

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

Prepared by: Tatiana DiLanzo, Women Deliver

Reviewed by: Genine Babakian, Consultant; Juliana Bennington, Women Deliver; Mary Crippen, Women Deliver; Maria DeVoe, Women Deliver; Louise Dunn, Women Deliver; Katja Iversen, Women Deliver; Jessica Malter, Women Deliver; Susan Papp, Women Deliver; Savannah Russo, Women Deliver; Liuba Grechen Shirley, Consultant; Petra ten Hoope-Bender, Women Deliver

## OVERVIEW

Due to restrictive laws, cultural practices, institutional barriers, and disproportionate access to quality education, healthcare, and resources, women worldwide continue to be marginalized from the political sphere. Yet reversing these discriminatory practices is not impossible. This brief examines various proven solutions that empower women and amplify their voices in decision-making processes. The interventions below range from raising awareness among girls and women — particularly the most marginalized — of their national power structures, to fostering inclusivity in leadership roles.

## SECTION 1: FRAMING THE ISSUE

Girls and women have a 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. By investing in their right to political participation, the international community not only moves closer to achieving gender equality, but also to fulfilling several 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, the benefits from the inclusion of girls and women are cross-cutting, paving the way to more inclusive and egalitarian democracies, balanced economic growth, and enhanced peacebuilding capacities.<sup>1,2</sup>

In 2015, roughly 22% of national parliamentarians were women, an increase of more than 10% from 1995.<sup>3,4</sup> Despite this progress, there is still a long road ahead to achieve gender equality in the political sphere. And although multiple international agreements call for the inclusion of women in leadership roles, the absence of women in political and decision-making bodies persists. As of 2015, only thirty countries in the world had 30% or more women ministers<sup>5</sup> and only 17.7% of all ministers globally were women.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore:

- In 2015, only 19 women worldwide were serving as heads of state.<sup>7</sup>
- In 2015, women made up less than 10% of parliament across 38 countries; globally, women's representation in parliament reflected regional discrepancies: 41.5% (Nordic countries); 26.5% (Americas); 23.6% (Europe, excluding Nordic countries); 22.4% (sub-Saharan Africa); 19.0% (Asia); 18.1% (Middle East and North Africa); 13.1% (Pacific).<sup>8</sup>
- In 2010, 57% of government employees in OECD countries were women, but they are underrepresented in top-level posts; in 2012, women held 29% of senior management positions in the public sector.<sup>9</sup>
- Data between 1992 and 2011 show women accounted for less than 4% of signatories to peace agreements and less than 10% of negotiators at peace tables.<sup>10</sup>

There are multiple barriers that prevent women from taking their place within the political arena, including legal, political, and cultural constraints. Breaking down these barriers and creating opportunities for women calls for a collaborative effort among states, civil society, and the international community.<sup>11,12</sup>

## SECTION 2: SOLUTIONS AND INTERVENTIONS

Due to discriminatory laws, institutional and cultural barriers, and disproportionate access to quality education, healthcare, and resources, women worldwide continue to be marginalized in the political arena.<sup>13</sup> The path forward needs to ensure and support women's right to be involved in decision-making and political processes, and should be rooted in the following solutions.

- Introduce gender quotas as transitional mechanisms
- Promote women's participation in peacebuilding processes



Meeting the demand to invest in women's political participation and decision-making power is linked to the achievement of several 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

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- Include young women and women within marginalized populations
- Create training and leadership pathways that are gender-sensitive
- Foster inclusivity in leadership, civic engagement, and decision-making in public and private spheres
- Ensure political environments are free from discrimination and violence
- Ensure recognition of women in decision-making capacities

### Introduce Gender Quotas as Transitional Mechanisms

Evidence suggests that when women are elected to political positions, they can make a difference for girls and women and strongly impact legislation.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, women 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.<sup>15,16,17</sup>

When well-designed, quotas can be effective, temporary measures to increase women's political participation while transitioning to the point where a gender balance in political decision-making can be achieved and sustained; this is particularly crucial within electoral systems that are not conducive to equal participation.<sup>18</sup> In the 41 countries where women represented 30% of elected legislators, 34 countries had some form of quota system. Specifically, 17 of those countries used candidate quotas, 11 used voluntary quotas, and six used reserve seat quotas.<sup>19</sup>

