

# Pathways to Safeguarding Women's Rights Under the Patriarchal Ideology in Impoverished Areas: A Discourse on Substantive Equality Versus Equality of Opportunity

Yi Qiu<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jiangxi Lun Shing Law Firm, Ganzhou, Jiangxi, China

Correspondence: Yi Qiu, Jiangxi Lun Shing Law Firm, Ganzhou, Jiangxi, China.

doi:10.63593/SLJ.2026.03.10

## Abstract

Patriarchal ideology, as a deep-rooted social and cultural phenomenon in contiguous poverty-stricken areas, remote rural areas with low economic development and weak public service capacity in China (hereinafter referred to as "impoverished areas"), has become a core obstacle to the realization of women's political rights, leading to a more severe gender imbalance in the political power structure of these regions compared with other areas. Formal equality of opportunity in the legal sense has failed to effectively break the practical predicament of women's political marginalization in impoverished areas. Taking the women's political quota system as the research core, this paper focuses on the theoretical controversy between substantive equality and equality of opportunity, specifically analyzes how patriarchal ideology restricts women's political participation in impoverished areas through family role binding, resource allocation bias and social cognitive stereotypes, combs the global status quo of gender imbalance in the political power system and the supporting role of global quota system research for this paper's argument, analyzes the realistic characteristics and special dilemmas of women's political rights protection under the dual constraints of poverty and patriarchal ideology, and explores the practical value of the quota system in safeguarding women's political rights in impoverished areas. Based on the experience of the European Union in improving the quota system mechanism, the paper puts forward specific and operable targeted paths for optimizing the women's political rights protection system in impoverished areas. The study holds that in the context where patriarchal ideology in impoverished areas cannot be fundamentally changed in the short term, the quota system, as a practical carrier of substantive equality, is an essential and feasible means to correct systemic gender discrimination and guarantee women's equal participation in politics. Only through localized institutional design, strict implementation mechanisms and multi-dimensional supporting measures can we promote the transformation of women's political participation in impoverished areas from formal equality to substantive equality, and truly realize the effective safeguarding of women's political rights.

**Keywords:** impoverished areas, patriarchal ideology, women's political rights, substantive equality, equality of opportunity, quota system

## 1. Introduction

It is a universal social fact that the makers of social rules are often the greatest beneficiaries of them. However, from a global perspective, there is a serious gender imbalance in the power structures that formulate these rules, and this imbalance is even more prominent in contiguous poverty-stricken areas, remote rural areas with low economic development and weak public service capacity in China (hereinafter referred to as “impoverished areas”), where patriarchal ideology is deeply rooted. Women account for half of the world’s population, and in impoverished regions, they bear the dual pressure of material poverty and gender inequality, yet their voice in political decision-making is extremely weak. In the high-level decision-making bodies of impoverished areas, women are far outnumbered by men in terms of representation and influence, and the patriarchal ideology that values men over women has made this political inequality a “taken-for-granted” social phenomenon, failing to receive the necessary attention and correction.

Patriarchal ideology exerts a concrete restrictive effect on women’s political participation in impoverished areas through three core paths: First, family role binding takes women’s main energy for housework, child-rearing and elderly care as the core of family responsibilities, and the social cognition of “men in charge of external affairs and women in charge of internal affairs” makes women lack sufficient time and energy to participate in political learning and political activities. Second, resource allocation bias is reflected in the priority of educational resources, social communication resources and political training resources to men in impoverished areas, which leads to the low political literacy and participation ability of women in these areas. Third, social cognitive stereotypes label women as “lack of political decision-making ability” and “only suitable for trivial affairs”, which makes women face invisible resistance in the process of participating in political elections and taking up political positions.

Historical records and legal documents show that, with few exceptions, women around the world lacked independent legal personality for thousands of years (Beard, M., 1987). Patriarchy has evolved from a private family practice to a norm of public law over the long course of history (Lerner, G., 1986), making women subordinate to male heads of households in family life such as

marriage, property and inheritance, and depriving them of the right to participate in public spheres such as education, employment and especially politics. This historical injustice is further amplified in impoverished areas: the backward economic and social development has solidified the traditional patriarchal division of labor and gender values, and the lack of educational resources and social mobility channels has made it more difficult for women in these areas to break through the shackles of gender discrimination and participate in political activities. In such regions, the concept of “male political culture” is more ingrained, and women’s political rights are not only restricted by institutional factors but also bound by deep-seated traditional ideas, resulting in a more severe form of political marginalization.

Since the establishment and popularization of the human rights concept, women around the world have launched a long and arduous struggle for the right to participate in governance, and achieved remarkable progress. Over the past two centuries, democratic ideals based on freedom and equality have spread globally, becoming the value foundation of the political systems of various countries, and protective measures for women’s political participation have emerged one after another, among which the formulation of women’s parliamentary quota is regarded as an important institutional measure. Global academic research and practical exploration on the quota system have formed a rich theoretical portfolio for this paper’s argument: a large number of cross-national comparative studies have confirmed that the quota system is an effective tool to break the structural barriers of women’s political participation in regions with deep-rooted patriarchal ideology; the practice of more than 100 countries and regions that have implemented the quota system has provided empirical support for the applicability of the quota system in impoverished areas; the research on the optimization of the quota system mechanism has pointed out the direction for the localized design of the quota system in impoverished areas of China.

