

Strengthen Girls' and Women's Political Participation and Decision-Making Power

Facts, Solutions, Case Studies, and Calls to Action

OVERVIEW

The strong political participation of women is critical for democratic governance. However, girls and women throughout the world continue to be marginalized from the political sphere due to restrictive laws and institutional barriers; discriminatory cultural practices; and disproportionately low access to quality education, healthcare, and resources. However, reversing discriminatory policies and practices is possible and has been done.

This policy brief examines various proven solutions to addressing barriers in institutions, sociocultural norms, and individual capacity in order to empower all girls and women and amplify their voices in decision-making processes. The interventions presented range from raising awareness among girls and women—particularly the most marginalized—of their rights and national power structures, with the intent to foster inclusivity in leadership roles.

SECTION 1: FRAMING THE ISSUE

Girls and women have the right to engage in civil society, vote in elections, be elected to government office, serve on boards, and make their voices heard in any process that will ultimately affect them, their families, and their communities. While girls younger than 18 rarely have the right to vote or be elected to office, they have the right to have their voices heard in decision-making processes, as per the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.¹

Moreover, at a time when nearly half of the world's countries are considered democracies, the inclusion and equal participation of all citizens has become increasingly critical for good governance, which in turn is necessary for sustainable peace and development.² Under-representation of women in national governments is a rights issue and has detrimental effects on society, as bodies that govern citizens' daily lives miss the perspectives and experiences of half the population. Parity at all levels of government is fundamental to rights of equal representation and to creating an enabling environment for equality and good governance. Yet data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) reveals that in 2019, less than 10% of world leaders were women and only 20.7% of government ministers were women.^{3,4}

By investing in gender-responsive political participation, the international community not only moves closer to realizing girls' and women's basic human rights, but also fulfilling the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and targets that depend upon it. While achieving gender equality and empowering girls and women is the goal of SDG 5—achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls—the benefits of including girls and women in decision-making are cross-cutting, paving the way to more inclusive and resilient political processes and democracies, balanced economies, and enhanced peacebuilding capacities.^{5,6} As of October 2019, an estimated 24.5% of national parliamentarians were women, a slow rise from 11.3% in 1995.^{7,8} Women have also increasingly taken on positions of power as corporate leaders, civil society activists, political party leaders, mayors, cabinet ministers, prime ministers, and presidents.^{9,10} Despite this progress, there is still a long road ahead to achieving gender equality in the political sphere.

Although multiple international agreements, regional frameworks, and national laws recognize girls' and women's right to lead and participate in politics as a measure of democratic integrity, the widespread absence of women in political and decision-making bodies persists. Furthermore, as of June 2019, only 11 women worldwide were serving as heads of state and 12 were serving as head of government.¹¹ As of January 2019, only 42 countries had 30% or more women in ministerial positions.¹² As of 2018, young people under age 30 made up only around 2% of the world's parliamentarians, making young women among the most underrepresented globally.¹³ Both male and female legislators face numerous challenges during political campaigns, but according to a 2015 survey conducted in 84 countries by the Women in Parliaments Global Forum and the World Bank, women are three times as likely to worry about gender discrimination and twice as likely to fear not being taken as seriously as their male counterparts.¹⁴

Women often face their first barriers to full political participation as girls, which can limit their participation and leadership later in life.¹⁵ Prevailing social norms and cultural attitudes discourage political activism among girls and young women, which in turn limits their willingness and agency to take political action.¹⁶ A 2019 study by Plan International found that while 62% of girls are confident in their ability to lead, only 20.6% aspire to national leadership and only 19.3% want to be a community leader.¹⁷ With little encouragement from their direct environment and limited female role models in the public sphere,

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Meeting the demand to invest in women's political participation and decision-making power is linked to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and targets, including:

SDG 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

- **5.5** Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life
- **5.c** Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels

SDG 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries

- **10.2** By 2030, empower and promote the social, economic, and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, or economic or other status
- **10.3** Ensure equal opportunity and reduce inequalities of outcome, including by eliminating discriminatory laws, policies, and practices and promoting appropriate legislation, policies, and action in this regard

SDG 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels

- **16.7** Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels



levels of engagement in party activism among young women are lower than that of young men.¹⁸