#### Case Study: Doubling the Proportion of Women Parliamentarians in Senegal

*In 2010, Senegal adopted legislation calling for women to be guaranteed seats in all elective bodies at every level of government. In preparation for the 2012 elections, the government, along with civil society and UN Women, launched an awareness campaign and a training program on the electoral process to educate and encourage female candidates. The outcome of the 2012 elections resulted in a near balance between men and women in the National Assembly – a tangible shift toward gender parity and democracy.<sup>20</sup>*

### Promote Women's Participation in Peacebuilding Processes

Women remain underrepresented in leadership roles within conflict and post-conflict settings. Women's seats in parliamentary roles in conflict zones make up 4% less than the 22% global average.<sup>21</sup> And while 88% of U.N.-supported peace talks included consultations with women in 2014, three-quarters of all peace agreements within the last 15 years failed to mention women.<sup>22</sup> Inadequate support and persistent negative attitudes toward women in power continue to bar them from claiming their place at peace negotiations.<sup>23</sup> And 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 the negotiating table or to provide a platform for girls and women to voice their specific needs during reconstruction periods.<sup>24,25</sup>

#### Case Study: The Peace Table Project

*As the Asia-Pacific focus of the Women at the Peace Table project, Indonesia has made great efforts to attain gender balance in peace negotiations through a participatory process. Through convening actors from government and civil society, the project has yielded positive dialogue around ways to develop sounder and more gender-inclusive policies for peacebuilding. From these meetings, a report, Women at the Indonesian Peace Table: Enhancing the Contributions of Women to Conflict Resolution, was released, outlining the positive effects of women in leadership roles. As a follow-up, training sessions were conducted to address the relationship between women, peace, and security.<sup>26</sup>*

### Include Young Women and Women within Marginalized Populations

Positions of political power must be accessible to all women, and not restrictive based on age, education, socio-economic status, geographical origin, or any other demographic characteristic. Youth are more traditionally represented in civil society movements, yet they remain underrepresented in formal positions of power despite their capacity to serve as agents of change. In one-third of countries, the minimum age to serve in parliament is 25, yet only 1.65% of parliamentarians are under 30.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, young women are more likely to engage in political volunteer work compared to their male peers.<sup>28</sup>

Parliamentary representation of women from indigenous populations can also benefit society by creating space for new insights regarding national issues. Globally, parliamentary participation by indigenous populations remains low. Research conducted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union shows that indigenous people are proportionally underrepresented in 12 parliaments and absent from 9 parliaments, and there are a lack of data available on indigenous populations' roles in decision-making bodies.<sup>29</sup> Women from marginalized groups often face even greater barriers to participation, facing a double dose of discrimination.



**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
- **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



## Create Training and Leadership Pathways That Are Gender-Sensitive

Offering women political leadership and skills-based training 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 women candidates, legislators, and influencers.<sup>30</sup> These barriers include lack of financial resources and educational opportunities, as well as unaccommodating governments and geographic restrictions. 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

An umbrella network of women's organizations in Trinidad & Tobago launched a training program in 2013 to educate women on the fundamental elements of politics in their country. "Train, Run, Win and Lead" not only educates women about who is responsible for what in government, but the program works to empower them to fully participate in positions of leadership and ultimately effect change. Following the first round of trainings, women won half of the seats in local elections – all of which had previously been held by men.<sup>31</sup>

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

Addressing the needs of girls and women is impossible without 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. In Scandinavian countries, for example – where women are well represented in positions of power – public budgets and policies more appropriately reflect the interests of girls and women.<sup>32</sup> This same principle holds true for institutions of global governance, where there is a distinct gender imbalance. One study found that 73.5% of companies have at least one female director, but when counting boards with at least three women present, that number drops to 20.1%.<sup>33</sup>

When it comes to tackling the effects of climate change and natural disasters, women and girls are integral to progress and must be included in decision making and mitigation leadership. 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, wise management of land and environment, and improving preparedness and early warning for adverse events—is only effective when women and girls are involved.<sup>55,56</sup>

Women's participation in local government is 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.<sup>34</sup> Yet empowerment starts in the home and in the community. A recent study found that admiration, respect, and affection in father-daughter relationships is a vital component of successful women. For both male and female children, the father's role matters, particularly in terms of how boys interpret gender equality.<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup>

