would not ensnare leadership or disrupt the patronage arrangements (Wright, 2016; Unger, 2022). The latter and its connection to the technical M&E activity are an explicit censorship that reflects the direct preservation of the patriarchal power systems, exemplifying the political disincentivization of capacity GRM&E (Marx, 2024; Kabeer, 2016).

A vital negative result was that prevailing capacity-building models almost never unsettled this self-reinforcing cycle. The review of the training resources and consultant reports showed excessive, and eventually useless, emphasis on the development of individual data collection and skills on indicator design (Iradukunda et al., 2024). The specified strategy erroneously presents the issue as a flaw in the cognitive aspect of the individual officer as opposed to the institutional context that makes their new set of skills irrelevant (Ong'era & Musili, 2019; Kelemba, 2021). The clearest example of this misfit will be the ongoing national differences in gender representation and economic participation. For instance is the 23.7% proportion of parliamentary seats among women compared to the constitutional two-thirds rule; and an hourly wage disparity by gender at 17.7%, both of which, though documented in detail, have not been systematically tackled by governmental M&E regimes (KNBS, 2022; GoK, 2010). Capacity programs have always overlooked the demand side. They have never empowered county assemblies, civil society organizations or grassroots movements to systematically to demand, interpret and leverage weaponize gender evidence to oversee and advocate for changes (Edwards-Jauch, 2022; Oyugi, 2024; Ngigi & Busolo, 2019; Opiyo, 2017). This supply-side obsession continues to maintain a reliance on external technical support and exonerates political leaders from the need to develop endogenous accountability (Cramer et al., 2020; Canes & Wantchekon, 2022).

Lastly, the synthesis solidified the discovery of a vicious self-reinforcing loop of institutional marginalization (Wokadala, 2016; Tiravanhu & van Rensburg, 2018). The innate inabilities of counties to generate and take action regarding strong GRM&E leaves the gaps in the evidence on the path to gender equality (Acharya & Zafarullah, 2024; Anthony & Arslan, 2020). Such a vacuum in turn plays a critical role in undermining the bargaining powers of both internal champions of gender and external auditors (Holmes, 2020). The absence of strong and locally-produced data which proves that gender-blind investments are inefficient or unconstitutional makes it easy to block an appeal to gender-responsive budgeting based on the concept of ideology or non-urgency. The sub-national discrepancy in women empowerment is dramatic, with certain counties such as Nairobi and Nyeri reporting significantly higher empowerment levels than Mandera or Wajir, a difference that requires localized GRM&E, but is usually solved using generic solutions (KNBS, 2022; Rettig & Hijmans, 2022; Ewerling et al., 2020). As a result, argument in support of investing in the GRM&E capacity is compromised by the fact that only a functional GRM&E system could deliver that evidence (James & van Thiel, 2016; Hyden, 2016). The loop is reiterated such that gender-responsive accountability is never more than aspirational planning, thus reinforcing politically the salient, measurable, and gender-blind measures of traditional administration (Alande, 2017; Achiba & Lengoiboni, 2020).

DISCUSSION

The discourse in this study posits that the results on GRM&E capacity reveals an underlying governance paradox in the devolved state (Bhatia, 2025; Kanyinga, 2016). This contradiction cannot be viewed merely as a failure of technique because a product of a systematic creation of ignorance in which institutional logics are used methodically to mute out the knowledge that would satisfy constitutional mandates that support gender equity. The indications suggest that the gap between policy and practice, rituals that M&E is characterized by, and the politicalization of gender data are not individual dysfunctions but symptoms of the larger underlying epistemological and political-economic crisis. By explaining these results using the synthesized prism of feminist institutionalism and decolonial critique, we illustrate that the existing models of technical capacity-building are structurally incompatible with the nature of the power dynamics in the county bureaucracies (Smith, 2021). Thus, constructing genuine GRM&E capacity requires a transformative project that reinvents the connection between the evidences, power and

accountability in sub-national governments (Kanyamuna et al., 2019; Wokadala, 2016).

