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GENDER INEQUALITIES IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN TOGO: WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION AND DECISION-MAKING IN KOZAH 3 COMMUNE

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ABSTRACT

Decentralization reforms in Togo aim to strengthen citizen participation and promote women's inclusion in local governance. Drawing on a case study conducted in the municipality of Kozah 3, this research examines the mechanisms that constrain the transformation of women's participation into effective decision-making power. The study is based on 105 semi-structured interviews conducted with municipal actors, members of Village Development Committees (VDCs), and traditional authorities, complemented by participant observation and document analysis.

The findings reveal that, despite their presence in participatory structures, women remain underrepresented in strategic coordination and decision-making positions. Women account for 36.8% of VDC members but only 28.57% of executive committee members, and they are entirely absent from traditional chieftaincy positions. These inequalities are reinforced by sociocultural norms, informal networks of influence, and the weak institutionalization of local gender promotion policies.

The study highlights a mechanism of institutional absorption of participation, whereby women's inclusion in governance structures is not accompanied by a corresponding redistribution of decision-making power. It therefore contributes to ongoing debates on gender, local governance, and the limitations of approaches that focus exclusively on access to participatory spaces.

Keywords: Gender; Local Development; Women's Participation; Decision-Making Power; Local Governance; Togo.

1 INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, decentralization reforms implemented across Sub-Saharan Africa have sought to bring public action closer to local populations and strengthen their involvement in local development. These reforms have promoted participatory mechanisms intended to make local policies more inclusive and responsive to citizens' needs.

Within this context, women's participation has become a central issue in local governance. However, research shows that women's presence in local institutions does not automatically translate into equivalent influence over public decision-making (Razavi & Miller, 1995; UN Women, 2016).

While existing studies have examined the barriers restricting women's access to local governance structures, the institutional and social mechanisms through which gender inequalities are produced and reproduced within these structures remain less well documented.

This issue is particularly relevant in Togo, where the revival of decentralization, consolidated by the 2019 local elections, has strengthened the role of municipalities in planning and managing local development initiatives.

Drawing on the case of Kozah 3 Commune, this study examines the mechanisms that contribute to gender inequalities in local governance. It addresses the following research question: Through which institutional and social mechanisms are gender inequalities produced and reproduced within local governance in Kozah 3 Commune? Specifically, it investigates how participation practices, the distribution of responsibilities, informal networks, and the limited institutionalization of gender concerns shape women's positions and influence in local decision-making.

The article is organized into four sections. Following the presentation of the theoretical framework and methodology, the findings examine the main forms of gender inequality observed in local governance in Kozah 3. The discussion then analyses the mechanisms underlying the persistence and reproduction of these inequalities.

2 MATERIAL AND METHOD

2.1 Study Area

Located in the Kara Region in northern Togo, Kozah 3 Commune is one of the seven communes of Kozah Prefecture. It comprises two main cantons, Awandjélo and Kpinzindè, and has an estimated population of 23,755 inhabitants (INSEED, 2023). Its economy is predominantly agricultural and informal. The local governance system includes an 11-member municipal council, an executive body headed by a mayor, and technical and administrative services.

The commune provides a relevant setting for examining women's participation in decentralized governance, particularly the relationship between their representation in local institutions and their influence on decision-making.

2.2 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case-study design to examine how women participate in local governance and the extent to which their participation translates into influence over public decision-making. The case-study approach enables an in-depth analysis of institutional arrangements, everyday practices, and social relations shaping participation in Kozah 3 Commune.

2.3 Data Collection and Sampling

Data were collected between April and May 2026 through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and documentary analysis. Two groups of respondents were included: municipal actors and community-level stakeholders.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents by gender and professional category

Professional category	Men	%	Women	%	Total
Executive management and municipal office	3	7.7%	1	2.6%	4
Heads of departments / technical staff	14	35.9%	4	10.3%	18
Administrative and financial staff	6	15.4%	3	7.7%	9
Technical and support services	5	12.8%	2	5.1%	7
Interns	0	0%	1	2.6%	1
Total	28	71.8%	11	28.2%	39

Source: Field survey, May 2026

The municipal sample comprised 39 actors, including 28 men and 11 women. Participants were purposively selected according to their professional roles, responsibilities, involvement in local governance, and gender. The sample size was guided by empirical saturation. Table 1 presents their distribution by gender and professional category.

