



WHY FEMINISTS SHOULD LEAD

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION AND
LEADERSHIP AS KEY TO GENDER EQUITY



Womankind
Worldwide

AWE —
SOME

Acknowledgement

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to all the partners who contributed to this research report on *“Why Feminists Should Lead: Women’s Participation and Leadership as Key towards achieving gender equity”*. Your commitment, insights and collaboration have been instrumental in shaping the findings and recommendations presented in this report and the policy brief and fact sheet derived from it.

We are especially thankful to the various representatives from Womankind partner organizations from our focus countries of Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Afghanistan and Nepal who generously shared their knowledge, experiences and data. Your dedication to advancing gender equality through your work on women’s participation and feminist leadership in all spheres of life, has not only enriched this research but also serves as a powerful testament to the impact of collective effort anchored on the feminist values and principles of – intersectionality, inclusivity and solidarity.

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This report and its annexures are a product of your unwavering support and feminist partnership. We look forward to continued collaboration in the ongoing pursuit of a more just, inclusive, and equitable society for all.

With sincere appreciation,

Womankind Worldwide and The Research Team

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Foreward

At a moment when the global community stands at a crossroads when it comes to gender equality, *“Why Feminists should lead”* powerfully affirms that gender equality is not possible without the full and fearless participation and leadership of women in all their diversities across the private and public spheres of society.

Commissioned by the AWESOME project consortium, this report documents and analyses the lived experiences, systemic barriers, and bold strategies of Womankind partners and feminist leaders across Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Nepal and Afghanistan. It not only challenges the limited, often tokenistic approaches to women’s participation and leadership, it reimagines leadership as collective, community rooted and transformative.

At a time when the anti-rights and anti-gender movements are rising globally and political goodwill is dwindling with regard to gender equality commitments, threatening hard won gains for gender justice – this report is a call to governments, civil society, donors, funders and movements to center feminist leadership for a just and inclusive future.

Congratulations to the research team, staff and our partners who are the heart of our work at Womankind for producing this vital body of knowledge. We hope that it is used to inspire action, guide policy and advocacy and overall, strengthen the collective work of feminist movements all over the world.

In solidarity and sisterhood,

Diana Njuguna & Disha Sugand

Co-CEOs, Womankind Worldwide



List of Abbreviations

AWESOME:	Advancing Women's Engagement: Strengthening Opportunities to Mobilise for Equality
BBC:	British Broadcasting Corporation
CEDAW:	Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
DEDAW:	Declaration of the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
DWRO:	Disabled Women's Rights Organisation
EWDNA:	Ethiopian Women with Disabilities National Association
FIDA Kenya:	Federation of Women Lawyers, Kenya
FWODE:	Forum for Women in Democracy
IEBC:	Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission
ITGNC:	Intersex, Transsexual, Gender Non-Conforming
LBQ:	Lesbian, Bisexual, Queer
KDHS:	Kenya Demographic Health Survey
SADC:	Southern Africa Development Community
SDGs:	Sustainable Development Goals
SGDEA:	Solemn declaration on Gender Equality in Africa
SWDA:	Siiqqee Women's Development Association
UDHR:	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
WCC:	Women Challenged to Challenge

Key Terminology

Affirmative action	This means positive steps taken to increase the representation of women in areas of employment, education, public affairs, and culture from which they have been historically excluded.
Agency	It refers to the capacity of women and girls to take purposeful action and pursue goals, free from the threat of violence or retribution.
Capacity strengthening	This refers to building and/or enhancing the knowledge, skills and ability of individuals, institutions, groups, and organizations to achieve gender equality objectives in a sustainable and transformative manner.
Cyber bullying	This is the use of technology to harass, threaten, embarrass, or target another person.
Gender based violence	Includes sexual, physical, mental, and economic harm inflicted in public or in private. It also includes threats of violence, coercion, and manipulation. This can take many forms such as intimate partner violence, sexual violence, child marriage and female genital mutilation.
Gender discrimination	Unequal or disadvantageous treatment of an individual or group of individuals based on gender.
Gender equality	Equal access of socio-economic, political and cultural opportunities and avenues of decision making without discrimination as to one's gender.
Gender equity	This refers to the provision of fairness and justice in the distribution of benefits and responsibilities between women, men, and all genders. It also means addressing gender inequalities that limit a person's ability to access opportunities to achieve better health, education and economic opportunity based on their gender.
Gender mainstreaming	Involves the integration of a gender perspective into the preparation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies, regulatory measures, and spending programs, with a view to promoting equality between women and men and combating discrimination.
Intersectional feminism	Focuses on the fact that systems of oppression impact people differently based on their race, class, ability, sexuality, and other characteristics. While "mainstream feminism" may focus only (or primarily) on gender or sex, intersectional feminism understands that oppression is an interlocking system.
Patriarchy	The system in which men as a group are constructed as superior to women as a group and as such have authority over them.
Democracy	A political system is democratic to the extent that its most powerful collective decisions are made by officials accountable to the people, who are selected through fair and free elections in which virtually all adults can vote and run for office. (Dahl)

Modern Democracy

Democracy is a universal value based on the freely expressed will of people to determine their own political, economic, social and cultural systems, and their full participation in all aspects of their lives.

Substantive Equality

This concept was taken from the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). It focuses on the actual impact of laws and policies compared to formal or legal equality, which ensures the same opportunities and access to resources. For example, while men and women might be equal in the eyes of the law, women might still face certain barriers that may require special temporary measures to rectify this inequality - these measures are also known as equity.

Women and Girls in all their diversities

An inclusive and intersectional term encapsulating the reality that women and girls do not live and/or identify in singularity across the spectrum and spheres of 'being'. It encapsulates LBQ and ITGNC communities.

Women participation and leadership

This is the way women are involved in formal, informal socio economic and political decision-making processes while leadership refers to roles, they carry with responsibilities either at the national or local level within their community. This includes their individual agency to make decisions or engage in such processes in society.

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**Each time a woman
stands up for herself,
without knowing it,
without claiming it,
she stands up for all
women."**

Maya Angelou

– Poet. Author. Civil Rights Activist.

CHAPTER

01

INTRODUCTION

1. Introduction.

1.1. Background

This project report has been commissioned by Womankind Worldwide through its AWESOME project. This report seeks to unpack through intersectional feminist approaches, the role of women's participation and leadership as key towards realizing Gender Equity. It aims to strengthen the understanding of feminist leadership in intersectional women's movements, changing perceptions and attitudes towards the rights of women and girls in all their diversities in decision making and enhancing the clarion call to implement existing laws and policies that promote the rights of women and girls in all their diversities to participate and lead in various facets of society and protects them from discrimination.

Specifically, the report aims to realize the objectives below:

1. **Catalyse an in-depth understanding of key factors and issues influencing Women's Participation and Leadership in Womankind Worldwide focus countries.**
2. **Document the normative and legal frameworks promoting/advancing women and girls' participation and leadership in the political sphere.**
3. **Promote the adoption of intersectional feminist movement strengthening advocacy approaches in advancing Women political leadership(WPL).**

The scope of this work is anchored on the AWESOME Programme - Partners' work linked to WPL and their geographical location – Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia. It will also seek to include insights from other Womankind focus countries – Nepal, Afghanistan, and Zimbabwe, in a bid to provide foundational documentation in line with WPL as a thematic focus for Womankind and our partners.

Owing to the deep entrenchment of patriarchal systems which are often poised to control resources, including influence, power and authority, women bear a disproportionate burden of poverty in terms of lack of control of resources and material deprivation, resulting in discrimination. This further gives rise to oppression, as the treatment of one group as inferior to another is a justified modality to increase the superiority of the oppressive group¹. These persistent patriarchal attitudes coupled with deep-rooted gender stereotypes, perpetuate inequality and lead to violations of the rights of women and girls in all their diversities.²

Consequently, this hampers and restricts ease of access to available opportunities to influence processes and institutions which shape their lives even in their own homes, much less in the community and wider society. The under-representation of women's voices in decision-making and agenda-setting at all levels means that their interests tend to be under-represented in socio economic, cultural, and political fora. The implication of this is that laws, policies and decisions made are non-responsive to the needs of women and further marginalize them out of decision-making spaces.

Women's equal participation and leadership is crucial to achieving internationally shared Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for universal peace and prosperity for people and planet by 2030.³ Goal 5 of the SDGs emphasizes the need to ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in society. Indeed, the inclusion of women in decision-making and leadership positions should be aimed at enhancing substantive equality as defined by CEDAW⁴ by increasing awareness of women's concerns, ensuring their meaningful contribution to enable them take part in the public life and access power. The low proportion of women in political and decision-making spaces reflects men's historical advantages in electoral systems and long-standing inequalities between men and women in society.

¹ Hasa (2020) Difference Between Discrimination and Oppression. Available online at www.pediaa.com

² Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. (2010). *General recommendation No. 28 on the core obligations of States parties under article 2 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW/C/GC/28). United Nations. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/cedaw/general-recommendations>

³ The 17 Goals. (2024) The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Sustainable Development. Available online at <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

⁴ Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. (2004). *General recommendation No. 25 on article 4, paragraph 1, of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, on temporary special measures* (CEDAW/C/GC/25). United Nations. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/cedaw/general-recommendations>

This is reflective in all spheres of a woman's life including the household, school, workplace – women and girls typically have compounded restrictions that hinder any existing opportunities as compared to their male counterparts – when it comes to acquiring policy and leadership skills, opportunities or positions. A prevailing phenomenon even amidst conducive legal and policy environments. Further, a lack of implementation of these policy frameworks enforces this prevailing status quo.⁵

Notably, modern democracy does not signify a direct path towards entrenching fair and equitable representation amongst men and women. Looking at democracies such as the United States of America and France – there are lower percentages of women in elected positions than would be forecast for such seasoned democracies.⁴ Additionally, the corresponding reduction of women in decision making spaces within social and economic institutions also contributes to this phenomenon. As they cannot garner leveraging or bargaining power to ensure their participation in all these spheres. (Economic, Social and Political). Women's representation in legislative bodies has increased in most parts of the world, but it is still at a low level.⁶ The diagram below shows a global analysis of representation across legislative bodies and regionally as in 2023 and contrasted to 2025.