It is undeniable that the evaluation of any institutional measure cannot be separated from its specific temporal and social context. In the current socio-political environment where the consciousness of gender equality has not yet been fully formed, especially in impoverished areas where patriarchal ideology is prevalent and the

foundation of gender equality is extremely weak, the quota system, as an effective measure to guarantee women's right to political participation, is the most viable means to realize women's political rights. This paper holds a clear supportive position on the women's political quota system in impoverished areas from the beginning: the formal equality of opportunity that "treats everyone the same" can only maintain the status quo of gender inequality in political participation in impoverished areas under the dual constraints of poverty and patriarchal ideology; only the substantive equality of outcome that "gives targeted support to disadvantaged groups" through the quota system can effectively correct systemic gender discrimination and help women in impoverished areas obtain equal political participation rights. Answering this question is the key to exploring the path of safeguarding women's political rights under the patriarchal ideology in impoverished areas.

## **2. Theoretical Controversies over Women's Political Quota Systems in the Context of Impoverished Areas**

The women's political quota system has become a mainstream policy tool for the international community to promote women's political participation and achieve gender equality, and it is also regarded as a potential institutional solution to the problem of women's political marginalization in impoverished areas. However, since its implementation, this system has triggered extensive academic debates at home and abroad. Scholars' attitudes towards this system are mainly divided into two opposing camps: opposition and support. In the specific context of impoverished areas where patriarchal ideology is deep-rooted and economic development is backward, these theoretical controversies show more distinctive characteristics, and the core of the debate is whether the quota system is suitable for the reality of women's rights protection in impoverished areas and whether it can effectively break the dual constraints of poverty and gender discrimination.

### *2.1 Arguments Against the Women's Political Quota System*

Scholars who oppose the women's political quota system put forward a series of critical views based on the principles of equality and democracy, and these views are also echoed in

the discussion of women's rights protection in impoverished areas. Their main arguments are as follows:

First, the quota system violates the principle of equality and undermines the legal norm of equality of opportunity. These scholars divide "equality" into two dimensions: equality of opportunity and equality of outcome. Equality of opportunity means that everyone has an equal chance to make free choices in political participation, while equality of outcome requires that individuals achieve the same final representation in political decision-making (Kanbur, R., 2021). They hold that modern constitutions generally only require the realization of equality of opportunity, especially in liberal countries that advocate "fair competition", and the law only needs to provide fair competition conditions, without being responsible for the specific results of competition (Roemer, J. E., & Trannoy, A., 2015). In the context of impoverished areas, opponents believe that the quota system tailored for women's political participation gives women preferential election conditions, which breaks the principle of equal opportunity for all citizens to participate in politics, and is a blatant violation of the principle of formal equality. Even in impoverished areas with serious gender inequality, the solution should be to improve the equality of opportunity for women's political participation, such as popularizing education and eliminating institutional barriers, rather than artificially intervening in the outcome of political participation through the quota system.

Second, the quota system damages the democratic principle and infringes on the democratic rights of voters. Parliamentary elections are a process in which voters select their representatives through democratic voting, and the core of this process is the principle of popular sovereignty. The imposition of the quota system mandates a specific gender composition of political representatives, which is regarded by opponents as an infringement on the voters' right to independently choose their representatives, and it "undermines the idea that government can adequately represent the people" (Hassim, S., 2010). In impoverished areas with relatively backward democratic construction, opponents argue that the implementation of the quota system will further weaken the authenticity of democratic elections, make the election of political representatives a "formality" that meets

the gender quota, and is not conducive to the cultivation and development of democratic consciousness in these areas.

Third, the increase in the number of female representatives does not necessarily mean the solution to women's practical problems, especially in impoverished areas. Opponents hold that the quota system only elevates the number of women in political and governance positions in theory, creating an illusion of gender parity, but in reality, many women who enter political decision-making bodies in impoverished areas are influenced by the deep-rooted patriarchal ideology, and tend to follow the male-dominated political discourse and discuss issues of concern to men with male legislators, rather than speaking for the practical rights and interests of women in impoverished areas (Zhang, Y. H., 2009). They believe that the gender inequality in political participation in impoverished areas is a product of social and economic development, and with the improvement of the economic level of impoverished areas and the popularization of gender equality concepts, the prejudices against women and the low level of women's political participation will naturally disappear, and there is no need for legal intervention through the quota system.

Fourth, the quota system may lead to more forms of discrimination and intensify gender contradictions in impoverished areas. On the one hand, the quota system is regarded as a form of "reverse discrimination" against men. Based on the principle of equality, the law should not discriminate against the right to political representation based on gender, race or nationality. The preferential treatment given to women in the allocation of representative quotas is a kind of "discrimination" against the male majority, ignoring the legitimate interests of men (Dahlerup, D., 2005). In impoverished areas where the patriarchal concept is deeply rooted, this "reverse discrimination" is more likely to arouse male resentment and intensify gender conflicts in the local area. On the other hand, the quota system is also regarded as an indirect discrimination against women. Treating women as a vulnerable group in political participation and giving them special care will make many women in impoverished areas be regarded as "elected because of gender rather than ability", which is a form of "charity" in politics, and is not conducive to the cultivation of women's political

confidence and political competence (Li, X. G., 2009). Scholars point out that the quota system is only a temporary social guidance measure, and the real improvement of women's political status in impoverished areas cannot be achieved through artificial institutional design alone, but needs the internal improvement of women's own quality and the natural evolution of social concepts (Praud, J., 2012).