In humanitarian, conflict, and post-conflict settings, UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security specifically acknowledges the role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, in humanitarian response, and in post-conflict reconstruction.¹⁹ The resolution also affirms the importance of women's equal participation and full involvement in peace and security processes, particularly as they are most affected in times of crisis. Additionally, older adolescent girls' and young women's participation in peace processes is guaranteed under resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace, and Security.²⁰ However, in the nearly 20 years since Resolution 1325 was adopted, little progress has been made in facilitating and supporting gender-sensitive engagement.²¹ Despite the proven results and importance of including girls' and women's voices in conflict resolution, women still remain a small minority of the United Nations military peacekeepers and parliamentarians in conflict-afflicted countries.²² Additionally, data from the major peace processes between 1992 and 2018 showed that women accounted for only 3% of mediators, 13% of negotiators, and 4% of signatories to peace agreements.²³

Multiple barriers have persistently prevented women from taking their place within the political arena. For women who belong to a marginalized and/or minority group, additional challenges, such as legal, political, and cultural constraints, prevent them from full and equal participation due to interconnected systems of power. Meaningful political participation of girls and women needs to address the overlapping dynamics of inequality and power and should be representative of all girls and women, including those from indigenous communities, those with disabilities, those in LGBTQIA+ groups, girls and women living in urban slums, girls and women living in fragile settings, refugees, and sex workers.²⁴

SECTION 2: SOLUTIONS AND INTERVENTIONS

The systemic barriers to meaningful political inclusion that girls and women face must be addressed on three levels: individual, institutional, and sociocultural.^{25, 26, 27} While change may not happen simultaneously on each level, all three must be addressed in order to create an enabling environment for girls and women to reach equal and sustainable political participation. Breaking down the barriers and creating opportunities at each level calls for a collaborative effort among states, civil society, and the international community.^{28, 29} Each of these stakeholders, from lawmakers to activists to religious and traditional leaders to family members, can play a different role in addressing different challenges.³⁰ Additionally, instituting mechanisms that report on gender-equality commitments and ensure accountability for increasing women's political participation are essential for tracking progress and collecting data at the local and state levels. The path forward needs to ensure and support girls' and women's right to be involved in decision-making and political processes. This should be rooted in the following solutions:

- Introduce gender quotas as transitional mechanisms where representation is not equal.
- Promote girls' and women's rights and participation in conflict prevention, mitigation of humanitarian crises, and peacebuilding processes.
- Promote access to decision-making spaces and political processes for all women, including the most marginalized.
- Create training and leadership pathways for girls and women that are gender sensitive.
- Foster inclusivity in leadership, civic engagement, and decision-making in public and private spheres.
- Ensure political environments are free from gender-based discrimination and violence.
- Ensure recognition of women in decision-making capacities as a human right.

Introduce Gender Quotas as Transitional Mechanisms Where Representation Is Not Equal

Evidence suggests that when women are elected to political positions, they make a difference for girls and women and strongly impact legislation.³¹ In many cases, women are more likely to pursue inclusive policies and respond to constituent concerns;^{32, 33} tend to push for positive change around health, community wellbeing, poverty reduction, and family welfare; and are more likely to strive to reach a consensus on policies.^{34, 35} Studies show that under certain conditions, women in parliament are more likely to sponsor legislation, reach across political lines, and secure funding for their constituents.^{36, 37, 38} Additionally, evidence from more than 125 countries suggests that the presence of women in government is associated with lower levels of corruption.³⁹

When well-designed and properly implemented, quotas can be effective, temporary measures to increase women's access to decision-making positions while transitioning to the point where a gender balance in political leadership can be achieved and sustained.⁴⁰ Quotas can be adapted to fit a variety of political systems, structures, and contexts, and while they may not work in every situation, they can be particularly crucial within electoral systems that are not conducive to equal participation.⁴¹ Quotas often address an institutional barrier—whether within national political parties or the private sector—and, ideally, they demand action from institutional actors and power-holders rather than placing the onus on individual women to succeed.⁴² As of February 2019, more than half of the 50 single or lower houses that were comprised of 30% or more women had some form of a quota system in place—either legislative candidate quotas or reserved seats.⁴³ Additionally, a 2018 report on women in parliament showed that 27.7% of women were elected in single and lower chambers and 36.1% in upper chambers in countries where quotas were used, compared to 18.6% and 16.2% of seats, respectively, in countries where no form of gender quotas were used.⁴⁴