BOTH HOUSES COMBINED	
Total Mps	46,218
Gender breakdown know for	46,218
Men	34,878
Women	11,340
Percentage of Women	24.5%

SINGLE HOUSE OR LOWER HOUSE	
Total Mps	39,013
Gender breakdown know for	39,013
Men	29,423
Women	9,590
Percentage of Women	24.6%

UPPER HOUSE OR SENATE	
Total Mps	7,205
Gender breakdown know for	7,205
Men	5,455
Women	1,750
Percentage of Women	24.3%



Photo: Janet Anyango,
Deputy Executive Director, FIDA-Kenya

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union. Women in National Parliaments: World and Regional Averages, 2023⁷

⁵ ² Global Women's Issues: Women in the World Today, Women in Power and Decision Making, Chapter 7 < <https://opentextbc.ca/womenintheworld/chapter/chapter-7-women-in-power-and-decisionmaking/#over1> > accessed on 24 June, 2025.

⁶ Ashford, Lori S. *Women in Power and Decision-making*. In: *Global Women's Issues: Women in the World Today (Extended Version)*. Open Text BC, <https://opentextbc.ca/womenintheworld/chapter/chapter-7-women-in-power-and-decisionmaking/>.

⁷ Inter-Parliamentary Union. *Women in National Parliaments: World and Regional Averages*. IPU, July 2023, <https://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>. \

World and regional averages of women in parliament

	Single house or lower house	Upper house or Senate	Both houses combined
World Average	27.2%	27.4%	27.2%
Regional Averages			
Regions* are classified by descending order of the percentage of women in unicameral parliaments or the lower house of parliament.			
Americas	35.3%	36%	35.4%
Europe	31.8%	31.9%	31.8%
Sub-Saharan Africa	27.1%	27%	27.1%
Asia	22.1%	22%	22.1%
Pacific	20.1%	49.5%	23.2%
Middle East and North Africa	18.1%	11.7%	16.7%

*The composition of IPU regional groupings may be consulted at <http://data.ipu.org/content/regional-groupings>

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union; United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) 2025⁸

From the local to the global level, women's leadership and political participation remains restrictive and gains made are persistently under *threat of regression with the growing anti-gender rhetoric amongst other systemic barriers rooted in patriarchy*.

Women are underrepresented as voters, as well as in leading positions, whether in elected office, roles linked to affirmative action, civil service, private sector, or academia. This occurs despite their proven abilities as leaders and agents of change in their communities and society at large, and their inherent civil and political rights to participate equally in democratic governance. They face several obstacles to participating in political life. Structural barriers through discriminatory laws and institutions still limit women's options to run for office. Capacity gaps mean women are less likely than men to have the education, contacts and resources needed to become effective leaders. The progress achieved over the past decade in the participation of women in politics has been reversed and we are far from accomplishing the goal agreed in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision making in public and private spheres of their lives. ([Call to Action on eight areas of gender equality, and for enhancing women's participation in power and leadership](#), CSW UNGA 2019)

Women and gender-diverse people—often face compounded biases in decision-making spaces and are frequently excluded from participating in decision making and consultation processes due to systemic perceptions that marginalize them by gender identity, sexual orientation, economic class, education, employment status to name but a few. These intersecting forms of marginalization deepen their political and economic disempowerment, increasing their vulnerability to harm, violence, harassment, and abuse in the limited and often precarious work environments available to them – formal or informal. From the foregoing, socio-economic and cultural notions make it difficult for women to own their power within and realize their respective niches as respected powerful decision makers within their communities and societies.⁹

⁸ UN Women and Inter-Parliamentary Union. Women in Politics: 2025. UN Women, Mar. 2025, <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/women-in-politics-2025-en.pdf>.

⁹ Peake, Linda & Nyasimi, Mary. (2015). Review of SDG 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

There are other intersectional factors that impact women's ability to assume leadership, more so in conservative and patriarchal societies. These include economic and class barriers, related stereotypes and their attendant biases as compounded through media and other reports, exposure to online and offline bullying, and lack of technical and other networking knowhow for successful lobbying and implementing campaigning strategies. Media plays a huge role more so in the majority world including Africa and Asia, in either exacerbating negative perceptions or enhancing positive ones for women in leadership. For example, in Nepal, a 2016 media monitoring report by *Sancharika Samuha* found that women politicians were rarely quoted on policy issues, reinforcing the perception of male *political authority*. Whilst at the same time women in leadership leverage on community media platforms by stations such as *Radio Sagarmatha* and *Ujyalo 90 Network* that have allowed them to share their policy priorities to relevant constituents.¹⁰

Unfortunately, during campaigns for elective positions, social media has often been leveraged as a tool for cyberbullying female candidates and their supporters without any legal redress. The media is also important in the narratives they share with their audiences on women's participation and leadership, whether through news reporting, interviews, or programming. This shapes the wider societal perception of women, including ideas about their ability to lead effectively and to actively contribute to the making of decisions.

The BBC provided a gendered analysis of Kenya's general elections in 2022. It was noted that the percentage of women in the race for senate, national assembly and governor seats increased from 7 percent in 2017 to 11 percent. BBC put together a feature highlighting some of the aspiring and elected women across these houses highlighting sexual harassment as one of the many challenges women in politics face with other challenges including, violence, intimidation and the expensive nature of campaigns. The gendered reporting and features aired by the BBC provided an in depth look into the challenges that are synonymous to being a woman in politics in Kenya, an approach that is not the norm in media reporting in Kenya during the elections.¹¹

AWESOME consortium member, FIDA Kenya convened a Women's Leadership Academy to provide comprehensive support for women political aspirants for the 2022 general elections. One of the tools they leveraged was media, with the development of video documentaries, features in National and county level media such as newspapers, radio, TV and even digital media via socials. They focused on raising awareness on the aspect of gender-based violence in its varying forms for women political aspirants. FIDA-Kenya's persistent advocacy for gender equality received widespread media recognition, resulting in an average of 602 web and social media mentions, as well as 6 TV appearances, 3 radio appearances, and coverage in 13 newspaper and online features. Notable media coverage included discussions on FIDA-Kenya's initiatives to empower female leaders and Members of County Assemblies (MCAs) in Machakos, as well as partnerships aimed at enhancing the capacities of women leaders for effective and gender-responsive governance.

This strategy was also leveraged on by WCC Kenya with a specific focus on women with disability vying for political office. In 2023, WCC Kenya worked with 20 journalists from various counties, including those from prominent media organizations like The Standard Group and Royal Media services in Kenya. During the training, 80% of participants admitted to never receiving prior training on women with disabilities, leading to discussions about government efforts to combat stigma and discrimination against this demographic. They jointly identified strategies such as, creating documentaries, dedicating more airtime to disability-related topics, ensuring media stations' disability-friendliness and inclusiveness, and conducting interviews to raise awareness about women with disabilities in general and those vying for political positions.

1.2. Theoretical Approach

Drawing from the Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Nepal and Afghanistan case studies, this report analyses these barriers with an intersectional feminist lens which determined amongst others the nature of questions interrogated, participants engaged and the presentation of findings.

¹⁰ UN Women Asia-Pacific. (2022, December). *"Invisible" violence, visible harms: Violence against women in politics in Nepal*. United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. Retrieved from <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/np-VAWP-Nepal-Report-2512-s.pdf>

¹¹ BBC News. (n.d.). *[Kenya Election 2022: 'I woke up to threats of being gang raped.]* [Video]. BBC. Retrieved June 25, 2025, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-africa-62398217>

Feminism, simply defined, refers to all genders having equal rights and opportunities.¹² Noting that rights and opportunities are mostly denied to women and girls, as well as to other people marginalised by gender such as intersex persons, trans people, non-binary people, and others. It is about respecting, protecting, and fulfilling the human rights of women, girls and all gender marginalised persons in all their diversities. It is about levelling the playing field between genders and ensuring that diverse women, girls and gender marginalised have the same opportunities available to cisgender men and boys.¹³ It is worth noting that in many countries around the world, a core element of exercising dominant patriarchy is a forced binarization of gender performance, roles, expectations and practice, all intended to keep people “as they were born” and “doing the roles they were born to do”¹⁴. Denying civil liberties to everyone who is not a cisgendered man is a large part of keeping women in their place, and ensuring the forward movement of these social hierarchies as we know them, especially since the contribution of women in capitalist economies is usually essentialized into reproductive function and making the next generation of labourers possible.¹⁵ This is supported and bolstered by religious, cultural and other narratives that underline that this way of life is natural, moral, and inevitable. Any and all methods to demolish the existence of those who express gender and sexuality in “different” and non-majoritarian ways therefore becomes justifiable as a necessary part of defending the way of life of the majority. Narratives that are at the centre of anti-rights and anti-gender campaigns and strategy.¹⁶

In this context where the existence of diversity in real life is countered, diminished and even erased by discriminatory law, religion, culture and other hegemonic beliefs, feminism that is inclusive of struggles beyond the man/woman binary becomes a key strategy for advocacy and resistance in the fight for equal treatment, rights, privileges and dignities. Intersectionality, a term coined by civil rights advocate and legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, essentially considers the many ways each woman and person experiences discrimination.¹⁷ Examining feminism through an intersectional lens is critical because it allows the fight for gender equality to be more inclusive. Intersectionality is widely used to illustrate the interplay between discrimination and within oppressions expanding scope and nuance to include an understanding of gender, age, economic class, race, marital status, religion, level of education etc. Intersectional feminism is therefore the acknowledgement that every woman and gender marginalised person has their own unique experiences of discrimination and oppression. Upon consideration of other variables of marginalization such as race, socio-economic class, religion, culture, desirability, sexual orientation, physical ability among others.