## *2.2 Arguments in Favor of the Women's Political Quota System*

This paper stands in the camp of supporting the women's political quota system, and holds that the system is an essential means to realize substantive gender equality, and its practical value is more prominent in impoverished areas where women's political rights are seriously damaged by patriarchal ideology. The supporting viewpoints are mainly concentrated in the following three aspects:

First, the quota system symbolizes the shift from equality of opportunity to substantive equality, which is the key to breaking the gender inequality in political participation in impoverished areas. The realization of genuine gender equality in politics cannot be achieved by merely granting women the same legal political rights as men, especially in impoverished areas where the dual constraints of poverty and patriarchal ideology make women face insurmountable practical obstacles in exercising their political rights even if they have formal equality of opportunity. Measures aimed at achieving equality of opportunity often lack enforceability and are difficult to implement in impoverished areas, resulting in unclear policy effects and failure to fundamentally change the status quo of women's political marginalization (Kantola, J., 2009). Traditional gender inequality has a profound historical basis, and gender balance will not be automatically achieved with social progress, especially in impoverished areas where the social structure is relatively solid and the traditional concept is difficult to change. Emphasizing the so-called "fairness of opportunity" under the existing patriarchal culture in impoverished areas will only perpetuate the unfair status quo of women's political participation. To change this situation, it is imperative to implement synthetic interventions such as the quota system to correct the historical and realistic gender disparities (Xu, Y., 2008). The quota system, as a corrective strategy, is the most reliable way to transform the

status of women's political participation in impoverished areas and realize gender equality in public policy.

Second, the quota system is in line with the essence of democratic principles and can better reflect the inclusive nature of democracy in impoverished areas. The concept of democracy is not only reflected in the equal right of men and women to participate in the electoral process, but also in their equal participation in legislation and policy-making, and in the equal reflection of the interests and demands of all social groups, including women in impoverished areas. Modern democracy is essentially the sharing of power and interests among all social classes and groups. When women, who account for half of the population, are absent from the political decision-making of impoverished areas, it means that the interests and demands of half of the population are not effectively represented, which is a serious defect of democratic politics. Taking active measures such as the quota system to increase the number of female representatives in impoverished areas is not a violation of democracy, but a maintenance and improvement of the democratic system, which can make the political power structure of impoverished areas more inclusive and representative.

Third, the quota system is a necessary care and differential treatment for women as a disadvantaged group, which is in line with the requirement of substantive equality for respecting human nature. Women are latecomers to the political field, and in impoverished areas where patriarchal ideology is deep-rooted, it is even more difficult for them to enter the political power structure through their own efforts. In the current environment of advocating gender equality in political participation, the political participation of women in impoverished areas must rely on the biased quota policy. Achieving gender equality in the political field does not mean "one-size-fits-all" equal treatment, but also requires differential treatment of rights that respects the natural and social differences between men and women (Lin, J. J., 2007). Respecting the physiological differences between men and women, considering the social disparities caused by patriarchal ideology in impoverished areas, and narrowing and compensating for the gender inequality in the political field of these areas are the fundamental motives and footholds of the differential treatment of women's political rights. Only by

providing differential treatment and implementing biased policy protection for women's political participation in impoverished areas can this largest disadvantaged group be truly integrated into public political life, unleash their political energy, and realize the substantive equality of political rights.

### *2.3 Summary of Theoretical Controversies*

In summary, the criticism and doubt of the women's political quota system are mainly focused on its alleged violation of the principles of formal equality and democracy, its failure to solve the practical problems of gender equality in political participation, and its potential to create new gender discrimination and conflicts. These controversies are more prominent in the context of impoverished areas, and opponents are more worried that the implementation of the quota system in these areas will not only fail to protect women's political rights, but also intensify local gender contradictions and hinder the process of local social development.

The supporting viewpoints of the quota system (and the core stance of this paper) hold that the system is a necessary measure to realize substantive equality, which is in line with the essence of democratic principles. For impoverished areas where women's political rights are seriously damaged by patriarchal ideology, the quota system is a powerful adjustment tool to correct the gender inequality caused by historical and social reasons. Treating women as a socially disadvantaged group and giving them special care is not a violation of the principle of equality, but a reflection of factual and substantive equality. In the short and medium term, as long as the patriarchal ideology in impoverished areas has not been fundamentally changed and the gender equality consciousness has not been fully formed, the quota system, as a temporary active intervention measure, still has irreplaceable practical value in the protection of women's political rights in these areas.

### **3. Gender Imbalance in the Political Power System: A Global Perspective with Special Reference to Impoverished Areas**

In most countries and regions around the world, although the number of women holding ministerial positions has increased to a certain extent, the gender imbalance in the political power system is still a prominent social problem, and this problem is more serious in impoverished

areas where patriarchal ideology is deep-rooted. The distribution of female political representatives in functional departments shows obvious stereotypical clustering characteristics, and this clustering is more extreme in impoverished areas, which further reinforces the traditional gender role cognition and exacerbates the social stereotype of women's political competence.

### *3.1 Stereotypical Clustering of Female Political Representatives in Functional Departments*

In the global political power system, female ministers are mainly assigned to departments related to the "private sphere" such as health, social welfare, family and culture, while they rarely hold leadership positions in departments related to the "public sphere" such as defense, foreign affairs and budgeting (see Table 1). The latter have always been dominated by men, holding a core position in the formulation of national economic and foreign policies, and are the key departments reflecting the core political power of a country or region, which are regarded as the "image" departments of a country or region (European Parliament, 2024). In impoverished areas, this stereotypical clustering of female political representatives is more obvious: female political participants are almost only assigned to the most marginal functional departments with weak decision-making power, such as family planning, women's and children's work, and social assistance, and they are completely excluded from the core political decision-making departments such as local economic development, financial budgeting and public security management. This distribution characteristic of female political representatives in functional departments not only reflects the reinforcement and stereotyping of women's social gender roles in the political field, but also further exacerbates the social stereotype that "women are not suitable for core political work", making it more difficult for women to break through the gender ceiling in political participation.