- **16.10** Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements
- **16.b** Promote and enforce non-discriminatory laws and policies for sustainable development





Case Study: Quota Law Leads to Gender Parity in Tunisia's Municipal Councils

During the Arab Spring, women's movements were visibly at the forefront. In Tunisia, they have pushed for the country to adopt constitutional protections for women's equal rights. In April 2017, Tunisia's parliament passed a bill with an overwhelming majority to increase women's representation in local elections, with 127 members of parliament voting in favor, three against, and four abstaining. The new legislation requires parties and political blocs to put forward an equal number of women and men as heads of party lists. This electoral legislation supports "horizontal and vertical" parity, creating more opportunities for women to be elected as representatives.⁴⁵ Horizontal parity requires that municipal election lists across Tunisia have equal men and women, while vertical parity requires men and women to alternate in each list. Additionally, the law calls for gender equality in municipal and regional councils, which ensures that the quota law affects women at a sub-national level. The result of the quota law is that women accounted for 47% of those elected in the May 2018 municipal elections across the country, a tangible shift toward gender parity and democracy.⁴⁶

Promote Girls' and Women's Rights and Participation in Conflict Prevention, Mitigation of Humanitarian Crises, and Peacebuilding Processes

In 2000, the UN Security Council passed resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, which calls for: 1) women's participation in peace processes; 2) the protection of girls' and women's rights; 3) gender training for peacekeeping operations; and 4) gender mainstreaming in UN activities around conflict, peace, and security.^{47,48}

Mainstreaming gender in conflict prevention and resolution can improve outcomes before, during, and after conflict. Women's participation in democratic transitions in particular can improve the likelihood of peace negotiations arriving at settlements and parties reaching sustainable agreements. Research shows that women's participation in resolution processes decreases the chances of peace agreements failing by 64% and increases the chances of peace agreements lasting for 15 years by 35%.⁴⁹ Although there is broad recognition that gender-specific peacebuilding strategies can aid in effective and holistic reconstruction, national policies and programs often neglect to invite women to negotiating tables or provide a platform for girls and women to voice their specific needs during reconstruction periods.⁵⁰ As of January 2019, only 19% of parliamentarians in conflict and post-conflict countries were women, compared to 24.3% globally.⁵¹ Additionally, the global average of women ministers is 20.7%, compared to 18.3% in conflict and post-conflict countries.⁵²

Several countries have taken steps to promote women's active and equal participation in peace processes and conflict resolution, including the United States, which passed the Women, Peace and Security Act in 2017⁵³ and a subsequent strategy in 2019,⁵⁴ as well as Canada, which appointed the first Ambassador for Women, Peace and Security in 2019 to implement Canada's National Action Plan on women, peace and security.⁵⁵ Additionally, in July 2019 the Development Assistance Committee within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) adopted its Recommendation on Ending Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance as an effort to prevent further violence against girls and women in prevention and response efforts conducted by donor countries.⁵⁶

Gender equality is a key predictor of human security and peace. Government leaders need to recognize that state security goes beyond armed conflict and includes everyday human security, particularly of marginalized and vulnerable groups.⁵⁷ Beyond the formal process of peace accords, transitions provide a pivotal moment for advancing gender equality in a country. They offer an opportunity to transform fundamental barriers to gender equality, allowing institutions, processes, and norms to be reshaped into more inclusive systems. This is a transformation that, in turn, can build the democratic backbone of sustainable peace, fostering more resilient democracies and helping prevent future conflict. Yet for these transitions to be transformative, women must not only be present at formal processes, but must also have the capacity to engage in the creation of new governing structures.⁵⁸

Case Study: Iraqi Women Activists Create a Strategy for Peace⁵⁹

A group of 40 Iraqi women peace activists came together in 2018 to devise a strategy for peacebuilding and promoting gender-sensitive policy priorities in Iraq. The women produced a policy document, "A Strategy for Peace in Iraq: A Gender-Sensitive National Reconciliation Platform," which outlines 38 policy recommendations to serve as a roadmap for peace, and acts as a discussion document for others to grapple with the future direction for peace in Iraq. In building this document, the activists focused on six issues that would need to be resolved to enable a new reality in Iraq: women's empowerment, safety and security, trust and confidence, victims and survivors, education and youth, and governance and redistribution of resources. The women peace activists will use this strategy as the foundation of their efforts to promote the implementation of the recommendations and to advocate for women's active and equal participation in the peace process in Iraq.