Some of the barriers highlighted above contributed to the fortification of harmful norms and cultural beliefs that are adopted as truths in their communities. For example, harmful stereotypes include women who have access to leadership positions tend to be well educated with a high economic status and hailing from urban set ups. Whilst there is some truth to this including legal requirements that would allow a woman political aspirant to run for office such as is seen in Kenya, it is not a full representation of the women that hold leadership and political positions in general. For example, in Uganda, before colonial rule, women influenced their political and social leadership through the traditional decision-making systems peculiar to different communities. Women had informal networks and collaborative arrangements, especially during crises, heavy workloads, and family events such as weddings and funerals. Additionally, traditional kingdoms in modern day Uganda such as the Buganda have historically and to date had women leadership roles in spite of its patriarchal structure. It is thus pertinent to have an intersectional approach in identifying various representations of leadership across the echelons of society and how they frame the leadership of women therein as a foundational understanding towards advocating for WPL as key towards realizing gender parity. Subsequently, this study seeks to understand what women's participation and leadership connotes, through the expanded dimensions of this intersectional feminist lens. It queries what the existing barriers to women's participation and leadership are, and explores opportunities and strategies for their inclusion, and towards further enhancement of gender equity.

¹² International Women's Development Agency. (2018, May 11). *What is feminism?* IWDA. Retrieved June 25, 2025, from <https://iwda.org.au/learn/what-is-feminism/>

¹³ <https://iwda.org.au/learn/what-is-feminism/>

¹⁴ Kroeger, L (2025). *Do the People Hold the Power?* 8 March 2024. Retrieved from <https://www.womankind.org.uk/do-the-people-hold-the-power/>

¹⁵ 42nd Street (2024). Understanding oppression, Part 1 - Accessed 5 Feb 2025 <https://www.42ndstreet.org.uk/lgbtq-resources/zines-articles/understanding-oppression-part-1/>

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ Sjöberg, Laura, 'Feminism', in R. A. W. Rhodes, and Paul 't Hart (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Leadership*, 2014; online edn, Oxford Academic, 2 Sept. 2014, accessed 8 Nov. 2023

1.3. Data Collection

This study adopted a mixed methods approach to the collection of data. This aligns with the overall feminist participatory methodology which relies on the use of narratives as one of its key data collection methods. The goal was to develop concepts to clarify specific phenomena and emphasize the meanings, experiences, and views of participants being engaged.

The study involved, in the first instance, a detailed desk review of available sources. This included a review of available program documents and literature on women's participation and leadership with specific focus given to Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia as the key sites for the implementation of the AWESOME project. It undertook a law and policy review of the framework in these countries, including a detailed review of relevant policy frameworks that impact the status of gender (in)equity within the identified contexts.

The study also analysed other relevant literature such as journal articles, reports, book chapters, laws, and human rights instruments to respond to the identified research statements. The focus was, amongst others - gender equality and feminism as a broad framework, with spotlight on women's participation and leadership. For comparative analysis, the study reviews the status quo in other countries relevant to Womankind's work including Zimbabwe, Afghanistan, and Nepal.

The study also engaged key stakeholders to fill gaps identified through the literature review. This included: Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions with Womankind staff working on the AWESOME project and towards women's leadership and participation; member organizations of the AWESOME project; and Womankind partners working at a regional and sub-regional level towards women's participation and leadership. Through these engagements we sought to understand:

1. **Some of the key activities, achievements, and challenges noted in the work they have been doing with respect to women's participation and leadership.**
2. **Whether the law is sufficient for the realization of women's participation and leadership.**
3. **Some of the barriers that women face in leadership and participation in their experience and work.**
4. **Any good practices or strategies that can be identified for inclusion in the report, towards the development of a policy document that can guide thinking around women's participation and leadership.**
5. **What the key considerations in the development of this report and brief should be, through participants' reflections on their own leadership journeys, and the highlights and challenges they experienced. The interviews undertaken are annexed to this report with the participants anonymized.**



Examining feminism through an intersectional lens is critical because it allows the fight for gender equality to be more inclusive.

Photo: Samyog KC from Mitini (an LGBTIQ+) organisation in Nepal



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To be a powerful woman means to have the possibility, the right and responsibility to make choices that better oneself and better one's community."

Graca Machel

Gender activist, politician and humanitarian

CHAPTER

02

**WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION
AND LEADERSHIP TOWARDS
GENDER EQUITY.**

2. Women's Participation And Leadership Towards Gender Equity.

In many African societies there is the tendency to assume that women are meant to be seen, but not heard, disregarding and erasing their historical and vital role in national development. This sums up the way in which gender inequality is further entrenched, in relation to women's leadership and participation in decision making. Women have historically been disadvantaged in participation and leadership owing to their perceived inability to make public political decisions with regard to societal leadership, and be recognized as experts or authorities in this field.¹⁸ They continue to be vastly underrepresented in key decision-making in their households, communities, politics, and in businesses.¹⁹ Whereas men have been the voice and authority in making decisions at home, work and in community affairs, women have been routinely left out of consultative and decision-making spaces.²⁰

Even matters directly regarding women's welfare, bodily autonomy and integrity are decided upon by men to their exclusion. These include menstrual supply and sanitation access, breastfeeding laws, fertility laws, abortion access laws, penal code adjustments and decriminalisations, age of consent policy conversations, and many more. Beyond laws and policies that have direct engagement with sexual and reproductive health, engagements with matters like inheritance, resource access, marriage, divorce and civil partnership, elder rights and more, have all be considered from a lens that ignores that different gender expressions create different outcomes in these arenas.

Gender equity in women's leadership recognizes that men and women are not starting off from the same footing. Women have continuously been marginalized and excluded over the years. For instance, in certain cultures in the region and some social arrangements, men are guaranteed more access and ownership to capital and property than women. Women's property rights and access to resources tend to be less secure due to patriarchal inheritance cultural norms and in some instances rights. Customarily, access to productive resources such as land is largely dependent and regulated by men.²¹ These issues contribute to the low socio-economic status of women by prohibit women from accessing social services like health and education and even securing social-economic status, which results in prominently establishing the phenomenon of the feminization of poverty.

Gender equity as an approach recognizes that enhancing women's participation and leadership can be used as a vehicle to achieve equality in a broader social sense, where both men and women have an opportunity to participate in formal and informal leadership structures within their communities.²² More needs to be done to enhance women's capacity to engage with decision making processes in spheres where they have been routinely left out.

Part of achieving this has been through affirmative action processes, capacity building for women to have a voice in community matters, at work and within their homes, enhancing the welfare of further excluded groups such as women with disabilities whose rights have been overlooked, and ensuring wider gender representation in consultative decision-making processes. Whilst affirmative action has been entrenched in law as a fail-safe mechanism that is meant to be temporary towards realizing and promoting women's participation and leadership, in many contexts such as Kenya it has become a crutch. A bare minimum threshold that the political machinery references to as their major win when it comes to affirming, promoting and protecting the civil and political rights of women and girls in their diversities overall.

In Uganda an article by the Daily Monitor prominently explored the successes of affirmative action in Uganda as a framework affirming and promoting women's leadership and access to education. Women representation has significantly moved from single digits into 34 percent in the Ugandan parliament and 40 percent in local councils.²³ The article highlights that affirmative action is a great entry point towards promoting and protecting the civic and political rights of women in all their diversities to participate and lead however, it is not the final point of entry. It must be part of a continuous evolution in addressing intersectional barriers that still meet women leaders when in these affirmative action seats such as sexual harassment, harmful cultural and societal norms and attitudes just to name but a few.

While affirmative action remains a critical tool for advancing women's political participation and representation, it can also unintentionally reinforce structural ceilings when it is not accompanied by

¹⁸ Oluwatoyin Olatundun Ilesanmi, (2018), Women's Visibility in Decision Making Processes in Africa—Progress, Challenges, and Way Forward, Front. Sociol., Sec. Gender, Sex and Sexualities Volume 3.

¹⁹ Boserup, E., Tan, S., Toulmin, C., and Kanji, N. (2013). *Woman's Role in Economic Development*. London: Routledge.

²⁰ MacGregor, S., & Detraz, N. (Eds.). (2023). *Feminist Frontiers in Climate Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

²¹ International Organization for Migration. (2016). *Barriers to women* [PDF]. IOM. Retrieved July 23, 2025, from https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/barriers_to_women.pdf

²² Bhat, Bilal & Majid, Jenifur & Dar, Mohamad & Mary, Dr & Gurumayum, Khelena. (2022). Promoting Gender Equality for Women's Leadership. International Journal of Early Childhood Special Education. 14. 3589-3594. 10.9756/INTJECSE/V14I5.397.

broader systemic transformation. In contexts where key barriers have been mitigated and women can access leadership through equitable means, overreliance on affirmative action can limit the recognition of women as autonomous political actors. Feminist approaches call for a nuanced and intersectional legal and normative framework—one that safeguards and promotes the full spectrum of civil and political rights of women and girls in all their diversities. This includes, but is not limited to, affirmative action, and must center on women's agency, leadership, and substantive participation in decision-making processes at all levels.²⁴

This having been said, there are several international and regional treaties that aim at achieving gender equity and cementing women's active engagement in decision-making processes as discussed below.

2.1. The Universal Declaration on Human Rights 1948

The Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) was enacted at a pivotal point in international politics right after the Second World War in 1945.²⁵ It encapsulated aspirations of dignity and equality for all human beings. Although it did not specifically lend itself to breaking down the long-held prejudices against women's participation and leadership and addressing discriminatory practices, it laid a solid foundation for subsequent treaties in enhancing equal rights for women and girls.