The theorization of the stark policy-implementation dissonance has to transcend describing void in building GRM&E systems as the existence of some kind of gap to conceiving it as a logical consequence of institutional formulation. Feminist institutionalism explains that the bureaucratic emphasis on measurable infrastructural products rather than social indicators of change is a manifestation of institutional logic that is deeply rooted (Wagle et al., 2020; Portillo & Humphrey, 2018; Holmes, 2020). This perspective gives precedence to masculine-coded concepts of concrete, deliverable projects and systematically undervalue the relational work of response to power imbalances, which is often feminized and thought of as soft (Wotha, 2016; Leal Filho et al., 2022; Moser, 2012). The empirical evidence supporting this discovery is based on the analysis of Kenyan Health Policy Implementation Strategies where the gender integration was shown to be extremely inconsistent and dependent on particular enabling factors (Suchman et al., 2020; Kabia et al., 2018). The Kenya AIDS Strategic Framework (KASF II 2020) succeeded in its integration based on effective actor coalitions, gendered framing of HIV, as well as effective data systems (Suchman et al., 2020; Kabia et al., 2018). Contrastingly, the National Strategic Plan on Tuberculosis (2023-2028) exhibited a very low level of gender incorporation because of the lack of advocacy actors and a vague framing of policies (Suchman et al., 2020; Kabia et al., 2018). This pattern at the national level is reproduced and magnified at the county level, where the lack of such enabling conditions, influential gender champions, meaningful framing of GRM&E as a vital mechanism to effective governance (rather than compliance), and immediately credible local gender data permit gender to be regular marginalized in performance contracts and budgetary decisions (Staudt, 2017; Otero-Hermida & Lorenzo, 2020). The successful implementation of M&E functions as a rite of passage, therefore, is not a failure but a successful institutional approach in controlling political risk through the conveyance of accountability and decorum of decision-making while muzzling the disruptive type of evidence which a real GRM&E would create (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Wright, 2016; Unger, 2022).

Moreover, decolonial critique offers a pivotal point of view in decoding the epistemics of the crisis of capacity (Smith, 2021). The disclosure of the standardized, donor-prescribed M&E log-frames which habitually obstruct local knowledge and community defined indications amounts to epistemic violence (Chambers, 1997). It mirrors the colonial model by its design and patterns and

promotes external, technocratic paradigms as the only valid form of evidence, thus disqualifying the situated and contextualized conceptualizations of well-being, access, and control (Saka, 2023; Thomson, 2018; Mousmouti, 2023; van Eerdewijk, 2016). This generates a stark sense of alienation when M&E systems are perceived as extrinsic and external systems and not innate instruments to self-improvement and accountability (Chilisa & Mertens, 2021; Coultas, 2020). Practical implication is an invalid M&E system that is inadequately prepared to reflect the realities it claims to quantify, such as the disproportional amount of unpaid care labor by women which is an acknowledged structural impediment of national statistics yet frequently is missing from devolved government project indicators. Successful initiatives such as PPDP project by ILO in Great Rift Valley succeed due to their reversal of this logic. They address these disparities, based on a gender analysis model which is rigorous and thus exposed the roots of inequality in areas such as access to land and power to make decisions. Resultantly, the project was able to formulate interventions, such as mobile training to alleviate the burdens of travel or Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights-based curricula, which are directly aligned to that setting (ILO, 2023). This responsive design is contrasted with the generic and extractive M&E models commonly used at county levels, which underlines the epistemic divide in the core of the capacity challenge (Parkhurst, 2016; Morse, 2016).

The implication of these perceived findings is tremendous and as such requires a radical redefinition of capacity building (Munive et al., 2023; Ochen-Ochen, 2025; Kanyamuna et al., 2019). Firstly, it suggests that effective intervention should be re-defined as institutional change programming, rather than skills transfer (Cheeseman et al., 2019; Tambe Endoh & Mbao, 2016). This would necessitate both a formal and informal move. The requirement of gender-sensitive indicators within county performance contracts and budget code codes and enhancing political demand by improving the ability of assemblies of counties, auditors and civil society to challenge and make decisions accordingly on gender evidence (Decataldo & Ruspini, 2016; Edwards-Jauch, 2022; Oyugi, 2024). The ongoing disparities of gender in spheres such as the working within digital platforms where females receive lower wages and lack social protection are only highlighted by the material costs of not acting. This illustrates the need for urgency in such undertakings using gendered information from GRM&E systems (KNBS, 2022). Second, it needs to contribute to the establishment of indigenous GRM&E frameworks (Mohamud, 2018; Kimaro

et al., 2018). That includes going beyond national templates to help counties co-develop indicators and techniques that embody local gender priorities, similar to the participatory and contextualized methods of available and effective projects-based M&E trainings (Ontiria, 2024). Third, it is necessary to develop "epistemic courage" (Iradukunda et al., 2024). It implies establishing safe spaces within county bureaucracies so that the officers could analyze and present gendered results without fear of victimization, thus changing the institutional culture gradually at the administrative level (Cramer et al., 2020; Canen & Wantchekon, 2022). It is especially imperative in a governance environment where, as the health policy study confirms, gender concerns are always marginalized by emergency responses, and since equity frameworks have not yet been established and institutionalized, the gains become easily reversed (Suchman et al., 2020; Kabia et al., 2018; IFRCRCS & UNICEF, 2021).