Case Study: Syrian Women's Political Movement⁶⁰

In 2017, a group of Syrian women politicians and activists formed the Syrian Women Political Movement (SWPM) to ensure women and grassroots activists are included in political and peace negotiations for the future of Syria. Supported by the Women's International League for Peace & Freedom (WILPF), SWPM hopes to bring the voices and experiences of Syrian women to the political process, with the ultimate goal of increasing women's participation to at least 30% at all levels in the peace-building process in Syria. The SWPM's membership comes from both inside Syria and throughout the diaspora, and it includes women and men. It has coordinated the efforts of Syrian women from diverse backgrounds. Through consultations and meetings, they have produced concrete recommendations and released more than three policy papers on what needs to be done to achieve sustainable solutions to the conflict.

Relevant International Norms, Standards, and Agreements:

- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979)
- United Nations Economic and Social Council Resolution (1990/15)
- Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995)
- 2000 United Nations Security Council Resolution on Women, Peace, and Security (S/RES/1325)
- 2003 United Nations General Assembly Resolution on Women's Political Participation (A/RES/58/142)
- 2011 United Nations General Assembly resolution on women's political participation (A/RES/66/130)
- 2015 United Nations Security Council Resolution on Youth, Peace, and Security (S/RES/2250)
- Sustainable Development Goals (2015–2030)
- Report of the High-Level Working Group on the Health and Human Rights of Women, Children and Adolescents (2017)



Promote Access to Decision-Making Spaces and Political Processes for All Women, Including the Most Marginalized

Women's rights groups and networks are powerful levers of political change. They provide girls and women with platforms so they can elevate their voices and accessible avenues for political representation and participation. Despite their importance in galvanizing political action, these groups operate in an increasingly shrinking civil society space, where funding and political will for women's movements are scarce.⁶¹ Access to stable, flexible, long-term funding would allow women's groups to build on their existing work, while effectively responding and adjusting to emerging trends and needs. With access to stable resources and support, groups can build greater capacity, be innovative in their work, and galvanize greater impact.⁶² Moreover, for maximum impact, individual women's voices, women's organizations, and local women's groups need to be included as partners and stakeholders at every stage of the policymaking and decision-making processes. Increased investment in women's movements and groups will allow for the further creation and strengthening of safe spaces through which girls and women can cultivate and exercise their collective agency, leadership, and decision-making skills.

Women from marginalized groups, such as indigenous women, women from minority ethnic groups, and women with disabilities, often face additional barriers to participation via intersectional discrimination.^{63, 64} Positions of political power must be accessible to all women and not restricted based on age, educational background, socio-economic status, geographical origin, indigenous status, sexual orientation, gender identity, or any other demographic characteristic. Diverse female leadership is essential to shaping systems and policies that are representative and inclusive of all.⁶⁵ Parliamentary representation of women from marginalized communities and populations can also benefit society by creating space for new insights regarding local and national issues. Ensuring gender balance at all levels of the decision-making process, including providing support and representation to women from marginalized populations, is necessary for policy reforms that are inclusive and cognizant of all populations, particularly those most at risk.

For example, increased engagement of indigenous women is integral to gender-responsive climate action and disaster-risk reduction processes because indigenous groups have a close relationship and dependence on the environment and its resources.⁶⁶ Yet, parliamentary participation among indigenous populations remains low globally. Research conducted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union in 2014 shows that indigenous people are proportionally underrepresented in 12 parliaments and absent from nine out of the 33 parliaments with data available as of 2014.⁶⁷ There is also a lack of data available on indigenous populations' roles in decision-making bodies. Fewer than half of the parliaments surveyed had data available on indigenous representation, possibly due to the low number of countries that legally recognize indigenous peoples.⁶⁸