For instance, Article 1 states that all human beings (inevitably including women) are born equal in dignity and rights. Despite this visionary aspiration, this has not been the lived experience of many women owing to years of subjugation and patriarchal norms that stifle the woman's voice and hinder her participation in decision making processes. Article 7 also reiterates the equality of all persons without any discrimination.

Article 19 underpins the right of everyone including women to have an opinion and express themselves. Coupled with Article 21 on one's right to participate in governance systems, the UDHR infers that women should be able to freely participate in leadership without discrimination. All the rights enunciated in the UDHR are applicable in amplifying the woman's voice in decision making processes.²⁶ This promotes the autonomy of women and girls in all their diversities in participating in the everyday socio economic and political welfare of their societies.²⁷

One key fact about this document is the intention to be a cover for all the peoples of the earth, and the gender-neutral wording used across most of its text. Almost 80 years later, this creates a lot of room for a gender expansive perspective of humanity, which becomes a useful baseline for introduction of more specific language in following international law normative and policy documents, which can focus on women because of the already stated intention to equality for all as presented earlier. It also allows for interpretations that include human diversities beyond its current understanding which allows it to have a true intersectional feminist intention.

This affirmation by the UDHR affirms the dignity of all human beings regardless of gender, sex, race, religion et al. Affirming that in whichever you 'show up' in everyday life, by virtue of being born you have inherent human rights and the right to live a dignified life. These human rights are – universal, inalienable, indivisible, interdependent, and interrelated.

77years!
**since the Universal Declaration
 on Human Rights (UDHR) was
 enacted right after WWII.**

²⁴ Faniko, K., Ellemers, N., Derks, B., & Lorenzi-Cioldi, F. (2017). *Nothing changes, really: Why women who break through the glass ceiling end up reinforcing it. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 43(5), 638–651. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167217695551>

²⁵ UN General Assembly, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 10 December 1948, 217 A (III), available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b3712c.html> [accessed 12 January 2024]

²⁶ Kavitha Suthanthiraraj (2019) The UN Declaration of Human Rights at 70: Women's Rights, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 73:4, 331-336.

²⁷ Reanda, L. (1981). Human Rights and Women's Rights: The United Nations Approach. *Human Rights Quarterly*, 3(2), 11–31.

2.2. Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women

The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was enacted in 1979 with the urgent need to protect and advance the rights of women on a global plane.²⁸ CEDAW is a Treaty Body of the United Nations, set up to delve into special interests in human rights gaps experiences by the peoples of the world. Similar bodies in parallel issues include committees on the elimination of racial discrimination, on economic, social and cultural rights, on wider human rights, against torture, on migrant workers, on the rights of the child, on persons with disabilities, and on enforced disappearances.²⁹ CEDAW is one of the most widely ratified human rights treaties in history and has inspired feminist activism around the world and helped raise women's legal consciousness.³⁰

Hailed as the Women's Bill of rights, in Article 2,³¹ it categorically condemns any discrimination against women with the purpose or effect of impairing the enjoyment by women of political, economic, social, cultural, or civil human rights on equal footing with men. In addition, it urges all governments to include the principles of equality of men and women in national constitutions. This is also emphasized in Article 3 where states are required to intervene in the political, social, economic, and cultural fields, and all appropriate measures, including legislation, to ensure the full development and advancement of women, for the purpose of guaranteeing them the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms on a basis of equality with men. This includes eliminating cultural practices that offend women³², and ensuring women have the right to participate in public affairs.³³ This places an obligation on states to provide a secure and conducive environment for women to enjoy their rights including participation in community affairs.

States should enact laws that equally protect men and women, including offering remedies in cases of discrimination. CEDAW stands behind women's equal participation in all aspects of life, focusing on five priority areas: increasing women's leadership and participation; ending violence against women; engaging women in all aspects of peace and security processes; enhancing women's economic empowerment; and making gender equality central to national development planning.³⁴

CEDAW, as a Treaty Body, receives reports from State Parties on the progress of human rights treaty implementation, including inputs from non-governmental institutions, civil society, development agencies, academia and more.³⁵ Aside from being a rich archive where successes and stagnations can be studied, and where comparisons can be made with other nations as case studies, it is possible for coordinated feedback to be given by country and regional networks, as well as international NGOs like Womankind, that allows a more intersectional data analysis to be shared by CEDAW, to widen their understanding and framing of gender marginalization.

2.2.1. CEDAW General Recommendation No. 40 (2024)

General Recommendation No.40(2024)³⁶ was adopted by the committee on 25 October 2024 after wide consultations across regions in Istanbul, Cairo, Addis Ababa, Bogota and Bangkok. It is anchored on the central premise that the systemic and continuous exclusion of women from decision making, and leadership robs institutions, formal and informal, of humanity's talent and perspective. The recommendation is instructive in nature but provides anchorage and linkage to the implementation and localization of the CEDAW convention and regional and national legal instruments that allow for the adoption of international law and national level legislation. It clarifies obligations under Article 7 and 8 of the CEDAW Convention, reinforcing state duties to ensure women can represent governments domestically and internationally. It also reinforces that gender parity is legally enforceable including the use of temporary and permanent measures under Article 4 in areas where women remain underrepresented.³⁷

It is particularly instructive as it provides solutions to key WPL barriers and significantly contributes to efforts geared towards an accelerated call towards realizing Gender Equality at global, regional, and

²⁸ United Nations (2024). United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. Treaty Bodies. Available online at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies>, accessed 31/12/24.

²⁹ Vanegas, Marta R. and Pruitt, Lisa R. (2012) "CEDAW and Rural Development: Empowering Women with Law from the Top down, Activism from the Bottom Up," *University of Baltimore Law Review*: Vol. 41: Iss. 2, Article 4.

³¹ Reddock, R. (2022). CEDAW and Violence Against Women: Reflections After 40 Years. *Violence Against Women*, 28(8), 1723-1727. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10778012221086003>

³² Art. 5, CEDAW

³³ Art. 7, 8, CEDAW

³⁴ Cho, S.-Y. (2014). International Women's Convention, Democracy, and Gender Equality. *Social Science Quarterly*, 95(3), 719-739. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26612190>

³⁵ United Nations (2024) United Nations Human Rights

³⁶ Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. *General Recommendation No. 40 (2024) on the equal and inclusive representation of women in decision-making systems*. United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 25 Oct. 2024. UN Doc. C/GC/40.

³⁷ Dominguez, Catalina. "The Power of Parity – CEDAW's General Recommendation No. 40 for Women in Decision-Making Systems." *Strategic Advocacy for Human Rights*, 29 Nov. 2024. wearesahr.org/blog/the-power-of-parity-cedaws-general-recommendation-no-40-for-women-in-decision-making-systems.

national levels. It asserts 50:50 parity between women and men in all their diversity as the global baseline for decision making roles and further applies it across political, public, economic, private and digital spheres including international systems and even includes technological spaces and tools such as Artificial Intelligence.³⁸

The Committee, through the General Recommendation, proposes seven pillars for equality and parity when it comes to realizing WPL. These include; (a) fifty-fifty parity between women and men in decision-making systems as a starting point and universal norm; (b) effective youth leadership conditioned by parity; (c) intersectionality and the inclusion of women in all their diversity in decision-making systems; (d) a comprehensive approach to decision-making systems across spheres; (e) equal power and influence exercised by women in decision-making systems; (f) structural transformation for the equal and inclusive representation of women in decision-making systems; and (g) civil society representation in decision-making systems.³⁹

2.3. Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

In 1967, United Nations Member States adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, (DEDAW) which states that discrimination against women is an offence against human dignity. The Declaration was an important precursor to the legally binding 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Its aim was to promote gender equality, specifically for protection of the rights of women. It was drafted by the Commission on the Status of Women in 1967.

The Declaration calls on States to *“abolish existing laws, customs, regulations and practices which are discriminatory against women, and to establish adequate legal protection for equal rights of men and women”*.

⁴⁰ This urges states to eliminate any laws, practices that impeded the rights of women and which reneged on global gender equality.

Article 2 of the Declaration emphasizes that all laws and customs aimed at discriminating against women should be abolished while Article 11 underpins the principle of equality of men and women. This was aimed at tackling the considerable incompatibility of discrimination against women with the principle of dignity inherent in every human being.

Unfortunately, to date, there are still customs and laws that prevent women from enjoying their full rights and/or which have done little in improving their status in society. The prevailing notion that women are to be seen and not heard has stifled the gains of gender equality in having women rightfully seat at the table of leadership whether in formal or informal structures of their communities. In other instances, as will be revealed in the country specific reviews, despite being bound by international laws such as CEDAW and policies eradicating discrimination against women, societal norms and patriarchal practices still bear sway in hindering women's equal participation and leadership.

DEDAW is a key civil rights charter of our time, when we consider the long struggle, it has taken for the women of the world and especially in the Majority World, to be recognized as human just in law, let alone in culture and society. One possibility to convene around the achievements of this Declaration and its attendant victories would be to do further data collection and analysis in Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda, as well as explore other countries as case studies, to map the link between the ratification of this declaration and grassroots organisational impacts with the support of national governments and relevant stakeholders. It would also be of interest to note where the lived experience of increased legal recognition was had by which women, and which women continue to be left behind, noting well that women and other gender marginalised and oppressed peoples do not all have the same experiences across the board.



³⁸ Universal Rights Group. Representation: The 'Mother' of Women's Rights – On CEDAW's General Recommendation 40. 15 Apr. 2024, <https://www.universal-rights.org/representation-the-mother-of-womens-rights-on-cedaws-general-recommendation-40/>.

³⁹ Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. *General Recommendation No. 40 (2024) on the equal and inclusive representation of women in decision-making systems*. United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 25 Oct. 2024. UN Doc. C/GC/40.

