WOMEN DELIVER

BALANCING THE POWER EQUATION
WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN POLITICS, BUSINESSES, AND COMMUNITIES

SUMMARY

Women are powerful agents of change, and the far-reaching benefits of diversity and gender parity in leadership and decision-making are increasingly recognized in all spheres of society. Still, women continue to be vastly underrepresented in decision-making in politics, businesses, and communities. This policy brief explores the benefits, challenges, and opportunities to accelerate women's leadership. It outlines recommendations to drive progress in women's leadership and decision-making by 2030.

THE POWER OF WOMEN LEADERS

Women as leaders and decision-makers at all levels are critical to advancing gender justice and gender equality—and to furthering economic, social, and political progress for all. When women are meaningfully represented and engaged in leadership bodies – such as legislatures, courts, executive boards, and community councils – laws, rulings, and decisions are more likely to be inclusive, representative, and take diverse views into account.[1] Women's leadership within households, including decision-making over land and household income, improves access to education and healthcare for their families.[2] Countries with a greater proportion of women as top decision-makers in legislatures have lower levels of income inequality.[1] Peace agreements are 35% more likely to last at least 15 years if women leaders are engaged in their creation and execution.[3] When women hold more executive leadership positions, their companies are more profitable: companies in the top quartile for gender diversity on executive teams are 21% more likely to outperform the national average.[4]

The case for balancing the power equation in leadership has never been more clear: elevating women in decision-making benefits politics, businesses, and communities. Women's leadership is also intrinsically linked to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals—including and beyond *Sustainable Development Goal 5 "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls."*

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WILL ALL THE WOMEN LEADERS PLEASE STAND UP: CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

Despite the growing evidence of the benefits of women's leadership, women are underrepresented in decision-making positions across all sectors (see Box 1, p.2). Cultural, structural, and educational barriers continue to challenge women's participation and inclusion, limiting their ability to ascend to leadership positions.

While many and varied challenges remain, progress can be made by addressing these systemic issues:

Established gender norms perpetuate unequal power relations between men and women that can limit

women's leadership. Policies and practices that reflect these norms – such as uneven distribution of unpaid work, unequal pay, discriminatory tax provisions, unaffordable child care, and unbalanced parental leave – penalize women by hindering their full and equal participation in the workforce and causing women to forgo opportunities for professional advancement.[15, 16] **Stereotypes** that diminish the value of women and perpetuate **sex discrimination** remain significant challenges. Media coverage that portrays girls and women in traditional gender roles, such as focusing on

their marital status or appearance, diminishes women's perceived abilities and trivializes their chances of advancing to and succeeding in leadership positions.[15]

Gender-based violence is also one of the main barriers to women's leadership. Women face various forms of threats, disparagement, and sexual harassment that discourage engagement and close pathways to leadership. In still too many cases, female candidates and politicians are arrested, tortured, and otherwise threatened – online and offline – for defying established patriarchal orders to ascend in the political hierarchy.[17] **Sexual harassment** of women in corporate settings also perpetuates power imbalances between men and women.[15]

Broader **exclusionary structures, practices, and policies** – such as child marriage, unequal inheritance laws, and restricted access to family planning services – preclude girls and women from accessing education, trainings, and resources that provide essential, marketable skills to become leaders.[18, 19] **Lack of effective networks and mentors** for women also hinder women's ability to gain more senior roles.[15] Additionally, **continued limited access to financial and natural resources**, time poverty, and low prevalence of group membership constrain women's upward mobility in leadership and decision-making.[20]

Lack of gender-sensitive budgeting limits targeted government spending toward services that help girls and women reach their fullest potential, and hampers accountability efforts.[21] **Diminishing funding** for women's civil society organizations restricts women's ability to effectively lead community advocacy efforts, reduces their visibility, and contributes to the 'shrinking civic space' – where advocacy efforts are stunted through oppressive legislation and intimidation.[22, 23] **Lack of sex-disaggregated data** on women's inclusion, participation, and leadership, such as in local governments, also limits visibility and impedes efforts to monitor progress toward gender equality.[24]

BOX 1 STATUS OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP AND DECISION-MAKING POSITIONS

Politics:

- Women held only 23.8% of all parliamentary positions in 2017.[5]
- Only three countries had achieved gender parity in their single or lower house parliaments in 2017: Rwanda, Cuba, and Bolivia.[6]
- Globally, 18.3% of ministers were women in 2017.[7]
- In 2017, approximately 11% of countries had a female head of state or head of government.[7]

Business:

- In 2017, only 15% of all board seats were filled by women globally.[8]
- Globally, only 4.5% of board chairs and 4% of CEOs were women in 2017.[8]
- The number of women CEOs of the *Fortune 500 Companies* dropped 25% between 2017 and 2018.[9, 10]
- In 2017, almost 30% of all Information Technology companies had all-male boards.[11]

Community:

- In 2017, women comprised close to 60% of the global non-profit workforce, yet less than 50% of leadership positions.[12]
- Men in the European Union held the majority of decision-making positions in research funding, media, and sports institutions in 2016.[13]
- As of 2017, women still held less than 20% of all agricultural land.[14]
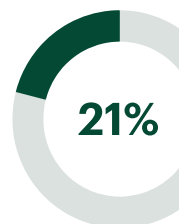
21%

When women hold more executive leadership positions, their companies are more profitable. Companies in the top quartile for **GENDER DIVERSITY ON EXECUTIVE TEAMS** are **21% more likely to outperform the national average.**

For **marginalized groups**, such as indigenous girls and women or LGBTQIA+ communities, **these challenges are compounded**, and women face disproportionate disadvantages in attaining leadership and decision-making positions because of the ways in which interconnected systems of power create additional barriers for those who are most marginalized.

PATHWAYS TO POWER:
PROGRESS AND SOLUTIONS

Over the past several decades, there have been notable gains in women's leadership, with more women in decision-making roles in politics, businesses, and communities than ever before (see Box 2).

While progress remains slow, limited, and uneven, the following policies, strategies, and initiatives have shown success in balancing power between men and women in leadership.[i]

Implementing Gender-Sensitive Policies:

Instituting Transitional Gender Quotas. Reserving seats for women, setting a minimum share of women on political candidate lists or corporate boards, or writing measures into statutes of political parties have increased female leadership. Globally, it is estimated that women won more than 30% of political seats across 21 countries with transitional quotas compared to 15.4% of seats in 19 countries without transitional quotas on 2017.[5] The strategic use of transitional quotas in businesses also led to an increase in women on corporate boards in Belgium, France, Italy, Germany, and the Netherlands.[33, 34]

Creating Women-Friendly Workplaces. Companies play an important role as actors, enablers, and influencers to drive progress in gender equality.[35] Policies that address underlying gender inequalities in the distribution of unpaid work and gender stereotypes in the workplace allow women to ascend to leadership positions. A study of 22,000 companies across 91 countries found a strong correlation between offering paternity leave and an increased share of board seats held by women.[36] Companies that provide employer-supported childcare have improved gender diversity and retention of women employees.[37] Changes in workplace policies not only benefit women in the organizations where they are enacted, but can influence other companies, policymakers, and the general public to promote and invest in gender equality.[35]

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i While progress has been made globally, global figures mask demographic, regional, national, and industry-based disparities.

Promoting Women's Reproductive Rights. Ensuring that women have the right to make decisions about their own bodies contributes to an enabling environment for women to thrive. When women cannot exercise their full reproductive rights, they may forgo advancement opportunities and leadership positions since there is a high degree of overlap between childbearing and career-building years.[38] Making family planning services and comprehensive sexuality education available for girls and women throughout the life course is necessary to increase the number of women in leadership and decision-making positions.

Addressing Harmful Gender Norms:

Combating Sexual Violence in Politics and Businesses. Feminist movements like #MeToo, #BalancetonPorc, #NiUnaMenos, and many others, are exposing the magnitude of sexual harassment, misogyny, and gender-based violence in communities, corporations, academic institutions, governments, and the media. The movements have ignited debates within parliaments on how to prevent and combat gender-based violence, leading to the establishment of advisory boards specialized on harassment and initiatives within political parties to build environments in which women can thrive and exercise their human rights.[5]