Case Study: Training Women With Disabilities to Change Kenya's Public Policy⁶⁹

Women with disabilities face many obstacles and discrimination as a result of their intersecting identities. One of these barriers is a lack of access to decision-making processes and political empowerment. Women Challenged to Challenge, an organization dedicated to advocating for the rights of women and girls with disabilities, along with the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), implemented an initiative called, The Power to Persuade: Empowering Women with Disabilities to Influence Public Life. Forty female disability rights activists gathered in Nairobi in 2017 to create a platform on policy priorities. The platform was presented to Kenyan government officials and has subsequently become an advocacy tool for disabled women to fight for their rights and recognition in the public sphere.

Create Training and Leadership Pathways for Girls and Women That Are Gender Sensitive

Encouraging continuous participation and civic education of girls and women in schools, universities, and civil society spaces can be important to their future political participation.⁷⁰ Some youth development experts note that another integral element of future political participation entails institutionalizing young people's civic education and participation in settings they experience on a regular basis.⁷¹ Civic education taught to girls in school from a young age helps them understand the workings of democracy and their country's political system. It also equips them with necessary knowledge and skills to become active citizens and engage with the political issues of their time. Trainings targeted to girls that help them acquire the foundational skills for political participation, such as problem-solving, assertive communication, and negotiation capabilities, along with opportunities to engage in decision-making processes at the family and school levels, are all critical pathways to political empowerment.⁷²

Youth-led civil society and volunteering organizations can also be important avenues for participation and learning. Civil society groups allow young people to learn about decision-making processes and exercise their agency in issues affecting their own community. These groups also introduce young people to networks of likeminded peers, setting the foundation for further learning and engagement with civic and political life.⁷³ Similarly, educational sports programming, especially for girls, can be a confidence-building mechanism that cultivates their leadership, agency, and resilience.⁷⁴

Offering gender-sensitive political leadership and skills-based training for women also provides them with the foundation they need to actively participate in politics. Many groups and organizations around the world have carried out programs focused on overcoming major political barriers for female candidates, legislators, and influencers.⁷⁵ These barriers include a lack of financial resources and educational opportunities, unaccommodating governments, and geographic restrictions. A 2019 study on parliamentary committees and the health sector in Africa by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy found that once in office, women parliamentarians are still sidelined by being appointed to less prestigious and influential parliamentary committees.⁷⁶ By fostering opportunities in political engagement training, women may increasingly take action at local, national, and international levels to yield lasting results.

Case Study: Train, Run, Win, and Lead

Ahead of the 2015 election in Burkina Faso, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) supported local partners, including the Council of Burkinabe Women, in their work to increase the number of women candidates nominated by their parties and the number of women elected to public office. The Council of Burkinabe Women and NDI trained a total of 379 prospective female candidates, of which 110 were nominated and 13 were ultimately elected after being placed on the party's candidate lists.⁷⁷ Ahead of the municipal election in 2016, NDI trained a total of 674 women running for election to the local council on issues such as campaign management, public speaking, communications, and media relations.⁷⁸ These trainings built on previous NDI work, in which it led a drive to issue birth certificates to more than 16,000 Burkinabe, making them eligible to vote.⁷⁹

Case Study: What Young Women Want

Plan International conducted a survey taken by nearly 10,000 girls and young women between the ages of 15 and 25 across 19 different countries. The survey asked the girls and young women about their leadership aspirations in terms of career, community, and family. While 76% of the girls and young women surveyed said they aspired to be a leader, only 60% felt confident in their ability to lead, and 94% thought that being a leader would result in being treated unfairly compared to their male counterparts.⁸⁰ These findings demonstrate that while girls and young women have aspirations



to lead, they also have extremely negative perceptions of what being a female leader involves.⁸¹ Findings and recommendations from the report call for cultivating leadership aspirations at home first; setting up girls to succeed through access to schools and wider educational opportunities, as well as supporting and encouraging girls' and young women's networks and youth-led civic action; and addressing sexism, discrimination, and gender bias within the community, educational systems, and political spaces.⁸²

Foster Inclusivity in Leadership, Civic Engagement, and Decision-Making in Public and Private Spheres

Addressing the needs of girls and women is challenging without the representation of their interests in top decision-making positions. Evidence shows that an increase in the participation of women in politics affects how their needs are prioritized in policymaking. For example, in some Scandinavian countries, where women are well represented in positions of power, public budgets and policies more appropriately reflect the interests of girls and women.⁸³ This same principle holds true for institutions of global governance, where there is a distinct gender imbalance. One such example where girls and women are increasingly asserting their rights is around climate justice.