⁴⁰ UN General Assembly, *Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women*, 7 November 1967, A/RES/22/2263, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b38734.html> [accessed 12 January 2024]

2.4. African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (Banjul Charter).

The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (the Banjul Charter), the basis of Africa's continental human rights system, entered into force on October 21, 1986, upon ratification by a simple majority of member states of the Organization of African Unity (OAU).⁴¹ The African Charter aims at institutionalizing a human rights protection regime within the African continent. It attributes certain rights to and imposes certain duties on the individual to enable one to live a meaningful life and to contribute in a useful manner to society.⁴² It has been hailed to be a remarkable document because it represents a significant departure from the international and regional human rights instruments it preceded as it is responsive to uniquely African circumstances.

This notwithstanding, the Charter does not specifically address the issue of women's rights but rather incorporates them by reference.⁴³ Article 2 urges parties to combat all forms of discrimination against women through appropriate legislative, institutional and other measures by *inter alia* integrating a gender perspective in their policy decisions, legislation, development plans, programs, and activities and in all other spheres of life. Article 9 focuses on governance processes emphasizing the need for states to ensure that women are represented in all levels of decision making.

Overall, the Banjul charter provides rights for both men and women to be respected having inherent dignity,⁴⁴ express their thoughts and opinions,⁴⁵ participate in governance systems, and enjoy socio economic rights.^{46,47} These provisions domesticated the articles in CEDAW that was recognized the international standard document for promoting women's rights. Over time there was a need to have a dedicated African document providing contextualized rights for women and girls leading to the enactment of the Maputo Protocol discussed subsequently.⁴⁸

2.5. Protocol to African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol).

The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR) on the Rights of Women in Africa was adopted in Maputo in July 2003, eight years after the commencement of the drafting process in Lomé, Togo in March 1995. This event marked a major achievement for women rights in the continent.⁴⁹ The protocol covers a wide range of issues, including the political, economic, social, and cultural rights of women. The Maputo Protocol underscores the principle of promoting gender equality on the continent as a prerequisite for achieving inclusive and sustainable development on the continent. It articulates clearly the rights of the African woman, nuanced within context, and urges states to combat all forms of discrimination against women, promote the participation of women in political processes and protection against negative cultural practices. The Protocol recognizes and documents the existing socio-cultural barriers against the full enjoyment of rights and freedoms for women in Africa. Unlike any other women's human rights instrument, it details wide-ranging and substantive rights for African women from an intersectional perspective nuancing the unique regional context.

Article 2 of the Maputo protocol, for example provides that states ought to ensure that the opinions of women are considered *in all endeavours at the village, city, suburban or national level*. This means that all forms of existing barriers towards women's participation and leadership should be eradicated for equitable outcomes in the socio economic and political welfare of society. This includes shutting down women's participation or providing a hostile environment that prevents women from voicing their opinions. It also recognizes the various levels of formal and informal decisions making that are crucial for women to be a part of i.e. from the local, sub local to the national level.⁵⁰ Thus, for example, when one wants to write or propose a village development plan, a proposal for the economic or social improvement of the village, or if the Parliamentarians want to vote on a law, the views of women should be *sought and their opinions taken into account*.

⁴¹ Organization of African Unity (OAU), *African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights ("Banjul Charter")*, 27 June 1981, CAB/LEG/67/3 rev. 5, 21 I.L.M. 58 (1982), available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b3630.html> [accessed 12 January 2024]

⁴² Makau wa Mutua, "The Banjul Charter and the African Cultural Fingerprint: An Evaluation of the language of Duties, Virginia Journal of International Law, Vol. 35, pg. 362.

⁴³ W. Langley, (1987) The Rights of Women, The African Charter, and The Economic Development of Africa, Boston College Third World Law Journal [Vol. 7:215]

⁴⁴ Art. 5, Banjul Charter

⁴⁵ Art. 9, Banjul Charter

⁴⁶ Art. 15, Banjul Charter

⁴⁷ Tamale, S. (2001). Think Globally, Act Locally: Using International Treaties for Women's Empowerment in East Africa. *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, 50, 97–104.

⁴⁸ Geng, Jing, (2019) The Maputo Protocol and the Reconciliation of Gender and Culture in Africa. Research Handbook on Feminist Engagement with International Law, Susan Harris Rimmer, and Kate Ogg (eds.), (Edward Elgar, 2019).

⁴⁹ African Union, *Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa*, 11 July 2003, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3f4b139d4.html> [accessed 12 January 2024].

⁵⁰ FJ Mohamed, 11 Years of the African Women's Rights Protocol: Progress and Challenges, Development, 57:1, 2014.

Article 2 also emphasizes that where there are areas or situations in which women continue to be treated unjustly, the state Party must pass laws or take corrective action to ensure that women and men enjoy the same rights keeping in mind the historical injustices that have been meted out against women within their societies.

Article 3 points to the right to dignity, which commits states to adopt and implement appropriate measures to prohibit exploitation or degradation of women and ensure the protection of every woman's right to respect for her dignity and protection of women from all forms of violence. This is critical because women who are routinely subjected to abuse tend to shy away from any participatory process within their communities for fear of victimization and threats of intimidation.⁵¹

Article 9 of the Protocol brings into focus the participation of women in governance processes providing that states parties shall take specific positive action such as enacting laws that clearly stipulate and encourage the participation of women in the political life of their countries on equal footing with men through affirmative actions. This not only points to the mainstream political process but also the local governance and development processes in ensuring that the women have the time, opportunity, conducive environment, and space to participate in leadership. This includes eradicating harmful cultural practices including wife inheritance and gender-based violence against women, which stifle their participation opportunities.⁵²

The importance of the Maputo Protocol is that it recognizes that gender inequality undermines social, economic, and political empowerment, which in turn impacts women's participation and leadership. The ratification of the protocol means that accountability, protection against abuses and equality for women are in place on paper at least at the highest level on the continent.

2.6. Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (SDGEA).

The Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (SDGEA) was adopted by the AU Assembly in 2004, calling for member states' continual action toward achieving gender equality and reinforcing their commitment to international and regional women's rights instruments. In addition to calling for wider ratification of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, it also addresses state responsibility for tackling violence against women and gender-based discrimination.

The Solemn Declaration on Gender equality in Africa was made with the realization that there are low levels of women's representation in social, economic, and political decision-making structures and feminization of poverty impact negatively on women's ability to derive full benefit from the economies of their countries and the democratization process.⁵³

To this end, in Declaration 5, state parties commit to inculcate gender parity in decision making processes both at the nation and local levels of leadership. The declaration also addresses the barriers for women participation and leadership by urging states to ensure that women have access to education,⁵⁴ property and land,⁵⁵ as well as protection against any forms of gender-based violence.⁵⁶

States also commit to gender mainstreaming in development processes.⁵⁷ This is in efforts to recognize that women who are often left out need to be included at the consultative table and actively participate in socio economic decisions not only within their communities but also at higher echelons of authority.

2.7. African Union Strategy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE).

The African Union strategy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) 2018-2028 which was launched during the AU Summit February 2019 is based on an inclusive and multi sectoral approach and builds on the lessons learned from the 2009 gender policy.⁵⁸

⁵¹ Abdulmelik, N., & Belay, T. (2019). Advancing Women's Political Rights in Africa: The Promise and Potential of ACDEG. *Africa Spectrum*, 54(2), 147–161.

⁵² Amnesty International, Women's Rights are Human Rights, (2016) Our Work Women's Rights issue, www.amnestyusa.org/our-work/issues/women-s-rights

⁵³ Preamble, SGDEA

⁵⁴ Declaration 8.

⁵⁵ Declaration 7

⁵⁶ Declaration 4

⁵⁷ Declaration 12

⁵⁸ African Union strategy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) 2018-2028.

The GEWE strategy identifies and proposes practical measures to eliminate the major social and economic constraints hindering gender equality and women's empowerment if Africa is to achieve the goals of Agenda 2063 and specifically Aspiration 6 which envisions *"An Africa where development is people driven, relying upon the potential offered by people, especially its women and youth and caring for children."* The GEWE strategy is aligned to the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in particular, goal number 5 which aims to *"achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls."*

The Strategy is transformational in that its outcomes aim to mitigate, if not eliminate the major constraints hindering gender equality and women's empowerment, so that women and girls may participate fully in economic activities, political affairs, and social endeavours. It is a framework document to strengthen women's agency in Africa and ensure that women's voices are amplified, and their concerns are fully addressed. The GEWE strategy not only identifies the root causes of gender inequality and gender gaps such as: patriarchal norms, poverty, discrimination against women and girls and weak political will and accountability; but also provides detailed actions and interventions that can be undertaken by institutions, policymakers, and advocates for gender development to generate the intended outcomes that will improve a lot of women and girls on the continent.

More specifically, Pillar 4 focuses on leadership, voice, and visibility. Women and girls have equal voice and exercise agency in the home, community, and public spaces. Gender stereotypes, the social norms around gender in the home, community and work result in women being effectively silenced. This pillar recognizes that for women to have a voice, they need to be equally represented in all areas of decision-making and be able to participate with impact, through the removal of all forms of barriers including access to education, prevalent gender-based violence, biases for male leadership, women being relegated to more conservative roles in society and inadequate socio-economic empowerment for women.

This foregoing section illustrates the vast legal and policy frameworks in place to tackle gender equality and enhance women's participation and leadership. However, implementation and overcoming socioeconomic cultural and political barriers remain the key concerns with these arrays of frameworks. The subsequent section further reviews participation and leadership nuances for women in Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia.

2.8. Other notable legal and normative instruments

2.8.1. The Istanbul Convention

Formally it was known as the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. Whilst not explicitly on WPL, it highlights key intersections of GBVAWG that link with it including an enabling normative and legal framework that supports the leadership and participation of women in all their diversity, in decision making whilst addressing the key barrier that is gender-based violence against women and girls. By addressing violence as a structural barrier to equality, it supports a feminist vision of leadership⁵⁹ that factors in a gendered perspective on the impact of violence on women and girls and its disproportionate manifestation in facets of their lives including leadership and their participation in decision making.