Men accounted for 71.8% of municipal respondents and women 28.2%. This distribution provides a basis for examining gender differentiation in municipal roles and access to decision-making positions.

At the community level, the study covered Village Development Committees (VDCs) and traditional chiefs in Awandjélo and Kpinzindè. Of approximately 40 villages, 11 were selected using a 25% sampling rate: six in Awandjélo and five in Kpinzindè. Three VDC members and three village chiefs were selected in each village, yielding 66 community-level respondents. The combined sample therefore comprised 105 respondents, with no overlap between the two groups.

The interviews explored professional trajectories, perceptions of gender, participation in local governance, decision-making practices, and power relations. Participant observation during three working sessions and community meetings focused on interactions, speaking patterns, and women's inclusion in or exclusion from discussions. Documentary analysis covered the 2022–2026 Communal Development Plan, meeting minutes, and municipal organizational charts (Commune de Kozah 3, 2022).

2.4 Data Analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed. The data were analyzed thematically using both inductive and deductive coding. Inductive coding allowed themes to emerge from the field data, while deductive coding drew on concepts from the theoretical framework.

NVivo software was used to organize and code the qualitative material. Codes and themes were reviewed at different stages to assess their consistency and refine the analytical categories. Interviews, observations, and institutional documents were then compared to identify convergences and discrepancies between participants' accounts, observed practices, and formal institutional arrangements.

This triangulation supported the analysis of gendered access to positions, participation in governance bodies, and influence over local decision-making.

2.5 Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Participants were informed of the study's objectives and provided informed consent before taking part. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained in the treatment and presentation of the data.

The purposive sampling strategy does not support statistical generalization. In addition, the data-collection period and the observation of three working sessions and community meetings provide only a limited view of governance practices over time. Nevertheless, the use of multiple data sources enables a qualitative examination of the institutional and social mechanisms shaping women's participation in Kozah 3 Commune.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings reveal a structural gap between women's participation in local governance and their influence on public decision-making in Kozah 3 Commune. Their marginalization begins during the identification of community priorities, continues through unequal access to leadership positions and informal networks, and extends to municipal planning and resource allocation. These patterns suggest that women's inclusion in participatory structures does not necessarily redistribute decision-making power. The following analysis examines the institutional, social, and socioeconomic mechanisms underlying this gap and develops the concept of institutional absorption of participation to explain how local governance incorporates women without substantially transforming existing power relations.

3.1 Gender Inequalities in Community Diagnosis and Communal Planning

Community diagnosis is a decisive stage in preparing the Communal Development Plan (CDP), as it identifies local problems and determines which needs enter the planning process. Women's representation at this stage therefore affects their opportunities to contribute to the definition of communal priorities.

In Kozah 3, women accounted for only 3 of the 16 trained facilitators (18.5%) and 74 of the 432 participants in the community diagnosis (17%). Their representation was limited in both Awandjélo and Kpinzindè, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Women's participation in community diagnosis

Canton	Level of observation	Total	Women	Men	Women (%)
Awandjélo	Trained facilitators	8	1	7	12.5
Kpinzindè	Trained facilitators	8	2	6	25.0
Total	Trained facilitators	16	3	13	18.5
Awandjélo	Diagnosis participants	210	32	178	15.2
Kpinzindè	Diagnosis participants	222	42	180	18.9
Total	Diagnosis participants	432	74	358	17.1

Source: Field survey, May 2026.

Women's underrepresentation concerns not only participation in the diagnosis but also the bodies responsible for organizing it. The Local Planning Commission and Steering Committee contain no specific provisions for gender balance. As one municipal officer explains, "When the committee was set up, no one really checked whether there were enough women. We selected the people we knew. Gender was not a priority" (Interview, Kozah 3, May 2026).