It is important to note that this stereotypical clustering of female political representatives is not a defect of the quota system itself, but a result of the stereotypical prejudices that still exist in the implementation of the quota system, and these prejudices are more prominent in impoverished areas. The patriarchal ideology in impoverished areas makes the local society have a deep-rooted cognition of "men are in charge of

the outside and women are in charge of the inside", and this cognition is also fully reflected in the political field. When evaluating the level of realization of women's equal political rights in a region, especially in an impoverished area, we cannot merely judge by the change in the number of female political representatives, but must analyze the specific departments led by female representatives and the actual political power they hold. A simple increase in the number of female representatives in marginal departments cannot mean the realization of women's equal political rights, but only a "cosmetic" change in the political power structure.

### *3.2 The "Gender Power Score" Method: A Scientific Evaluation of Women's Political Participation*

In response to the problem of the one-sidedness of evaluating women's political participation only by the number of female representatives, Diana, a scholar from the University of Southern California, designed a "Gender Power Score" method, which comprehensively integrates various theoretical viewpoints and provides a more scientific and fair evaluation standard for the situation of women holding leadership positions in government departments (Krook, M. L., & O'Brien, D. Z., 2012). This method comprehensively analyzes three core elements: the number of female ministers, the gender characteristics of departments, and the prestige of departments, and makes a quantitative and qualitative evaluation of women's political power status.

Specifically, the "Gender Power Score" method first classifies government departments into three types according to their connection with gender roles: masculine departments, feminine departments and neutral departments. Masculine departments mainly refer to departments related to the public sphere with core political power, such as agriculture, defense, foreign affairs, finance and technology; feminine departments mainly refer to departments related to the private sphere and closely linked to traditional female characteristics and experiences, such as education, children's affairs, culture and social welfare; neutral departments refer to departments that do not explicitly distinguish between public and private spheres, such as environmental protection, sports, justice and tourism. Secondly, the method classifies departments into three levels of prestige according to media attention, policy control power and resource availability: high-prestige

departments (defense, foreign affairs, finance, interior), mid-prestige departments (agriculture, education, planning, etc., which control important financial resources) and low-prestige departments (culture, sports, tourism, etc., which lack resource control power). Although this classification is not completely precise, it is generally in line with the social cognition of the hierarchy of government departments around the world.

Applying the “Gender Power Score” method to the evaluation of women’s political participation in impoverished areas, we can find that the “Gender Power Score” of women in these areas is extremely low: most female political representatives are assigned to feminine and low-prestige government departments, and almost no women enter masculine and high-prestige core departments. Even if some impoverished areas have implemented the women’s political quota system and increased the number of female political representatives, the low “Gender Power Score” still makes it difficult to truly achieve gender equality in political rights. As Caroline Flint, the former European Minister, vividly described, this kind of political participation of women only in marginal departments is a form of “window-dressing” in politics, which is merely for show and has no substantive significance for the realization of women’s political rights (Krook, M. L., & O’Brien, D. Z., 2012).

### *3.3 The Positive Significance of Women’s Political Participation in Impoverished Areas Despite the “Window-Dressing” Phenomenon*

Although many countries and regions, especially impoverished areas, use female political representatives to “decorate the political facade”, and the distribution of departments where women serve is highly uneven, it cannot be denied that the presence of women in the political field of impoverished areas has important positive significance. First of all, the participation of women in the political field of impoverished areas at least proves with practical facts that women are capable of holding high-level leadership positions, which is a powerful blow to the patriarchal ideology that “women are not suitable for politics” in these areas. Secondly, in the process of participating in political activities, women in impoverished areas can accumulate valuable political experience, improve their political literacy and political competence, and lay a solid foundation for their further entry into

core political departments in the future. Thirdly, the participation of women in the political field can enhance the activity of women’s political participation in impoverished areas, make the local society gradually adapt to the existence of women in the political power structure, and make it increasingly difficult to exclude women from political positions, thus gradually changing people’s attitudes and views on women’s participation in decision-making and leadership in impoverished areas.

In fact, many female national leaders in the world have previously held leadership positions in so-called “feminine” and “low-prestige” departments such as education, employment, women’s and children’s rights protection, and environmental protection, such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel and British Prime Minister Theresa May. Their political experience shows that the accumulation of experience in marginal departments is an important stage for women to enter core political departments. For impoverished areas, with the gradual deepening of gender equality consciousness, the continuous improvement of women’s own political competence, and the gradual optimization of the quota system, women will inevitably appear in more and more so-called “masculine” and “high-prestige” core political departments, and the “window-dressing” phenomenon of women’s political participation will be gradually broken.

### **4. The Quota System: An Important Safeguard for Women’s Equal Political Participation in Impoverished Areas**

In the context of the deep-rooted patriarchal ideology and the severe gender imbalance in the political power system in impoverished areas, the women’s political quota system is not only an effective tool for adjusting gender equality in global political participation, but also an important institutional safeguard for realizing women’s equal political participation in impoverished areas. The quota system, as a practical carrier of substantive equality, has important theoretical and practical value for breaking the dual constraints of poverty and gender discrimination and safeguarding women’s political rights in impoverished areas.