2.8.2. Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action has turned 30 years in 2025 since its adoption in 1995. It includes sections on women in power and decision making as a key and strategic area towards realizing gender equality and calls upon governments to tangible action so that women and men share power and responsibility at home, in the workplace and in the wider national and international spaces. It provides essential guidance as to how an intersectional shift can be realised when it comes to WPL and governance. Governments committed through the BDPfA to promote women's empowerment and "full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power."⁶⁰ It further links women's leadership to sustainable development, peace building, democracy, and social justice.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Council of Europe. "The Convention in Brief." *Action against violence against women and domestic violence – Istanbul Convention*, Council of Europe, n.d., <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/the-convention-in-brief>. Accessed 23 July 2025.

⁶⁰ United Nations. *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*. Adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women, 15 September 1995, para. 13. United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/>.

⁶¹ United Nations. *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*. Adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women, 15 September 1995, para. 16-18. United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/>.

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We must develop our narrative and challenge conventional thinking and paradigms. We must rekindle the passion of our founders and people in Pan Africanism, through unity, self-reliance, integration, and solidarity.”

Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma

Freedom Fighter, first woman Chairperson of the African Union

CHAPTER

03

**WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION
AND LEADERSHIP IN KEY
CONTEXTS**

3. Women's Participation And Leadership In Key Contexts.

This section of the report highlights the key contexts, Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Nepal and Afghanistan as case studies for women's participation and leadership. It summarizes the law and policy framework for the promotion of women's right to participate in decision making and take up key positions in leadership across all levels of society, as well as the identified barriers.

3.1. Kenya.

According to the 2019 National Census, women comprise 51.2% of the total population. Kenya's Vision 2030 aspirations and the consequent Sessional Paper No. 10 on Vision 2030 highlight that women should be equal players in the social, political, and economic pillars of the economy. The National Policy on Gender and Development of 2000, 2011, and 2019, which focus on gender equality and development, aim to further mainstream the needs of women and girls in society.⁶²

Despite all these efforts women continue to be significantly under-represented in management and leadership positions in the social and economic spheres. In fact, this under-representation has compounded to a gender gap within the labour force.⁶³ Several challenges compounded by the intersections of class, age, and education disparities remain, with stark outcomes. Women are particularly vulnerable to poverty especially at the household and community levels. This is exacerbated by gender-based violence, harmful cultural attitudes and beliefs around gender roles, norms, and female empowerment which in turn limits their agency to equal participation and leadership.⁶⁴

Politically, the implementation and operationalization of legislation on gender parity has remained a challenge despite article 81 (b) of the Kenyan Constitution on the general principles of the electoral system providing that, *"not more than two-thirds of the members of elective public bodies shall be of the same gender."* This connotes that women should occupy at least one third of the elective bodies in Kenya. Unfortunately, historical prejudices and stereotypes have ensured that a bill that would enshrine this legislative provision has twice failed to get the numbers to go through parliamentary debate in a male-dominated house.⁶⁵

In 2012, the Attorney General in Kenya filed a case in the Supreme Court seeking an advisory opinion to provide guidance on the implementation of the 2/3 gender rule. As strategic litigation continues to serve as a tool for advancing social justice various movement holders including Womankind partner CREAM enjoined in the case as interested parties.⁶⁶

The main concern was lack of a guarantee that the number of women from the lists of nominees provided by political parties would ensure that at least 1/3 of members in each house of parliament would be of one gender. Further if the 2/3 gender threshold was not achieved at the ballot, there would be a problem of correcting the deficit since the number of members of the National Assembly and the Senate is predetermined by the Constitution. It was thus necessary to seek judicial opinion and guidance ahead of the 2013 general elections.

Subsequently, the 2013 and 2017 Parliaments struggled to give life to the requirements of this rule, and this failure further demonstrates the complexities of negotiating and upholding democratic principles, the people's wishes, and constitutional imperatives.⁶⁷ The court arrived at the conclusion that the principle would be realized progressively but affirmed legislative measures to give effect to the principle. They further gave a review timeline for 2015. There have been several attempts to leverage on the courts to compel the Kenyan parliament to adopt legislation that would give a framework to bring into life the 2/3 gender rule. One key success has been the case challenging the constitutionality of the 11th⁶⁸ and 12th parliaments on their constitutionality anchored on the constitution as pertains to fulfilling the two thirds gender principle. In the latter, the High court ruled in favour of the petitioners CREAM and other key civil society actors. This was challenged by the Kenyan parliament and the court of appeal in 2019 affirmed the High court's decision.⁶⁹

⁶² Prasad, A., Murgai, R., Mulatu, M., Namara, S., Hanusch, M., Zaman, H., Fan, Q., & Bakilana, A. M. (2024). *Kenya economic update: Special focus on women's economic empowerment*. P. 18, 19. World Bank Group. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/099120924042528216>

⁶³ KNBS (2019). Kenya Economic Survey, Kenya National Bureau of Statistics.

⁶⁴ USAID, Gender Equality and Female Empowerment Fact Sheet – April 2020

⁶⁵ Awuor P. 2013. Gender mainstreaming and women empowerment in political party processes in Kenya: Implementing the new Constitution in Earnest, International Journal of Humanities and Social Science, vol. 3 (3), 62-71.

⁶⁶ Advisory Opinion Reference No. 2 of 2012 [2012] eKLR

⁶⁷ Akala B. May 21, 2017. Election season offers a reminder that Kenya remains deeply sexist, The Conversation, <https://theconversation.com/election-season-offers-a-reminder-that-kenya-remains-deeply-sexist-77427>

⁶⁸ Centre for Rights Education and Awareness (CREAW) & 3 Others v Speaker of the National Assembly & 3 Others [2017] eKLR, Petition No. 397 of 2018

⁶⁹ Speaker of the National Assembly v Centre for Rights Education & Awareness & 7 others [2019] eKLR Neutral citation: [2019] KECA 655 (KLR)

The 2022 general election witnessed a positive shift in political participation and representation of women. Female candidates made up an estimated 11% of the total number of candidates gazetted by the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC). This election also recorded an increment in the number of women vying for elective positions, which ultimately resulted in an increased number of women successfully elected. For instance, the number of female gubernatorial candidates increased from 9 in 2017 to 22 in 2022.⁷⁰ Out of these 22, 7 women were elected as County Governors, representing a 32% success rate.

As of 2023, women in Kenya hold 201 of the 1882 elective seats, representing 10.6% of elected leaders. This is up from 172 (9.1%) seats after the 2017 election and 145 (7.7%) after the 2013 election. Post the election, the national cabinet comprised 7 women Cabinet Secretary nominees out of 22, representing 32% of the cabinet. The President also appointed three other women to the Executive, including the Advisor on National Security, the Advisor on Women's Rights and Agency, and the Secretary to the Cabinet, bringing the representation of women in the Executive to 39%. This is an improvement from the 2017 Cabinet, which had a 30% representation of women.

Since then, there have been several attempts by both government and women rights organisations and movement holders to provide steer towards the implementation of the two thirds gender rule. In 2024, the State department for Gender and Affirmative action presented to the National Parliament's Justice and Legal Affairs Committee (JLAC) a comprehensive report compiled by a Multi Sectoral Working Group convened by the department and comprising of both state and non-state actors working on gender including WK partners CREAM and FIDA Kenya. The report outlined previous efforts both legislative and administrative and made progressive recommendations aimed at realizing the two thirds gender rule. Moreso in this collaborative approach, the working group aimed to galvanize political goodwill in the 13th parliament (2022-2025).

However, JLAC agreed in principle with the report's recommendations, they failed to catalyse these measures by asserting that the 13th parliament could not realize them owing to their 'ambitious' nature.

Christine Kung'u, Chairperson of FIDA Kenya as part of a press conference by WROs that constituted the MSWG asserted that the government continues to 'play around' with the two thirds gender rule and its implementation. Only choosing to commit towards its progressive realization during campaign periods during the general elections period as a ploy to garner votes and support from women voters and leaders but once in office they promptly sideline and renege on their promise when in office.⁷¹

Women's representation in the National Assembly and the Cabinet still fails to meet the Constitutional two-thirds gender requirement for elective and appointive positions, even with the existence of the women representative position. The women who choose to vie for political seats are few and face a goliath task in running against their majority male counterparts. They are often the subject of derogatory remarks on their private lives, economic status, level of education and social background. Some suffer gender-targeted violence and cyber bullying because of their candidatures and campaigns, amongst other intimidation tactics which extend even to their families and friends. The progressive constitutional provisions are therefore not necessarily a reflection of the narratives around women participation and leadership in the country. There is much to be done when it comes to addressing harmful attitudes and beliefs embedded in Kenyan society. This was one key recommendation nuanced by the MSWG. In addition, much more research, data analysis and public discourse is needed as regards the status of women's voting and political participation, especially the quality of this and what is possible to increase it, as this goes way beyond election-centric democratic engagement.

3.2. Uganda

Uganda has various policy and legal frameworks that have the potential to support women's participation in decision-making processes and spaces. In theory, Uganda's robust legal and policy framework guarantees gender equity and equality in the public and private spheres. The 1995 Constitution of the Republic of Uganda clearly outlines the rights of women in Article 31, 32 and 33. One of the specific strategies of Uganda's National Gender Policy (1997) and the more recent Uganda Gender Policy (2007) is to develop strategies to eliminate discrimination against women in elective and appointment systems and structures of governance. The government also enacted the Equal Opportunity Commission (EOC) Act of 2007, which promotes the elimination of inequality because of sex as well as affirmative action policies. The Presidential Elections Act (2000) provides for both males and females to contest for

⁷⁰ UN WOMEN, A Summary Analysis of Women's Performance in Kenya's 2022 Election, 2022.