Interviewees also identify domestic workloads, limited access to information, restrictions imposed by some husbands, and social perceptions that devalue women's contributions. One respondent observes, "Many women could not attend because of household chores or because they were not informed in time. And some people also believe that women have little to contribute to development" (Interview, Kozah 3, May 2026).

These findings indicate that inequalities emerge before formal decisions are made. Underrepresentation limits women's opportunities to articulate their priorities and contribute to the selection and ranking of local needs. Fung (2006) argues that expanding participatory mechanisms does not necessarily transform power relations, while Mansuri and Rao (2013) show that participatory processes can reproduce inequalities when differences in resources and social positioning remain unaddressed.

In Kozah 3, the composition of planning bodies and the conditions governing participation shape whose concerns enter the CDP and how they are formulated. The process therefore involves more than unequal access to consultation: it also involves unequal capacity to influence the definition of public priorities. Gender inequality is embedded in the organization of planning itself, before projects and budget allocations are determined.

3.2 Community Governance Structures: Women's Presence and Restricted Access to Leadership

Women's participation extends beyond community diagnosis to Village Development Committees (VDCs), Neighborhood Development Committees (NDCs), Canton Development Committees (CDCs), and ad hoc committees dealing with water, health, education, and hygiene. The quantitative data presented in this section concern VDCs, while information on NDCs, CDCs, and ad hoc committees is drawn from interviews and field observations. The analysis examines women's presence in these structures and their access to leadership and decision-making responsibilities.

Table 3: Women's representation in Village Development Committees

Position	Total	Women	Men	Women (%)
VDC members	38	14	24	36.8
Executive committee members	7	2	5	28.6
Canton and village chiefs	2	0	2	0.0

Source: Field survey, May 2026.

Women account for 36.8% of VDC members, but their representation falls to 28.6% in executive committees. Among the two traditional chiefs represented in the table, neither is a woman. These figures refer to the traditional leadership positions included in the analysis and not to the total number of traditional chiefs interviewed. These figures indicate that women's representation is lower in executive positions than in the overall membership of the VDCs examined. They also highlight the limited presence of women in traditional leadership positions within the study sample.

A similar pattern characterizes NDCs, CDCs, and ad hoc committees. In NDCs, women are mainly involved in hygiene promotion, awareness-raising, and basic social services, while leadership access remains limited. In CDCs, which connect villages, customary authorities, and the commune, traditional power structures further restrict women's presence in decision-making. Ad hoc committees also rely on women for implementation and social mobilization, whereas coordination, chairpersonship, and strategic resource management remain predominantly male-dominated.

This distinction between participation and influence is consistent with Arnstein's (1969) argument that participation ranges from limited consultation to actual power-sharing. The presence of women in a committee does not, in itself, establish that they influence its decisions. Kabeer (1999, 2005) similarly emphasizes that agency depends on access to the resources and institutional conditions necessary to exercise choice and influence.

The findings also highlight the importance of social legitimacy. Bourdieu (1990, 1997) shows how social structures and institutions confer unequal recognition on actors and reproduce differences in their capacity to exercise authority. In Kozah 3, women's involvement in community activities coexists with limited access to the positions through which priorities are validated and decisions are transmitted to the municipal level.

3.3 Traditional Chieftaincy and the Organization of Local Power

Traditional chieftaincy constitutes a central component of local governance in Kozah 3. In Kabyè communities, customary decision-making bodies composed of canton chiefs, village chiefs, and councils of elders remain strongly male-dominated. Women are virtually absent from these structures, limiting their access to arenas in which community decisions are discussed, validated, and endowed with customary legitimacy.

Traditional authority operates alongside municipal governance in a hybrid arrangement. The municipal council provides the formal institutional framework for local administration, while chieftaincy retains considerable social and normative influence over community affairs. This coexistence connects formal and customary authority without necessarily changing the gendered distribution of power within either sphere.

Olivier de Sardan (2008) shows that local governance cannot be understood solely through formal institutional rules, since administrative practices interact with social networks, informal norms, and established relations of authority. The findings from Kozah 3 illustrate this interaction: women can be present in community structures and implementation committees while remaining excluded from customary arenas that confer recognition and influence.