#### *4.1 The Quota System Supports the Realization of Substantive Gender Equality in the Political System of Impoverished Areas*

The right to vote and stand for election, as the fundamental political right of citizens, is mainly

regulated by the principle of equality of opportunity in the legal sense, but this does not mean that substantive equality is completely inapplicable to the protection of political rights, especially in the political rights protection of women in impoverished areas. Political rights and socio-economic rights are both important components of human rights, and although they belong to different rights systems and have different connotations, their fundamental purpose is the same: to ensure human dignity and the realization of popular sovereignty (Beetham, D., 2017). Therefore, equality of opportunity and substantive equality have different emphases in different rights systems, and they are not antithetical to each other. On the contrary, they are two aspects of the principle of equality, which together constitute the complete principle of equality. It is a wrong understanding to hold that political rights should strictly abide by absolute formal equality while socio-economic rights should follow absolute substantive equality. This understanding creates a false opposition between formal equality and substantive equality, and ignores the practical differences in the realization of rights by different social groups in different contexts.

The applicability of substantive equality to political rights has always been a hot topic in academic circles, and the core of the controversy is the degree of state intervention in the political field. In liberal countries, the state plays the role of a “night watchman” and rarely intervenes in the political field, because political rights are directly related to the source of state power. However, in the era of welfare states, the state has not only entered the economic and social fields, but also carried out necessary interventions in the political field. These countries realize the equality of various rights of citizens through state intervention, that is, they dissolve the inequality caused by formal equality through the model of substantive equality (Beetham, D., 2017). For impoverished areas, the state’s necessary intervention in the political field through the quota system is an essential means to realize the substantive equality of women’s political rights. Women in impoverished areas are still in a serious disadvantaged position in the exercise of political rights due to the dual constraints of poverty and patriarchal ideology. Legally stipulating the proportion of women’s political representation in impoverished areas is to meet the requirements of social fairness: women, who

account for half of the population in impoverished areas, should have the right to participate in local political decision-making in proportion to their population size.

The means of the quota system has a reasonable connection with the goal of realizing substantive equality of women’s political rights in impoverished areas. By legally ensuring the proportion of female political representatives in impoverished areas, the quota system aims to achieve a relative equality between men and women in political participation in these areas, reduce the unequal status of women in political rights caused by historical, cultural and economic reasons, and finally realize the substantive equality of women’s political rights. In the context where the patriarchal ideology in impoverished areas cannot be fundamentally changed in the short term, the formal equality of opportunity alone cannot solve the practical problem of women’s political marginalization. Only by combining formal equality of opportunity with substantive equality of outcome through the quota system can we truly break the shackles of gender discrimination and realize the equal political participation of women in impoverished areas.

#### *4.2 The Quota System Facilitates the Implementation of Representative Theory in Impoverished Areas*

With the expansion of social scale and the increase of population, the direct democracy of ancient Greece has become unfeasible, and representative democracy under the framework of indirect democracy has become the main form of democratic politics in modern society, which is also the main form of democratic construction in impoverished areas. The representative system of modern countries mainly refers to the system established after the bourgeois revolution, which is quite different from the representative system under the autocratic regime of “royal sovereignty” in the feudal era. The core of the modern representative system is the representative theory, which mainly studies the relationship between representatives and voters, and focuses on the role of representatives in the representative system, that is, whether representatives should completely obey the will of voters or exercise their powers independently according to their own judgment. Based on the independence of representatives, representative theory can be divided into two types: imperative mandate and free mandate (Urbinati, N., & Warren, M. E., 2008).

The imperative mandate holds that representatives are elected by voters and are accountable to voters. They must act in accordance with the will of voters and represent the interests of voters, and cannot exercise their powers based on their own judgment and self-interest. The free mandate holds that representatives have an independent legal status once they are elected by voters, and they can exercise their powers based on their own wisdom and conscience, without being bound by the specific will of voters (Urbinati, N., & Warren, M. E., 2008). The women's political quota system is based on the imperative mandate of representative theory, which holds that an individual's will and interests cannot be fully represented by others, and only individuals with the same identity and experience can best represent their own interests. The concept of the imperative mandate originates from Rousseau's thought, who believed that "the general will does not admit of representation" (Rousseau, J.-J., 1762). Under the premise of the representative system, the imperative mandate emphasizes that to realize the effective representation of interests, the representation should be as direct as possible, and people with homogeneity can best represent the interests of voters. This homogeneity is mainly reflected in two aspects: one is the regional homogeneity, that is, representatives should be from the same region as voters; the other is the identity homogeneity, that is, representatives should belong to the same profession, class or social group as voters. Whether it is regional homogeneity or identity homogeneity, it highlights the consistency of interests between representatives and voters.

Emphasizing the proportion of female political representatives in impoverished areas is in line with the identity homogeneity principle of the imperative mandate. Female representatives in impoverished areas share the same gender identity and similar life experiences with local women, and they can better understand the practical difficulties and interest demands of local women under the dual constraints of poverty and patriarchal ideology. A male representative, even if he is from the same impoverished area, is difficult to truly understand the gender-based unfair treatment suffered by local women, and this gender difference is difficult to bridge through subjective efforts. For example, male representatives can hardly fully understand the practical problems

such as the lack of educational resources for girls, the gender discrimination in employment, and the infringement of women's property rights in impoverished areas, nor can they put forward targeted solutions from the perspective of women's interests. Female representatives, on the other hand, can more accurately capture the practical demands of local women and put forward corresponding policy proposals, thus realizing the effective representation of women's interests in impoverished areas.