⁷¹ Setback as parliament postpones implementation of two thirds gender rule to the next parliament, <https://youtu.be/t71prpY9svI?si=0ADXGBqWk-dld-MW523> November 2024 <accessed on 7/7/2025>

presidency.⁷² The Parliamentary Elections Act (2005) and the Local Governments Act (1997) require 30% reserved seats for women at national and sub-national levels of decision-making and strongly support women's participation in politics without discrimination.⁷³ In addition, by adopting the SDGs, including goal 5, Uganda committed to ensuring women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all decision-making levels in political life. Currently, there are 189 Women MPs (including 14 ex officio Members) constituting 34% of Women in the 11th Parliament. There are 14 Women Cabinet Ministers constituting 45% out of 31 Cabinet Ministers and 24 Women State Ministers constituting 48% out of 50 Ministers of State.⁷⁴

In public service, all public officers are bound by the detailed and comprehensive Uganda Public Service Standing Orders (2010) which addresses various aspects of public officers including clear provisions for dealing with sexual harassment such as redress mechanisms. Unfortunately, these Standing Orders do not take into consideration underlying gender dimensions, such as reproductive roles of women outside their duties to the House, and their creation of workplace obstacles that hinder the promotion of female public servants. As such, research into this and other gender marginalizations would be useful, especially considering Uganda's very publicly aggressive stances against sexual and gender minorities, many of whom must hide or constrain their identities for their own safety and that of their families. As such, MPs and other elected officials would find it difficult to support these cohorts in any public way.

The Medium and Small Enterprise (MSME) Policy (2015) which guides this sector states gender equity, inclusiveness, and environmentally friendly business for sustainable development as one of its objectives and prescribes interventions to achieve this goal. Furthermore, the Investment Code (1991) provides favourable conditions for investments, among others by the establishment of the Uganda Investment Authority. However, it lacks specific provisions to support the entry and participation of women in the investment sector. Professional associations make their own rules, and there is little data available to analyse the extent to which they ensure gender equity in positions of leadership and management.

Notwithstanding the notable gains made towards increasing women's participation in the public decision-making process in Uganda, gender equality and women's empowerment remains a significant challenge. Women are still under-represented in political and in socio-economic spheres and the 30% affirmative action seems to be the maximum as moving towards 50:50 Gender Parity is increasingly an uphill task.

In 2018, the Robert Bosch Stiftung (Foundation) GmbH (RBSG) commissioned a study in Uganda to take a closer look at which conditions need to be in place to advance women's rights in public policy decision-making processes. The findings from the study revealed that women leaders in public policy making and implementation processes face several challenges that hinder advancement and promotion of women's rights. The challenges exist at a personal level, while others are more macro, including challenges with structures, procedures and resources. Personal challenges included issues of capacity to effectively influence, inability of women leaders to conceptualize issues, and the self-limiting and negative perceptions of women as leaders. The structural hindrances included preferred male leadership over female leadership due to patriarchy, lack of goodwill in enhancing women's participation and leadership, and the rampant sexual harassment of women. The procedural challenges highlighted the low numbers of women in key decision-making spaces and the centralization of power within decision-making processes in spite of decentralization.

In addition, most interventions target women in elective politics, leaving out other components and constituencies within the broader area of leadership in advancing women's rights in public decision-making processes in Uganda. This means that there has been a disproportionate focus on women's participation only in political affairs leaving out the need to enhance their participation in socio-economic decisions within their households, communities, and workplaces. In any case, not all women would be amenable to vying for political seats necessitating the need to enhance their agency for decision making at the local level.

There are other categories of women such as women with disabilities and those from refugee and rural communities, or minority ethnic groups in Uganda facing limited spaces and opportunities for leadership and decision-making in their homes, communities, and beyond due to socio-cultural, economic, and political barriers. Included here are previously mentioned groups such as sexual and gender minorities, who face specific and amplified obstacles, violences and challenges. These more vulnerable groups are often overlooked and made an afterthought in consultative and decision-making processes, and as such their welfare is never highlighted as a concern. There is, however, a gradual shift owing to work being undertaken by civil organizations working within the communities to strengthen their agency in society. This strongly highlights the intersectional barriers women face in participation in their everyday affairs.

⁷² Solome Nakaweesi-Kimbugwe, Country Analysis: Leadership in Advancing Women's Rights in Public Decision-Making Processes in Uganda, Robert Bosch Stiftung, 2018

⁷³ Women Leadership Development (2014), Women's Leadership in Mainstream Politics: A Case of Uganda's Political Parties; and Isis-Women's International Cross-Cultural Exchange (2014), Making A Difference Beyond Numbers: Towards Women's Substantive Engagement in Political Leadership in Uganda.

⁷⁴ <https://www.parliament.go.ug/page/uganda-women-parliamentary-association-uwopa> accessed 9/11/2023.

3.3. Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, 80% of the population resides in rural areas and women provide majority of the agricultural labour in these communities.⁷⁵ However, their contributions often go largely unrecognized, and fathers, husbands and other men in these communities have supported the restricted access of women to resources, and even to platforms for active and intentional community participation. Worse still, one in three women experience physical, emotional, or sexual violence, 65% of women have experienced female genital mutilation, and only half of girls who enrol in primary schools ever make it to grade 5. Although the primary school enrolment rate of girls in Ethiopia has climbed from 21 to 91% in the last three decades, the majority are unable to transition to secondary and tertiary school due to distance, personal security gaps, and economic challenges.⁷⁶ This limits their chances of engaging in political and community decision making processes, given their limited educational backgrounds and the existing, socially supported, cultural perceptions against women leadership.

From an economic lens, women often face different constraints to men, including significantly less access to credit and markets. According to the Ethiopian Demographic and Health Survey in 2016, 30% of Ethiopian women do not make decisions on individual and family issues. Instead, husbands and male romantic partners make a large number of reproductive decisions for them, including whether or not to use birth control methods, and whether or not to give birth in a health facility or seek the assistance of a trained medical provider. While there is need for updated and more qualitative statistics, the general situation is concerning⁷⁷, especially because of the reduced maternal and child health outcomes that are directly related to mothers' lack of access to education, community support and networks, and decision-making agency. Additionally, ongoing, and socially supported harmful traditional practices such as early marriage and childbearing, female genital mutilation, and gender-based violence all have adverse effects on Ethiopian women.

Article 25 of the Ethiopian constitution guarantees all person's equality before the law and prohibits any discrimination on grounds of gender. Further, Article 35(3) emphasizes equal opportunity for women to participate in the decision-making process by giving them the right to vote and be elected. Affirmative action has therefore been one of the inclusions in the legislative frameworks owing to the historical legacy of inequality and discrimination suffered by women in Ethiopia. The purpose of such measures enables women to participate with men in political, social, and economic life as well as in public and private institutions.

Ethiopia has made noteworthy progress in recent years in bolstering women's political empowerment. In 2018, the Ethiopian parliament appointed the first woman to serve as president of the country. The international community applauded Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed when he appointed ten women to top ministerial positions, resulting in a gender-balanced cabinet.⁷⁸ Notably, the present proportion of women in Parliament is 41.5%, which is a respectable number in international comparison. However, there are very few women in political party leadership.⁷⁹ The most significant reason for women's representation in the Parliament is the gender quotas of the country's largest party, the Prosperity Party. The number of women in the Parliament does not necessarily indicate real opportunities for a critical mass of women to sustainably influence political decision-making, if women have been elected or appointed to fill quotas. It is important to note that the participation of female candidates in the 2021 elections decreased from the 2015 elections, which can be explained in part by the worsened security situation in the country.⁸⁰

Despite these progressive steps, the political leaders and the public at large seem to have maintained a generally unfavourable attitude toward women's capability to lead and administer tasks in government bodies of Ethiopia. Majority of the people of Ethiopia consider women as homemakers, best suited in doing childcare, cleaning, fetching, and caring of elders, and other domestic activities; hence, women continue been routinely marginalized and neglected in electoral, organic capacities from the top political decision-making process of the government bodies of the country.⁸¹

⁷⁵ USAID, Ethiopia Fact Sheet Empowering Ethiopian Women July 2017

⁷⁶ USAID, Gender, and Women's empowerment in Ethiopia 2020.

⁷⁷ Ethiopia Mini Demographic and Health Survey 2019, <https://www.unicef.org/ethiopia/media/1721/file/The%202019%20Ethiopia%20Mini%20Demographic%20and%20Health%20Survey%20.pdf> accessed 4/2/2025

⁷⁸ Dahir, Abdi Latif. 2018. Ethiopia's new 50% women cabinet isn't just bold—it's smart. <https://qz.com/africa/1426110/ethiopias-new-cabinet-is-50-women/> accessed 9/11/2023.

⁷⁹ Shimelis, K. (2015). Challenges and opportunities of women political participation in Ethiopia. <http://dx.doi.org>.

⁸⁰ <https://demofinland.org/en/our-work-in-ethiopia-womens-participation-supported/> accessed 8/11/2023.

⁸¹ Meseret, S. (2010). The attitudes and views of parliamentarians towards women's political leadership. Addis Ababa University.

3.4. Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe is a country of 13 million people – 51 percent women and 49 percent men. The country attained independence in 1980 with the adoption of the Lancaster House Constitution which enabled black majority rule but protected the white minority's property and land rights. These issues have dominated Zimbabwe's political and economic journey since independence and shaped to a significant extent the current political and economic crisis as well as the sour relationship between the Zimbabwe government and minority world countries including former colonizing state, the United Kingdom.

The Women's movement in Zimbabwe has been documented at different times and more so with due regard to their participation in Zimbabwe's political context and leading movement's participation therein as well.