The issue is therefore not simply whether women participate in local governance, but whether they can access the positions and relationships through which collective decisions acquire legitimacy. Their inclusion in lower-level structures remains compatible with the continued concentration of authority in male-dominated institutions. This pattern provides an initial indication of what this study conceptualizes as the institutional absorption of participation: the incorporation of women into governance mechanisms without a corresponding redistribution of decision-making power.

3.4 Municipal Administration: Numerical Presence and Unequal Access to Strategic Positions

The differentiation observed in community structures also appears within the municipal administration. The distribution of personnel by position indicates that women occupy several administrative, technical, and support roles, while the municipality's principal executive positions remain held by men.

The municipal administration comprised 39 staff members, including 14 women and 25 men. Table 4 presents a subset of 18 listed positions within this administration, comprising 14 women and four men. Women therefore account for 77.8% of the personnel represented in the table. These figures refer to two different categories and should not be interpreted as competing estimates of the municipal workforce.

The distribution nonetheless reveals an important distinction between numerical representation and hierarchical authority. The mayor, deputy mayor, and secretary general are men, while women occupy mainly administrative, technical, and support positions. Their substantial presence in the listed workforce does not translate into equivalent representation in the municipality's highest executive offices.

As one local elected official observes, "In meetings, women are present, but major decisions are often made among the top officials" (Interview, Kozah 3, May 2026). A municipal officer similarly notes, "I have been here for over ten years. We know the work and we train new staff, but leadership positions rarely go to women" (Interview, Kozah 3, May 2026).

These accounts suggest that professional experience and participation in municipal work do not automatically lead to access to strategic positions. The distinction is particularly important because organizational hierarchies determine

who can transform technical information and community demands into institutional priorities. North (1990) emphasizes that formal and informal rules structure interactions and distribute opportunities, while Lipsky (1980) shows how actors positioned within administrative systems can exercise discretion over the selection and prioritization of demands.

Table 4: Gender distribution of roles within Kozah 3 Municipal Administration

Position	Number	Women	Men
Mayor	1	0	1
Deputy Mayor	1	0	1
Secretary General	1	0	1
Personal Secretary	1	1	0
Assistants	3	3	0
Revenue Manager	1	1	0
Communications Officer	1	1	0
Legalization Officer	1	1	0
Civil Status and Tax Officers	4	3	1
Cleaning Technician	1	1	0
Interns (Planning, Communications, Accounting)	3	3	0
Total of listed positions	18	14	4

Source: Survey data, May 2026.

The gendered distribution of authority is also visible in municipal technical commissions.

Table 5: Gender distribution within municipal commissions of Kozah 3

Commission or structure	Men	Women
CAEFJP (Finance, Economy, Planning)	2	0
CASCJFPHAEEC (Social Affairs, Culture, Education)	2	0
CADETT P (Territorial Development, Public Works)	2	0
CPMP (Public Procurement)	1	0
CCMP (Public Procurement Control)	1	0
Municipal Council (elected officials and commissions)	10	1

Source: Municipal Council of Kozah 3 Commune, May 2026.

The reported composition shows that women are absent from the five listed technical commissions, including those responsible for finance, planning, infrastructure, and public procurement. The municipal council has only one woman among the 11 members reported in the table.

These disparities matter because technical commissions constitute intermediate arenas in which proposals are examined, priorities are refined, and decisions are prepared before reaching broader institutional bodies. Their composition therefore affects not only representation but also the capacity to influence policy formulation.

Fung (2006) and Mansuri and Rao (2013) caution that participatory arrangements do not necessarily reduce inequalities when the distribution of organizational power remains unchanged. The Kozah 3 findings extend this argument to the internal organization of municipal governance: women may contribute to administrative operations while remaining largely absent from the bodies that determine the direction of public action. Their participation is thus institutionally differentiated according to the functions and levels of authority they occupy.

3.5 Informal Networks and Socioeconomic Constraints on Women's Influence

Formal institutional arrangements do not fully explain the inequalities observed in Kozah 3. Informal practices also shape who is invited to participate, who receives information in time, and whose contributions receive recognition during discussions.