It is true that there are some criticisms of the quota system in practice: some women who enter the political decision-making bodies of impoverished areas do not necessarily represent the interests of local women, but are more willing to discuss male-dominated issues with male legislators. However, this shortcoming is not due to the quota system itself, but to the deep-rooted patriarchal ideology in impoverished areas and the widespread social bias against women's rights. When the number of female representatives in the political decision-making bodies of impoverished areas does not reach a critical scale, even if the quota system ensures the presence of a small number of female representatives, these female representatives are easily marginalized in the male-dominated political power structure, and the policy proposals related to women's interests they put forward are also difficult to receive fair attention and adoption (Ryan, M. K., Haslam, S. A., & Kulich, C., 2010). At the same time, the current quota system in impoverished areas has not yet fundamentally changed the situation where women are more likely to occupy unstable and marginal leadership positions than men, and it only addresses the superficial phenomenon of women's political participation, but does not touch the underlying causes of gender inequality in the political field of impoverished areas (Ryan, M. K., Haslam, S. A., & Kulich, C., 2010). Therefore, the current women's political quota system in impoverished areas still needs to be reformed and improved, and the scale of female political representatives and the actual political power they hold need to be further expanded to better realize the effective representation of women's interests in impoverished areas.

##### **5. Refining the Mechanism of the Women's Quota System: Experience from the European Union and Enlightenment for Impoverished Areas**

The effective implementation of the women's

political quota system is not only a matter of formulating a simple numerical target, but also requires a complete and refined institutional mechanism as a guarantee. The European Union has accumulated rich experience in the practice of promoting gender equality and improving the women's quota system mechanism, and these experiences provide important enlightenment for the refinement of the women's quota system mechanism in impoverished areas under the patriarchal ideology. Exploring the path of optimizing the quota system mechanism in combination with the actual situation of impoverished areas is the key to giving full play to the role of the quota system in safeguarding women's political rights in these areas.

### *5.1 The Experience of the European Union in Refining the Women's Quota System Mechanism*

The European Union has always been at the forefront of the international community in promoting gender equality and implementing the women's political quota system, and it has also found a series of institutional inadequacies in the practice process. The European Union's Gender Action Plan I (2010-2015) (GAP I) clearly pointed out the current deficiencies in the EU's gender equality institutions and systems: the scope of gender equality policies is too narrow, the gender-responsive budgeting is lacking, the EU delegations have insufficient understanding of the gender equality framework, the EU leadership lacks sufficient commitment to gender equality, and there is a lack of institutional structures and incentive mechanisms that can effectively support and motivate the staff to implement gender equality policies (European Parliament Think Tank, 2018). In response to these problems, the European Parliament put forward a series of reform suggestions in its resolution of October 8, 2015, including increasing the responsibility of the management layer for promoting gender equality, improving the gender equality training system for staff, and establishing a sound gender-responsive budgeting mechanism, so as to effectively rectify the deficiencies in the implementation of the quota system and the gender equality policy (European Parliament Think Tank., 2018).

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) defined three core characteristics of effective and meaningful quota implementation in its 2013 publication *Atlas of Electoral Gender Quotas*, which provide an important theoretical basis for the refinement of

the quota system mechanism in various countries and regions (EIGE, 2015). First, the quota system needs to define specific and measurable numerical targets. Vague numerical targets will make the implementation of the quota system lack operability, and it is difficult to form an effective constraint on the relevant responsible subjects. Second, the quota system must be supported by well-designed quota rules, such as ranking rules or allocation tasks that are compatible with the local electoral system, ballot structure and list types. The design of quota rules must be combined with the actual local political system, and cannot be copied mechanically, otherwise it will lead to the disconnection between the quota system and the local political practice, and affect the implementation effect of the system. Third, it is essential to formulate effective sanctions for non-compliance to motivate political parties and political elites to implement the quota system. Possible sanctions include refusing to accept the party's candidate list, imposing financial penalties, and giving financial rewards to the parties that effectively implement the quota system, or a combination of these incentive and restrictive measures (EIGE, 2015). Only by combining clear numerical targets, scientific quota rules and strict sanction mechanisms can the quota system be effectively implemented and play its due role in promoting gender equality in political participation.

### *5.2 Enlightenment of the EU Experience for the Refinement of the Quota System Mechanism in Impoverished Areas*

The European Union's experience in refining the women's quota system mechanism and the core characteristics of effective quota implementation defined by IDEA provide important enlightenment for the construction of the women's quota system mechanism in impoverished areas under the patriarchal ideology. The refinement of the quota system mechanism in impoverished areas cannot copy the experience of developed countries or regions mechanically, but must combine the actual situation of impoverished areas, such as deep-rooted patriarchal ideology, backward economic development, and imperfect democratic political system, and carry out localized institutional design and mechanism construction. This paper puts forward two specific and operable implementation recommendations on the basis of the three core enlightenments, and the specific content is reflected in the following aspects:

First, formulate specific, measurable and phased numerical targets for the quota system in combination with the actual situation of impoverished areas. The numerical target of the quota system should not be set too high or too low: if the target is too high, it will be difficult to achieve due to the low level of women's political participation in impoverished areas, which will damage the authority of the system; if the target is too low, it will not be able to effectively change the status quo of women's political marginalization in impoverished areas, and the quota system will lose its practical significance. The numerical target of the quota system in impoverished areas should be phased: the initial stage (1-3 years) should focus on ensuring that the proportion of female representatives in village committees and township people's congresses in impoverished areas reaches no less than 30%, laying a foundation for the cultivation of women's political competence; the middle stage (4-6 years) should focus on expanding the proportion of female representatives in county-level people's congresses and government departments to no less than 35%, and gradually increasing the number of female cadres in mid-prestige departments such as education and agriculture; the long-term stage (7-10 years) should focus on increasing the proportion of female representatives in prefecture-level and above political power organs to more than 40%, and realizing the rational distribution of female cadres in core and high-prestige departments such as economic development and finance. At the same time, the numerical target of the quota system should be clearly defined in local laws and regulations, forming a rigid institutional constraint.