When it comes to tackling the effects of climate change and natural disasters, girls and women are integral to progress and must be included in decision-making and mitigation leadership. Young female activists from around the world have been leaders in the movement to combat climate change—organizing protests, rallies, strikes, sit-ins, and lawsuits to fight for political and social change.⁸⁴ Disaster Risk Reduction—the practice of systematic analysis and mitigation of the causes of disasters, including reducing exposure to hazards, lessening the vulnerability of people and property, and improving preparedness and early warning for adverse events—is truly effective when girls and women are involved.^{85, 86}

Women's participation in local government is also essential to inform policy and deliver change. Women's engagement in leadership positions at the grassroots level has been shown to have positive correlations to a higher quality of education, health, and infrastructure projects, as well as a boost to women's empowerment and standards of living.⁸⁷ Yet empowerment starts in the home and the community. For children, the father's role matters, particularly in terms of unpaid care work⁸⁸ and children's understanding of gender equality.⁸⁹ Studies have also indicated that community and sports programs can foster problem-solving, team-building, communication, and leadership skills in girls that can be applied throughout their lives.⁹⁰

Another way to boost women's decision-making power is to propel more women into leadership positions in the economy. Gender equality in employment gives women more decision-making power and enhances family wellbeing. Women will typically invest more of their income in the health, nutrition and education of their children than men.⁹¹

In the private sector, gaps in leadership styles between men and women are common, making it harder for women to attain management positions. A 2018 study conducted by McKinsey, "Women in the Workplace," observed that women believe they are disadvantaged by workplace bias.⁹² When compared to men, women are close to three times more likely to report having missed out on opportunities, such as a promotion or a raise, specifically because of their gender.⁹³ Evidence shows that corporations with more women in leadership and decision-making positions show better financial performance than those with low female representation.⁹⁴ Therefore, it is critical to ensure that women are equally represented in leadership positions in a variety of businesses, workplaces, trade unions, and other social movements, and that women's rights issues are prioritized in collective bargaining processes. Quotas also serve as valuable transitional tools to increase women's representation in male-dominated work and leadership environments.⁹⁵

Case Study: Women in India Influence Local Politics

Prior to the 73rd Amendment Act in 1992, women in India were often restricted from elected positions.⁹⁶ The act changed that by reserving at least one-third of the seats of all Panchayat Councils and one-third of all Pradhan (head of the Panchayat) for women.⁹⁷ As a result, women's representation within Panchayat Councils reached nearly 50% by 2009.⁹⁸ Since its inception, women Panchayat Raj (village committee) leaders have become increasingly involved in their communities, ensuring that issues such as quality healthcare and education, as well as the financial considerations necessary to realize access to these services, are discussed at meetings.⁹⁹ As a result of women's increased participation within the Panchayat Councils, there was a 62% increase of potable water projects in these communities initiated by a woman leader, as compared to communities with male leaders.¹⁰⁰ There is also evidence that having more women in office changes attitudes towards women's role in society. One study on women in local politics in India found that having female politicians helps reduce stereotypes and gender roles in public and private life.¹⁰¹ The study also found that villages with reserved quotas for women further closed gender gap aspirations of girls by 32% and by 25% among their parents.¹⁰²

Ensure Political Environments Are Free From Gender-Based Discrimination and Violence

Governments need to demonstrate gender equality in their leadership and decision-making bodies by not only increasing female representation in ministerial and elected positions, but also by fostering gender-equitable work cultures in state institutions. Adopting gender-responsive policies and practices in governing institutions can ensure that female leaders are able to function and perform their services in an open and inclusive work environment. These policies and practices could include gender-equitable parental leave, childcare services, and fixed hours for voting debate and negotiations in decision-making bodies such as national and regional parliaments.¹⁰³