First, participation often depends on social networks, community seniority, and recognition by administrative or traditional authorities. These networks remain largely male-dominated. As one municipal officer explains, "It is often the same people we already know who are called to participate" (Interview, Kozah 3, May 2026). Such practices can reproduce established patterns of representation even when no formal rule explicitly excludes women.

Second, social representations of women's public speech can limit their visibility and influence. One elected woman observes, "You often have to insist to be heard; otherwise, the discussion quickly moves on" (Interview, Kozah 3, May 2026). This account illustrates how participation can be formally open while opportunities to speak and influence deliberations remain unequal.

Third, information about meetings and consultations does not always circulate systematically. Dependence on informal and administrative communication channels may leave some women with late notice, less preparation time, and fewer opportunities to contribute. These practices are consistent with Olivier de Sardan's (2008) analysis of the role of informal routines, social relations, and information flows in the operation of public institutions.

Socioeconomic conditions reinforce these institutional and informal constraints. In a context characterized by subsistence agriculture and informal economic activities, limited and unstable incomes can restrict women's ability to attend meetings and participate in public affairs. Agarwal (1997) and Kabeer (2005) show that access to productive resources shapes women's autonomy and opportunities for public participation.

Domestic responsibilities, agricultural work, and childcare further limit the time available for meetings and consultations. Razavi (2007) examines the unequal distribution of care responsibilities, while Moser (1993) conceptualizes women's responsibilities through the framework of the triple role. Limited access to land can also affect women's economic security, social recognition, and influence in community decisions (Agarwal, 1994; Doss & Meinzen-Dick, 2015). Economic dependence on spouses or family members may further restrict their autonomy, since access to resources does not necessarily entail the freedom to use them independently (Kabeer, 1999).

From Sen's (1999) capability perspective, these constraints reduce women's substantive freedom to participate and influence collective decisions. They interact with institutional hierarchies and informal networks rather than operating independently of them. Women's unequal participation therefore reflects both the conditions under which they live and the organizational arrangements through which their contributions are selected, interpreted, and transmitted.

Taken together, these findings show that gender inequality is reproduced through the interaction of formal hierarchies, informal selection practices, unequal information flows, social expectations, and socioeconomic constraints. As Cornwall (2003, 2008) and Gaventa (2006) argue, participatory spaces are not neutral arenas: power relations shape whose voices are heard and which contributions are considered legitimate. In Kozah 3, these relations constrain women's capacity to convert participation into institutional influence.

3.6 Gender-Responsive Budgeting and the Institutionalization of Gender Equality

The gap between women's participation and their decision-making influence is also reflected in local planning and public resource allocation. Although gender equality features in national policy orientations, its integration into municipal planning and financial management remains limited.

The Communal Development Plan (CDP) 2022–2026 and the second-generation Communal Development Plan (CDP) 2026–2031 (Commune de Kozah 3, 2026) provide successive frameworks for local development in Kozah 3. However, documentary analysis and interviews indicate limited consideration of women's specific priorities and a lack of explicit mechanisms for integrating gender into planning decisions.

This limitation is also evident in budgeting. No institutionalized mechanism was identified for assessing, tracking, or evaluating budget allocations according to their contribution to gender equality. The reviewed budget documents contain no dedicated lines explicitly targeting gender equality objectives. These findings suggest that gender considerations are not systematically incorporated into municipal financial programming.

Initiatives targeting women therefore rely largely on interventions supported by technical and financial partners, including GIZ, OIF, and local NGOs. These initiatives focus on women's groups, income-generating activities, and training, but remain project-based and weakly integrated into permanent municipal structures.

Civil society organizations, particularly APRODIFE in localities such as Awandjélo, contribute to dialogue, women's organizational capacities, and participation in public spaces. GIZ- and OIF-supported training also addresses public speaking, legal literacy, and local governance. Women's associations provide spaces for mobilization and collective representation and can act as intermediaries between communities and local authorities. However, these initiatives primarily strengthen individual and collective capacities without necessarily changing the institutional mechanisms through which decisions and resources are allocated.