### Case Study: Women in India Influence Local Politics

By 2009, women's grassroots political representation in India had reached 50%.<sup>37</sup> Prior to the 73rd Amendment Act in 1992, women were often restricted from elected positions.<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup> 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.<sup>40</sup> As a result of their participation, there was a 62% increase of potable water projects in these communities initiated by a woman leader, as compared to communities with male leaders.<sup>41</sup>

## Ensure Political Environments Are Free from Discrimination and Violence

Women will have greater incentive to engage in political campaigns if the political climate is free of violence, threats, and negative attitudes. Addressing masculine stereotypes of power, discriminatory party practices, and threats and acts of violence against women in electoral contexts is an important step towards building this kind of environment.<sup>42</sup> This includes engaging boys and men in promoting and supporting girls and women as leaders and decision makers, as well as holding individuals who obstruct women's abilities to engage in leadership roles accountable.<sup>43</sup>

## Ensure Recognition of Women in Decision-Making Capacities

Advancing the right 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, the capacities of girls and women are more broadly accepted, thus dispelling negative gender stereotypes.<sup>44</sup> The media are crucial partners to highlight the positive contributions of women



### Relevant International 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)
- 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)
- Sustainable Development Goals (2015-2030)



in politics and avoid perpetuating negative gender-based stereotypes, which influence public opinion about the role of women in public life. Female politicians can also gain visibility through support from civil society and other female leaders.<sup>45,46</sup> Working with others, including boys and men, can also contribute to shifting societal perceptions around political gender roles or capabilities. Toward this end, women parliamentarians have a duty to share their experiences publicly and ensure that their female constituents are well informed.

#### **Case Study: Albanian President Tells Women Leaders to Make their Voices Heard**

In 2009, Albanian President Bamir Topi called on women to not only participate in politics and public life, but to actively strive to be seen and heard in those positions.<sup>47</sup> With 10 of 140 parliamentary seats and 1 of 65 mayoral positions occupied by women, Albania had one of the lowest percentages of elected women in Europe.<sup>48</sup> In an effort to shift these statistics, the government has invested in ways to increase women's effective and visible participation in politics as a means of maintaining a stable, democratic government and economic growth.

### **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.<sup>49</sup> And since women in positions of authority tend to advocate for and allocate budgets towards social issues, their involvement in political processes is beneficial for all.<sup>50</sup> The positive impact of increasing women's participation in politics, for example, has been documented in studies reporting that an increased number of women in parliament leads to greater investments in education.<sup>51</sup> Another study showed, another 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 a return on equity that is 10.1% annually, versus the 7.4% annually from companies without.<sup>52</sup>

Furthermore, research suggests that gender balance in the political sphere promotes gender balance in the work force. This represents tremendous economic potential, as evidence shows that gender equality in the workforce would lead to a doubling in global GDP growth by 2025.<sup>53</sup> Evidence also shows that countries with high engagement of women in public life experience lower levels of inequality.<sup>54</sup>

➔ *For more, please reference the brief focused on boosting women's economic empowerment.*

### **SECTION 4: CALLS TO ACTION**

Women's equal participation in politics is a crucial step towards achieving gender equality, the SDGs, and progress for all. It is not only empowering for the women engaged, but benefits their communities, countries, and the world as a whole. Closing the gender gap by ensuring 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, affected populations, the United Nations, and the private sector—to take the following actions for girls and women:

- Eliminate structural and legal obstacles that hinder 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, women's right to participation, and roles in decision-making. *(Most relevant for: civil society and governments)*
- Introduce temporary quota systems and gender-sensitive leadership pathways to help bring women into political spheres. *(Most relevant for: governments, the private sector, and NGOs)*
- Secure visibility of female politicians and decision-makers, and promote a safe and enabling political environment in which they may participate in public life at all levels. *(Most relevant for: governments, civil society, media, the United Nations, and the private sector)*
- Promote women in leadership and decision-making at all levels, including at peace negotiation tables, by investing in NGOs that provide a space for women's involvement. *(Most relevant for: governments, civil society, the United Nations, and the private sector)*
- Promote community and sport programs that foster leadership skills for girls and women and promote gender equality. *(Most relevant for: civil society and governments)*
- 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 women to participate both individually and collectively in social, economic, political, and public life *(Most relevant for: governments and the private sector)*
- Incorporate men, especially fathers and sons, 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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