It is important to acknowledge the conceptual breadth of the study in order to contextualize the contribution or inform future empirical research. This discussion identifies system wide patterns and suggested explanatory models but not quantifying their distribution levels in all of the forty-seven counties. Although the suggested model of the vicious circle of marginalization has a logically convincing logic, it needs confirmation by empirical case studies that monitor the ability of interventions to either destabilize one component of the cycle or affect the entire system (Wokadala, 2016; Tirivanhu & van Rensburg, 2018). Besides, the prioritization of county bureaucracy inherently masks the position and influence of intersecting identities such as disability or ethnicity that exacerbate gendered experiences as a pertinent pathway to intersectional inquiry (Roulston, 2016; Mackay, 2016; Joshi et al., 2023). Thus, the way forward involves mixed-methods and comparative cases studies to empirically find out the propositions presented in this inquiry (Mbijiwe, 2021; Williams et al., 2020; Vincent, 2024). It also requires participatory action research to co-design context-sensitive GRM&E toolkits with county governments where officers are co-researchers. At the end of this discussion the verdict is that the process of meaningful GRM&E capacity must be seen as inseparable to the more profound project of decolonization of governance knowledge and the promotion of feminist institutional change (Moser, 2012). It is the process of moving beyond the perception of gender as a stand-alone variable to be introduced into the current systems to the perception that equity requires fundamental re-thinking of those systems themselves, their functions, their rules of evidence, and their very existence within a devolved

Kenyan state that values social justice (Kenyatta, 2024; Kemboi, 2025; Acharya & Zafarullah, 2024; Anthony & Arslan, 2020).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study explored the issue of developing sustainable capacity of Gender-Responsive Monitoring and Evaluation (GRM&E) in Kenya's county governments with a view to delivering the constitutional promise of equitable devolution (GoK, 2010; Wanyande & Wanyande, 2016; Mbori, 2021). Going beyond common diagnosis of the paucity of technical skills, the inquiry examined the institutional, political, and epistemological obstacles that systematically undermine gender equity as a governance agenda (Marx, 2024; Kabeer, 2016). It was informed by the overarching hypothesis that existing, supply-side frames of capacity building fundamentally do not match the political economy of county bureaucracies. This results in the adoption, but not actual use, of GRM&E systems (Ochen-Ochen, 2025; Kanyamuna et al., 2019; Naidoo, 2022). To unpack this issue, a conceptual design was used in the research, which combined the analytical prisms of feminist institutionalism and decolonial critique to examine policy structures, institutional discourses, and stakeholder discussions (Smith, 2021). The main objective was to develop a new theoretical framework, which positions GRM&E capacity as dependent on institutional power relations and epistemic contestation, thus providing a more precise and practical diagnosis of the enduring gap of implementation (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025).

The main finding converges around the discovery of a virtuous circle of institutional marginalization (Wokadala, 2016; Tirivanhu & van Rensburg, 2018). This analysis indicates that the constitutional requirement of gender equity is always mediated by superficial gendered bureaucratic practice in which County Integrated Development Plans (CIDPs) discourse supports gender mainstreaming, but accountability regimes effectively encourage quantifiable measures of infrastructural project outputs over transformative social indicators (Decataldo & Ruspini, 2016). This illustrated the contradiction in which the very systems designed to monitor the progress are epistemologically incapable to gauge it. This is not an isolated instance of planning only at the county level but a national trend of incomplete gender integration. Similar instances can be witnessed in the Kenyan health policy with success being heavily conditional on such enabling factors as powerful actor coalitions and strategic framing (Suchman et al., 2020; Kabia et al.,

2018). The ceremonial incorporation of M&E functions of data gathering to satisfy higher-level pressure but unhelpful in local decision-making becomes a complex political maneuver of containing the threat of disruptive gender evidence to prevailing power systems (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This utilization deficit, is compounded by an epistemic violence created by standardized, donor-prescribed M&E frameworks, which undermine local and community-determined knowledge about gender equality. Eventually, it reinforces alienation but not ownership (Chambers, 1997; Chilisa & Mertens, 2021; Coultas, 2020). As a result, it prioritizes standard capacity-building, with so much emphasis on technical training, which is a misdiagnosis itself. This approach only suffices to address a systematic, political-institutional issue in the form of cognitive deficiency at the individual officer level. However it does not touch the structural disincentives that makes the newly skills redundant (Ong'era et al., 2021; Kelemba, 2021; Iradukunda et al., 2024). This synthesis confirms that the inherent crippling of capacity is not due to an insufficient supply of technical expertise, but a radically weak demand of gendered-evidence by political and administrative system which continues to perpetuate a vicious cycle that maintains GRM&E as peripheral to the core governance functions (Spehar, 2018; Trequattrini et al., 2025; Acharya & Zafarullah, 2024; Anthony & Arslan, 2020).