Second, design scientific and localized quota rules that are compatible with the political system and electoral practice of impoverished areas. The design of quota rules in impoverished areas should be based on the local actual electoral system and political operation mechanism, and focus on solving the practical problems faced by women's political participation in these areas. For example, in impoverished rural areas where the village committee election system is implemented, the quota rules can be designed as "fixed female candidates" or "female candidate priority election" to ensure the proportion of female members in the village committee; in impoverished urban areas, the quota rules can be combined with the people's congress election

system, and the proportion of female representatives in the people's congress at all levels can be clearly defined. At the same time, the quota rules should also include the training and selection mechanism of female political talents in impoverished areas, focusing on cultivating local female political talents who understand the local actual situation and are supported by local women, and solving the problem of the shortage of female political talents in impoverished areas.

Third, establish a sound implementation supervision and incentive and restraint mechanism for the quota system in impoverished areas. The key to the effective implementation of the quota system in impoverished areas is to establish a strict supervision and sanction mechanism for non-compliance. The local government should set up a special gender equality supervision agency to supervise the implementation of the quota system in the whole process, and regularly publish the implementation status of the quota system to the society to accept social supervision. For the units or individuals that fail to implement the quota system in accordance with the regulations, corresponding sanctions should be taken, such as invalidating the election results, canceling the relevant political performance evaluation qualifications, and imposing appropriate financial penalties. At the same time, incentive mechanisms should be established to give financial and policy rewards to the units and individuals that effectively implement the quota system and have outstanding performance in promoting women's political participation, so as to mobilize the enthusiasm of all parties to implement the quota system. In addition, it is also necessary to strengthen the publicity and education of the quota system and gender equality concepts in impoverished areas, change the local people's patriarchal cognition, and create a good social atmosphere for the implementation of the quota system.

Specific implementation recommendation 1: Build a "three-level training system" for female political talents in impoverished areas. Set up village-level basic training courses focusing on political literacy and election skills, township-level improvement training courses focusing on policy understanding and work ability, and county-level elite training courses focusing on decision-making thinking and leadership ability; compile localized training materials combined

with the actual political work of impoverished areas, and invite local outstanding female cadres to teach by example, with no less than 40 hours of training for female political talents every year.

Specific implementation recommendation 2: Establish a “gender equality assessment mechanism” linked to the performance of local government cadres in impoverished areas. Include the implementation of the women’s political quota system, the cultivation of female cadres and the protection of women’s political rights into the annual performance assessment indicators of local government cadres in impoverished areas, with a weight of no less than 15%; for cadres who have made outstanding contributions to promoting women’s political participation, give priority to promotion and evaluation, and for cadres who ignore the implementation of the quota system, implement one-vote veto for their performance assessment.

## 6. Conclusion

At present, most democratic countries and regions in the world have legally established the basic right of men and women to equal participation in politics, and women have the right to exercise their right to vote and stand for election in accordance with the law. However, a large number of statistics on women’s political participation show that gender inequality in the political field is still a widespread global problem, and this problem is more prominent in contiguous poverty-stricken areas, remote rural areas with low economic development and weak public service capacity in China, where patriarchal ideology is deep-rooted. In these areas, women are faced with the dual constraints of material poverty and gender discrimination, and their political rights are seriously damaged. Although some countries and regions have made remarkable progress in women’s political participation, impoverished areas are far behind this progress, and the gender imbalance in the political power structure is becoming increasingly serious. This phenomenon prompts us to think deeply: why is there such a big gap in the quality and extent of women’s political participation between different regions? The answer is that women’s political participation is a complex social problem involving economic, cultural, institutional and other multiple factors, and the realization of gender equality in politics requires not only formal equality of opportunity in the legal sense, but more importantly, substantive equality of outcome that meets the

actual situation of different regions.

Patriarchal ideology restricts women’s political participation in impoverished areas through concrete and realistic paths such as family role binding, resource allocation bias and social cognitive stereotypes, and this restrictive effect cannot be eliminated by the spontaneous development of society in the short term. The women’s political quota system is an important legislative measure to protect women’s right to participate in governance, improve women’s political status and correct systemic gender discrimination. It is also the most direct and effective means to promote women’s political participation in impoverished areas under the patriarchal ideology. Globally, ensuring women’s political rights and improving their status in the political field has become an irreversible development trend, and more and more countries and regions are adopting the quota system to promote women’s political participation. The global portfolio of quota system research, including cross-national comparative studies, national practice exploration and mechanism optimization research, has formed a solid theoretical and empirical support for the applicability of the quota system in impoverished areas of China. Although the implementation of the quota system in various countries and regions has encountered a series of problems, such as the stereotypical clustering of female political representatives, the marginalization of female representatives, and the “window-dressing” phenomenon of political participation, these problems are not due to the quota system itself, but to the imperfect implementation mechanism of the system and the deep-rooted traditional patriarchal ideology. These problems are more prominent in impoverished areas, but they do not negate the practical value of the quota system in safeguarding women’s political rights in these areas.