Violence against girls and women in politics and those in decision-making positions is a global issue and has serious repercussions for inclusive democratic societies.¹⁰⁴ Violence cuts across all political sectors, including civil society, political parties, and electoral processes, and affects politically active girls and women regardless of their roles.¹⁰⁵ According to FRIDA the Young Feminist Fund, more than 50% of its young female activist members regularly feel unsafe or threatened because of the work they do in advancing gender equality.¹⁰⁶ In the online context, gender-based violence and harassment play a significant role in erecting additional barriers to girls' and women's leadership. At a time when online spaces animate multiple facets of daily life, online violence can discourage girls and women from utilizing social media platforms for civic and political engagement. Research indicates that online violence against young women in politics is prevalent in countries around the world and has a "chilling effect" on women's social media engagement, causing them to decrease, pause, or completely stop their online activity.¹⁰⁷

While acts of gender-based political violence are usually directed at individual women, they also carry an impact beyond their intended specific target. They frighten other women who are already politically active, deter women who might consider engaging in politics, and communicate to society that women should not participate in public life in any capacity.^{108, 109} Those who are in positions of influence or leading human rights advocacy are frequently targeted, with a view to silencing their voices and the voices of others.



The increased political participation of girls and women necessitates a safe and open physical, social, and online environment, where all can participate and lead without fear of violence or harassment. This was encapsulated in 2019 by members of the International Labour Organization, who adopted the Convention Concerning the Elimination of Violence and Harassment in the World of Work and a related recommendation, which was the first internationally agreed-upon standard and guidance for addressing violence and harassment in the world of work.¹¹⁰ Building an enabling environment for women's free and equal participation can be done by integrating protection from gender-based violence within the legal framework around electoral cycles. Improving girls' and women's access to justice and legal aid can also ensure accountability of assailants and discourage gender-based violence in politics.¹¹¹ Strengthening national anti-violence and online harassment policies can protect privacy and the flow of personal data, ensuring safer digital spaces for all. Additionally, engaging boys and men in promoting and supporting girls and women as leaders and decision-makers is also essential for building open political spaces.¹¹²

Case Study: Analyzing Violence Against Women in Political Parties¹¹³

Political parties provide an entryway for women's political participation, leadership, and engagement. Yet traditional gender norms have historically made it difficult to provide women with equal opportunities to access leadership positions and party platforms. Political parties are protected public spaces that allow and enable violence against women to take place. In 2018, the National Democratic Institute published findings from surveys of men and women party members in Cote d'Ivoire, Honduras, Tanzania, and Tunisia. These surveys found that a majority of men and women are aware that violence occurs in their political parties; a majority of men and women believe that women are more likely to experience violence in political parties; women actually do experience high rates of violence within their parties; and there is a lack of financial resources and party support for women overall.

Ensure Recognition of Women in Decision-Making Capacities as a Human Right

Advancing the rights of women to serve in positions of leadership and actively participate in decision-making processes can be achieved in part through their enhanced visibility. By publicly recognizing their contributions and protecting their rights by implementing international agreements such as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the capacities of girls and women are more broadly accepted, thus dispelling negative gender stereotypes.^{114, 115} Representation matters and is of paramount importance to inspire the next generation of female leaders. Towards this end, women parliamentarians should share their experiences publicly to normalize the idea of having women in positions of power and mentor girls and young women to help them access decision-making spaces and positions of power.

The media plays a crucial role in highlighting the positive contributions of women in politics and avoid perpetuating negative gender-based stereotypes. Female politicians can also gain visibility through support from civil society and other female leaders.^{116, 117} Working with others, including boys and men, contributes to shifting societal perceptions around political gender roles or capabilities.

Case Study: Parity Within Ethiopian Politics Changing at the National Level

In April of 2018, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed assumed office as the new reformist leader, chairing both the People's Revolutionary Democratic Front and the Oromo Democratic Party.¹¹⁸ In his acceptance speech, he spoke directly to Ethiopian women, recognizing their contribution to the progress of their country, and promised to speed up efforts to improve women's all-around participation.¹¹⁹ Prime Minister Abiy has already delivered on this promise to promote gender parity within his government, including appointing a gender-balanced cabinet comprised of 20 members.¹²⁰ He has also promoted women to strategic positions in the areas of defense and security, peace, trade, labor, culture, science, and revenue.¹²¹ Prime Minister Abiy's commitment to push for gender parity resulted in the Ethiopian Parliament's approval of Sahle-Work Zewde to be the first female president of Ethiopia.¹²²