Being a conceptual study, this study is inherently has constraints, which also provides opportunities for future empirical investigation. Its strength resides in the ability to identify systemic patterns and to build an explanatory structure, not in giving primary data that is statistically generalizable to the prevailing dynamics in all 47 counties. Although the insights are based on solid document analysis and summarized views of stakeholders, they need to be complimented by both empirical and longitudinal case studies, to track the advancement gender evidence under county bureaucracies. Moreover, although intersectionality is a central feature of the framework, the main idea is the emphasis on gender as an inequality dimension. Thus, the study may fail to investigate the exponential marginalization of women with disabilities, minority ethnicity, or arid and semi-arid territories. Future studies need to use a finer intersectional prism to examine these lived realities (Joshi et al., 2023; Roulston, 2016; Mackay, 2016). Nevertheless, despite such constraints, the study has been able to meet its central purpose of unearthing discussion of previously neglected areas of power, knowledge, and institutional change in Kenya within the unique devolved setting which impact evidence-based discussion on GRM&E capacity

(Williams et al., 2020; Vincent, 2024).

The impact of the research are applicable in the fields of both academia and practice, creating multiple promising avenues of interest. To begin with, comparative mixed-methods case studies involving a stratified sample of counties are urgently needed to empirically test the suggested GRM&E model and determine context-specific variables (Mbijiwe, 2021; Wokadala, 2016; Tirivanhu & van Rensburg, 2018). Second, participatory action research that co-design and pilot context-specific GRM&E toolkits with the county governments is needed to uncover solutions that are politically feasible and epistemically inclusive and move beyond the usual training models (Ngigi & Busola, 2019; Opiyo, 2017; Ouma & Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025; Iradukunda et al., 2024). Third, it is important that academic research increasingly concentrates on the “demand side”, exploring how county assemblies, auditors and social movements are able to use gender data to demand accountability (Edwards-Jauch, 2022; Oyugi, 2024; Spehar, 2018; Trequattrini et al., 2025). Lastly, studies should also explore how GRM&E can be incorporated into other more urgent county governance priorities, like climate adaptation. In these spheres, technical interventions frequently pose potential threats to existing gendered power dynamics unless thoughtfully planned, in terms of how gender-focused structures can be incorporated into the very fabric of such new policy spaces (ILO, 2023; Munive, Donville & Darmstadt, 2023).

Locating this work in the broader framework of the literature on devolution, the study plays a substantive role as it attempts to bridge the feminist political economy and the real-life issues of sub-national governance (Cramer et al., 2020; Canel & Wantchekon, 2022). It posits that the Kenyan devolution experiment, frequently studied through the prism of fiscal and political traits, cannot be regarded and assessed as successful without a deep analysis of its knowledge-production apparatus (Bhatia, 2025; Kanyinga, 2016). The perception of inequality, and, thus, the ability to plausibly respond to it, is an important part of democratic responsibility and legitimate decentralization (Kinyanjui & Kameri-Mbote, 2018). The practical impact of this research on county planning and budgeting is demonstrated by giving a more realistic and strategic map of intervention to the policymakers, county leaders, and development partners (Theissen et al., 2017).

In conclusion, the study offers specific suggestions of breaking the cycle of marginalization. First, at the institutional level, formal rules should be implemented to mainstream gender-sensitive

indicators in County Performance Management Systems and budget codes. These new sets of requirements that must be non-negotiable (Decataldo & Ruspini, 2016; Cheeseman et al., 2019; Tambe Endoh & Mbao, 2016). These should be combined with enhancing the political demand for the establishment of GRM&E literacy and oversight capacity of county assemblies and civil societies allowing them to assume roles as principals who demand accountability (Edwards-Jauch, 2022; Oyugi, 2024). Second, the cultivation of indigenous, context-specific M&E systems that appreciate local knowledge and look beyond homogenous national models needs to be supported at the organizational level (Mohamud, 2018; Kimaro et al., 2018). Third, at the personal level, capacity building should move beyond technical skills education and develop epistemic bravery, providing safe spaces where officers can study and report gendered results and potentially ultimately shift the institutional culture (Iraddock et al., 2024; Cramer et al., 2020; Canen & Wantchekon, 2022). This is the necessary praxis of construction of real GRM&E capacity that will convert the legal promise of the 2010 Constitution into actualized equitable development (GoK, 2010). It is not just a peripheral project to gender specialists but the core engine of establishing a more accountable, responsive and legitimate devolved state for all Kenyan citizens (Acharya & Zafarullah, 2024; Anthony & Arslan, 2020).

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