In the context where the patriarchal ideology in impoverished areas cannot be fundamentally changed in the short term, we cannot place our hope solely on the formal equality of opportunity and the spontaneous self-correction of gender discrimination attitudes. Instead, we should take the quota system as the core, continuously improve and optimize the institutional mechanism of the quota system, and adopt more robust protective measures to help improve the political status of women in impoverished areas.

The refinement of the quota system mechanism in impoverished areas must adhere to the principle of localization, combine the actual situation of these areas to formulate specific phased numerical targets, scientific localized quota rules and strict implementation mechanisms; at the same time, it is necessary to strengthen the publicity and education of gender equality concepts, popularize education for women in impoverished areas, cultivate local female political talents through the “three-level training system”, and establish a gender equality assessment mechanism linked to cadre performance to create a good social atmosphere for the realization of women’s political rights. Only in this way can we promote the transformation of women’s political participation in impoverished areas from formal equality to substantive equality, break the dual constraints of poverty and patriarchal ideology, and truly realize the effective safeguarding of women’s political rights in impoverished areas.

The protection of women’s political rights under the patriarchal ideology in impoverished areas is a long and arduous project, which cannot be achieved overnight. It needs the joint efforts of the state, society and individuals: the state needs to provide institutional and policy support, the society needs to create a good gender equality atmosphere, and individuals need to improve their own political literacy and political competence. With the continuous deepening of the global gender equality movement, the continuous improvement of the economic and social development level of impoverished areas, and the continuous optimization of the women’s political quota system mechanism, the patriarchal ideology in impoverished areas will be gradually weakened, and women’s political rights in these areas will be more effectively safeguarded. The realization of substantive gender equality in the political field of impoverished areas will not only promote the all-round development of women in these areas, but also inject new vitality into the economic and social development of impoverished areas, and promote the construction of a more fair, inclusive and harmonious social order.

## References

Beard, M. (1987). *Woman as a Force in History: A Study in Traditions and Realities*. Vani Prakashan.

Beetham, D. (2017). What future for economic

and social rights? In *Human Rights*, 215-234. Routledge.

- Dahlerup, D. (2005). Increasing women’s political representation: New trends in gender quotas. *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers*, 141.
- EIGE. (2015). Gender Equality in Power and Decision-Making: Report, Review of the Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in the EU Member States. Retrieved April 11, 2024, from [https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/gender-equality-power-and-decision-making-report?language\\_content\\_entity=en](https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/gender-equality-power-and-decision-making-report?language_content_entity=en)
- European Parliament Think Tank. (2018). Transforming the Lives of Girls and Women Through EU External Relations, 2016-2020 (Apap Joanna, Ed.). Retrieved April 11, 2024, from [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS\\_ATA\(2018\)621889](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_ATA(2018)621889)
- European Parliament. (2024). Women in Politics in the EU–State of Play in 2024 (Rosamund Shreeves & Ionel Zamfir, Eds.). Retrieved April 11, 2024, from [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/760348/EPRS\\_BRI\(2024\)760348\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/760348/EPRS_BRI(2024)760348_EN.pdf)
- Hassim, S. (2010). Perverse consequences? The impact of quotas for women on democratization in Africa. *Political Representation*, 211-235.
- Kanbur, R. (2021). Capability, opportunity, outcome and equality. *The Cambridge Handbook of the Capability Approach*, 333-346.
- Kantola, J. (2009). Women’s political representation in the European Union. *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 15(4), 379-400.
- Krook, M. L., & O’Brien, D. Z. (2012). All the president’s men? The appointment of female cabinet ministers worldwide. *The Journal of Politics*, 74(3), 840-855.
- Krook, M. L., & O’Brien, D. Z. (2012). All the president’s men? The appointment of female cabinet ministers worldwide. *The Journal of Politics*, 74(3), 841.
- Lerner, G. (1986). *The Creation of Patriarchy* (Vol. 1). Oxford University Press, USA.
- Li, X. G. (2009). Proportional Representation: The Effectiveness of Gender Equality in Political

- Participation in Contemporary China. *Collection of Women's Studies*, (6), 5-10.
- Lin, J. J. (2007). Equal Treatment and Preferential Protection: An Analysis of the Legislative Purpose and Value Concept of Women's Rights Laws. *Hebei Law Science*, 25(9), 57-60.
- Praud, J. (2012). Introduction: Gender parity and quotas in European politics. *West European Politics*, 35(2), 286-300.
- Roemer, J. E., & Trannoy, A. (2015). Equality of opportunity. In *Handbook of Income Distribution* (Vol. 2), 217-300. Elsevier.
- Rousseau, J.-J. (1762). *The Social Contract or Principles of Political Right* (G. D. H. Cole, Trans.). [Original work published 1762].
- Ryan, M. K., Haslam, S. A., & Kulich, C. (2010). Politics and the glass cliff: Evidence that women are preferentially selected to contest hard-to-win seats. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 34(1), 56-64.
- Urbinati, N., & Warren, M. E. (2008). The concept of representation in contemporary democratic theory. *Annu. Rev. Polit. Sci.*, 11, 387-412.
- Xu, Y. (2008). A Comparison of Women's Political Participation Ratios between China and Foreign Countries and Its Reflections. *Journal of Harbin University*, 29(1), 32-36.
- Zhang, Y. H. (2009). A Brief Analysis of the Shift from Gender Equality Strategy to Gender Mainstreaming Strategy. *Journal of China Women's University*, (5), 101-107.