SECTION 3: THE BENEFITS OF INVESTMENT

Investing in women's right to political participation is a necessary step to achieving global gender equality and democratic governance.¹²³ Increasing women's participation in politics leads to positive impacts for countries' development and growth. A study revealed that an increased number of women in parliament leads to greater investments in education.¹²⁴ More female lawmakers are associated with improved government accountability, more passed legislation, and increased compromise between political factions.¹²⁵ Research also shows that women's participation in resolution processes decreases the chances of peace agreements failing by 64% and increases the chances of peace agreements lasting for 15 years by 35%.¹²⁶

Furthermore, research suggests that gender balance in the political sphere promotes gender balance in the workforce. For example, one study showed that companies with strong female leadership, meaning three or more women on the board or female board representation higher than the country average, boast an annual return on equity of 10.1%, compared to 7.4% for companies without strong female leadership.¹²⁷ This represents tremendous economic potential, as evidence shows that gender equality in the workforce could lead to doubling women's contributions to global GDP growth by 2025.¹²⁸ Girls' and women's political participation stretches beyond elected office. Women's involvement and empowerment in all aspects of public life, from activism in civil society to leadership in political parties and on corporate boards, brings gains in sustainable, peaceful democracy, and more representative, resilient systems.¹²⁹ Evidence also shows that countries with higher engagement of women in public life experience lower levels of inequality.¹³⁰

SECTION 4: CALLS TO ACTION

Women's equal participation in politics is a crucial step toward achieving gender equality, the Sustainable Development Goals, and progress for all. It is not only empowering for the girls and women engaged, but benefits their communities, countries, and the world as a whole. Closing the gender gap by upholding girl's and women's right to political participation requires cross-cutting approaches to national and local issues and specific actions from key institutions.

In order to power progress for all, many different constituents must work together—governments, civil society, academia, media, local communities, the United Nations, and the private sector—to take the following actions for girls and women:

- Eliminate structural and legal obstacles that hinder all girls' and women's participation in politics and decision-making, and hold those obstructing them accountable. (Most relevant for: governments and the private sector)
- Offer training programs for young people, women, and men on political systems, girls' and women's right to participation and roles in decision-making, and unconscious bias and inclusion. (Most relevant for: civil society and governments)

- Introduce transitional quota systems and inclusive, gender-sensitive leadership pathways to help bring all girls and women into political spheres. (Most relevant for: governments, the private sector, and NGOs)
- Secure equal visibility of female politicians and decision-makers and promote a more inclusive representation of leadership. (Most relevant for: the media)
- Promote a safe and enabling political environment in which all girls and women may participate in public life at all levels without fear of physical, emotional, or online violence and harassment. (Most relevant for: governments, civil society, media, the United Nations, and the private sector)
- Promote women in leadership and decision-making roles at all levels, including at peace negotiation tables and in humanitarian emergencies. (Most relevant for: governments, civil society, the United Nations, development and humanitarian international actors, and the private sector)
- Support women's leadership in the workplace through greater inclusion in executive positions and on corporate boards. (Most relevant for: governments and the private sector)
- Fund grassroots organizations that build the capacity of girls and women to participate both individually and collectively in social, economic, political, and public life. (Most relevant for: governments and the private sector)
- Implement international agreements, guidelines, and protocols that seek to reduce harassment and violence that prevent women from ascending to leadership positions, such as the International Labour Convention to Eliminate Violence and Harassment in the World of Work and the OECD Recommendation on Ending Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance. (Most relevant for: governments and the private sector)
- Implement policies and accountability mechanisms that track and report on government performance with respect to gender equality commitments. (Most relevant for: governments and the private sector)
- Incorporate men in training focused on supporting and promoting girls and women as leaders and decision-makers. (Most relevant for: governments, civil society, and the United Nations)

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Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this technical paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of all partnering organizations.

These briefs are intended to be used by policymakers, decision-makers, advocates, and activists to advance issues affecting girls and women in global development. These materials are designed to be open-sourced and available for your use.

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