Changing the Narrative. Reshaping the global narrative around girls and women – from victims and vulnerable people to drivers of progress – improves girls' and women's chances of becoming leaders. Women who identify and are portrayed as agents of change are powerful role-models who can influence their peers, communities, and younger generations. The media can play a crucial role in changing the narrative. The Unstereotype Alliance, launched in 2017, is an industry-led initiative convened by UN Women to use the power of advertising to address harmful masculinities and gender inequality through better marketing practices.[39] Members – who include leading consumer brands and *Fortune 500 companies* – commit to portray all people as empowered actors, directly addressing unconscious bias in advertisements, and challenge each other to deliver only the best, unstereotyped marketing content.[39]

Committing to Gender Parity:

Walking the Talk. Companies that publicly commit to improve gender diversity in senior positions are more likely to increase the share of women leaders within their businesses and to create accountability mechanisms to meet these goals. Many top-performing companies who commit to gender diversity in the workplace have dedicated programs to improve hiring and promotion rates of women.[40] As of 2018, more than 1,950 businesses have signed on to the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs), which call for the implementation of gender-sensitive practices that appoint women to managerial, executive, and board positions.[41]

Following the (Woman) Leader. When women are in leadership positions, they tend to encourage more women to fill leadership roles, and more women are hired at all levels.[12] On average, companies with female CEOs have more women occupying board seats than companies with male CEOs, 29% and 15% respectively.[9] In politics, countries with women in leadership positions have become "role-models," influencing politics between parties and in neighboring countries.[5]

Investing in Women:

Providing Women with Skills-Based Trainings & Mentorships. Programs that prioritize and support women's leadership through educational and skills-building programs for professional development help ensure that women can fully engage in the workplace and excel in leadership positions. This includes investment in and support for training, mentorships, peer networks, and other systems. A qualitative study of women leaders in academia found that women in senior positions benefited from mentoring relationships throughout their careers, supporting the notion that mentorships for women can improve the number of women in decision-making positions.[42]

Funding Women's Organizations. Women's rights organizations, movements, and participation in policy dialogues are important catalysts of social progress
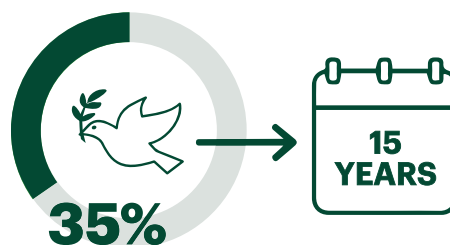
Peace agreements are 35% more likely to last at least 15 years if **WOMEN LEADERS** are engaged in their creation and execution.

and play a crucial role in advocating for changes in laws, attitudes, behaviors, norms, and practices. A study of 70 countries found strong autonomous women's movements to be the most important factor influencing and achieving a broad range of government responses to violence against women, thereby addressing a main barrier to women's ability to fully participate in leadership and decision-making opportunities.[43]

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Progress in women's leadership will not happen automatically. Governments, the private sector, and civil society should commit to the following actions to create an environment that supports and enables women's leadership:

Commit to gender parity in leadership. Publicly commit to achieving gender balance in executive and decision-making positions. Reflect commitments in activities, policies, and budgets, as well as supportive governance structures to achieve gender equality goals. Tie compensation and promotion opportunities for executives to progress in gender-balance commitments.

Implement laws and regulations that guarantee a safe and open environment for women's participation and leadership. Enact laws and regulations to accelerate progress, including implementing legal protections against gender-based violence and sexual harassment, removing tax provisions that discriminate against women, and guaranteeing accessible justice systems.

Establish policies and practices that encourage women's leadership and promote gender parity. Adopt policies and practices that help shift the gender power balance, including closing the gender pay gap, providing affordable child care and paid parental leave, mandating gender-sensitive budgeting, auditing, and procurement, and collecting and analyzing gender-disaggregated statistics.

Invest in systems and programs that promote and cultivate diverse leadership. Develop and sustain trainings, mentorships, and networks that model and foster strong female leaders. Provide ongoing systems to further women's personal and professional development.

Uphold women's agency. Guarantee girls' and women's rights to bodily autonomy and decision-making about their own lives, including the pursuit of education and use of family planning.

Enable and support women's organizations and movements. Provide women's organizations the space and opportunity to convene and organize without fear of persecution or retribution. Commit resources to movement building, research, partnerships, and the development of leadership skills.

Change the narrative on women in leadership and confront socio-cultural drivers of gender inequality. Depict and position women as effective leaders and role-models in marketing, political campaigns, and other public initiatives. Engage young people and men in efforts to change harmful gender norms at all levels.

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