Municipal officials acknowledge this dependence: "Gender-related activities exist, but they mainly depend on partner-funded projects, not on a structured municipal policy" (Interview, Kozah 3, 2026).

The findings point to a distinction between supporting women's participation and institutionalizing gender equality in local governance. Training and externally funded projects may expand women's capacities, but their effects remain limited when women have little influence over planning priorities and when municipal budgets lack mechanisms for incorporating gender objectives. Without such mechanisms, gender equality remains a sectoral concern rather than a cross-cutting principle governing public action.

This situation also raises a question of institutional sustainability. When initiatives depend on external funding, their continuation may be uncertain, while their integration into routine municipal procedures remains weak. More importantly, women's access to training or community activities does not necessarily provide them with greater influence over the allocation of public resources. The absence of gender-responsive budgeting therefore reflects not only a technical gap in financial management but also the limited institutionalization of gender equality within the decision-making process.

3.7 Institutional Absorption of Participation: Integrating Women Without Redistributing Power

Across community diagnosis, grassroots organizations, customary authority, municipal administration, informal networks, and budgetary processes, the findings reveal a consistent pattern. Women are present in local governance, but their participation is unevenly distributed across institutional levels and functions. They contribute to community mobilization, service delivery, administrative work, and implementation, while remaining underrepresented in bodies responsible for defining priorities, coordinating action, validating decisions, and allocating resources.

This pattern can be understood through the concept of institutional absorption of participation, defined here as the capacity of a local governance system to incorporate historically marginalized actors into participatory mechanisms without substantially transforming the structures through which decision-making power is distributed.

The concept brings together two dimensions of the findings. The first is institutional incorporation: women participate in consultations, community committees, municipal services, and externally supported initiatives. The second is the limited transformation of authority: strategic positions remain male-dominated, informal networks influence access to participation, and gender equality is weakly embedded in municipal planning and budgeting.

The concept complements Arnstein's (1969) distinction between participation and power-sharing by directing attention to the organizational mechanisms that operate across and beyond participatory spaces. It also extends the insights of North (1990), Bourdieu (1990, 1997), and Olivier de Sardan (2008) by highlighting how formal arrangements, social legitimacy, and everyday institutional practices can combine to preserve established power relations. Fung (2006) and Mansuri and Rao (2013) similarly demonstrate that participatory mechanisms do not automatically overcome inequalities rooted in social and organizational structures.

In Kozah 3, institutional absorption does not imply that women's participation has no value or that every participatory initiative is ineffective. Rather, it identifies the limits of inclusion when the conditions governing access to authority, the recognition of contributions, and the distribution of resources remain largely unchanged. Women can be included in the operation of local governance without acquiring equivalent influence over its strategic orientations.

The findings therefore shift the analytical focus from women's numerical presence to the institutional conditions under which their participation can affect collective decisions. Substantive inclusion requires not only access to participatory spaces but also more equitable access to leadership positions, planning and coordination bodies, information, and budgetary decision-making. Without these changes, participation risks legitimizing the appearance of inclusion while leaving the underlying distribution of power largely intact.

4 CONCLUSION

This study examined how women's participation in local governance translates into decision-making influence in Kozah 3 Commune. The findings reveal a structural gap between formal inclusion and effective power.

Across community organizations and municipal administration, women remain concentrated in implementation-oriented roles, while strategic positions are predominantly held by men. This inequality reflects not only barriers to access but also institutional hierarchies, male-dominated social networks, selective information flows, and socioeconomic constraints that limit women's influence.

The study introduces the concept of institutional absorption of participation, whereby local governance systems incorporate women into participatory spaces without substantially transforming existing power structures. Participation thus coexists with the reproduction of established hierarchies.

These findings highlight the need to move beyond access-based approaches and examine how decision-making influence is distributed. They also point to the importance of decentralization policies that promote women's access to strategic positions and strengthen the institutional integration of gender equality into local governance.

STATEMENTS ON COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare no financial or non-financial conflicts of interest.

Statement of informed consent

Participants were informed of the study's objectives and provided informed consent. Their anonymity and the confidentiality of the data were maintained.

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