Women were involved in the Zimbabwean war of liberation and this dated back to the 1890's when the Shona and the Ndebele against the British invaders in 1896 to mark the beginning of the first war of liberation. The country, then called Southern Rhodesia was governed by the British South African Company (BSAC). Zimbabwe gained official independence from the UK on 18 April 1980 but the role of women in the liberation struggle was downplayed to a large degree and was evident when women were excluded from the top administrative structures and had low representation in Parliament and the Senate. However, the involvement of women in the struggle was a fundamental necessity for the revolution and the guarantee for its continuity and the precondition for its victory. Without the full participation of women, the struggle for social, political, economic and cultural independence in Zimbabwe could not have been achieved.

Zimbabwean women, pre and just after independence had been organising through clubs and projects with some progressively becoming organisations and they directed their efforts more prominently towards supporting the independence government as part of their continuing contribution to the liberation and freedom of Zimbabwe. However, in 1983 a significant shift was recorded as a direct resistance to Operation Clean up by the Independence Government. The women's movement galvanized to respond to the arbitrary arrest of over 6,000 women on alleged charges of loitering for prostitution on Harare's streets. The cleanup exercise "cleaned up" nurses, teachers, students, old women. Mothers with babies on their backs and even ordinary school going children.⁸²

In response, the Women's Action Group was formed, and it is today as it was then a critical voice that challenged violations of women's rights by the government, and many other organisations were galvanised along the way.

In the first decade post-independence, various legislative reforms pegged at promoting and realising gender equality were successfully put in place. The Sex Disqualification Act of 1980 allowed women to hold public office, new labour regulations enabling equal pay for equal work as well as regulations linked to maternity leave. The 4th conference on women in Beijing in 1995 fuelled a more radical political perspective for the Women's movement in Zim with an intentional shift towards reforming the constitution. Subsequently, a Women's Rights Charter bore fruit from this drive. However, from the 2000s to date there have been consistent efforts at silencing women in politics and more so those leveraging their civil and political rights for governance reform in the country. Politically motivated silence and violence unleashed on human rights defenders became rife. The 2013 Constitution because of the resilience of Women Rights actors in the Zimbabwe women's movement enshrined the protection of women under sections 56 on Equality and Discrimination⁸³ and 80 on the Rights of Women.⁸⁴

⁸² UN Women – Africa. (2023, October). Assessing the state of the women's movement in Zimbabwe. UN Women East and Southern Africa https://africa.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/state_of_the_womens_movement_in_zimbabwe.pdf (p.5)

⁸³ **Zimbabwe.** (2013). *Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act, 2013*. Harare: Government of Zimbabwe.

Section 56: Equality and non-discrimination

1. All persons are equal before the law and have the right to equal protection and benefit of the law.
2. Women and men have the right to equal treatment, including the right to equal opportunities in political, economic, cultural and social spheres.
3. Every person has the right not to be treated in an unfairly discriminatory manner on such grounds as their nationality, race, colour, tribe, place of birth, ethnic or social origin, language, class, religious belief, political affiliation, opinion, custom, culture, sex, gender, marital status, age, pregnancy, disability or economic or social status, or whether they were born in or out of wedlock.
4. A person is treated in a discriminatory manner for the purpose of subsection (3) if--
 - a. they are subjected directly or indirectly to a condition, restriction or disability to which other people are not subjected; or
 - b. other people are accorded directly or indirectly a privilege or advantage which they are not accorded.
5. Discrimination on any of the grounds listed in subsection (3) is unfair unless it is established that the discrimination is fair, reasonable and justifiable in a democratic society based on openness, justice, human dignity, equality and freedom.
6. The State must take reasonable legislative and other measures to promote the achievement of equality and to protect or advance people or classes of people who have been disadvantaged by unfair discrimination, and--
 - a. such measures must be taken to redress circumstances of genuine need.
 - b. no such measure is to be regarded as unfair for the purposes of subsection (3).

⁸⁴ **Zimbabwe.** (2013). *Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act, 2013*. Harare: Government of Zimbabwe.

Rights of women

1. Every woman has full and equal dignity of the person with men, and this includes equal opportunities in political, economic and social activities.
2. Women have the same rights as men regarding the custody and guardianship of children, but an Act of Parliament may regulate how those rights are to be exercised.
3. All laws, customs, traditions and cultural practices that infringe the rights of women conferred by this Constitution are void to the extent of the infringement.

Today, WPL in Zimbabwe particularly in politics and the private sector faces significant challenges despite constitutional provisions for gender equality. While some progress has been made in increasing women's representation in parliament, particularly through quota systems, their presence in local government and private sector lags. Gender inequality is also prevalent in the economic sector, with women concentrated in the informal sector and facing barriers in accessing resources and opportunities.

WAG further asserts to the fact above by highlighting, "Half the time we do not look at the law and what it says, mainly because the law and constitution are general and speak about equality and 50/50 representation in different structures. But when it comes to the actual implementation, it becomes a challenge as it depends on interpretation and how one chooses to look at it and what angle you pick. There is a focus on the numbers now, and the numbers show that there is no equity. The numbers have been a way of analysing data outside of what the law provides."

3.5. Nepal

In Nepal, the narrative of women's leadership is one marked by determination, courage, and resilience. Nepal's journey towards gender equality saw the emergence of feminist movements in the early 1900s, challenging existing norms and advocating for women's rights. Later in the 20th century, significant political changes, including the transition from monarchy to a federal democratic republic, created opportunities for discussing human rights, particularly those of women.⁸⁵ A sizable country-wide milestone, the Constitution of Nepal (2015), enshrined identical rights for women, the poor, the vulnerable, and the marginalized that became a watershed in the fight for gender equality. Nepal's 2015 Constitution has been among the most progressive in South Asia for gender equality and the implementation of women's rights.⁸⁶

Women's Participation and Leadership in Nepal have seen significant progress, particularly in local governments due to constitutional provisions and quota systems. However, challenges persist, including underrepresentation in executive positions, societal biases, and unequal access to resources and support. Nepal's 2017 local elections saw a notable increase in women's representation with 34.4 percent in provincial parliaments and 40.45 percent in local government bodies. In 2022, women were elected to 41 percent of local government roles.

Women in Nepal have long experienced high levels of poverty, social exclusion, and marginalization because of their gender. In the past, Nepal operated as a patriarchal society where men held leadership positions in families and were seen as superior to women. This limited women's participation in societal affairs. Nepali women often occupy lower socio-economic positions than men, facing challenges beyond education and training. Limited access to credit, land ownership, and economic opportunities hinder their advancement. Societal expectations restrict women's participation in decision-making, sustaining gender imbalances.⁸⁷

In Nepal's ongoing struggle for gender justice, education and skill development are critical tools in challenging structural inequalities and shifting power relations. While significant progress has been made, particularly in urban areas, access to education remains deeply unevenly shaped by intersecting factors such as geography, caste, ethnicity, disability, and economic status. Feminist activists and community leaders across Nepal are at the forefront of expanding educational access, recognizing it not merely as a tool for individual advancement, but as a collective strategy to disrupt intergenerational cycles of marginalization and to reimagine equitable futures.

Feminist and community-led initiatives such as the Women's Empowerment and Livelihoods Program Water Environment and Life (WEL), Karnali Integrated Rural Development and Research Centre (KIRDARC Nepal), and the Women's Skill Development Project (WSDP) offer vocational training and economic empowerment pathways rooted in local knowledge and lived realities. These programs resist narrow definitions of development by addressing the political, economic, and socio-cultural barriers that limit women's autonomy. Initiatives like Solar Sister, Girls in Technology, and women-led cooperatives and microfinance groups further reflect how women are creating and claiming spaces for leadership.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ The Policy Tank. (2023, July 20). *Women's leadership in Nepal: Breaking barriers and shaping the future*. Medium. <https://medium.com/@thepolicy-tank/womens-leadership-in-nepal-breaking-barriers-and-shaping-the-future-8271661f1825>

⁸⁶ The Himalayan Times. (n.d.). *Women's leadership development, gender roles and relations*. Retrieved July 9, 2025, from The Himalayan Times website: <https://thehimalayantimes.com/business/womens-leadership-development-gender-roles-and-relations>

⁸⁷ Ibid

⁸⁸ Ibid

Afghanistan

On 15 August 2021, the Taliban took control of Kabul following the collapse of the Afghan National Security Forces and the fall of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. They later announced a new government in September 2021 under the name “*Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan*,” which is referred to as the *de facto* authorities by the UN.

Afghanistan is a signatory to CEDAW which requires States to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country. It clearly states that women have equal rights to participate in the formulation and implementation of government policy to hold public office and perform public functions at all levels of government including – the executive, judicial, administrative, and other governing and key decision-making bodies.

“As drastic changes unfold in Afghanistan, the state continues to bear a legal obligation under International Human Rights Law to guarantee the Human Rights of Women.” (UN OHCHR Experts)

Afghan women’s rights have long been shaped by conflict and political shifts. While Afghanistan’s political landscape has historically been dominated by patriarchal norms, progress toward gender equality has existed in earlier periods. The 1964 Constitution granted women the right to vote and run for office, and the 1987 Constitution under the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan formally recognized gender equality and women’s participation in public life. However, these rights were unevenly implemented and concentrated in urban areas, and they were later rolled back under Taliban rule in the 1990s. From 2001 to 2021, women’s rights were again recognized under the 2004 Constitution, leading to significant improvements in access to education, political representation, and participation in all aspects of public and social life.

Specific quotas were established to ensure women’s representation in Afghanistan’s legislative bodies, including the Parliament (Wolesi Jirga) and the Senate (Meshrano Jirga). For example, the 2004 Constitution mandated that at least 27% of the seats in the Wolesi Jirga be reserved for women, making Afghanistan one of the few countries with significant female parliamentary representation in the region. These quotas aimed to amplify women’s voices in lawmaking and governance.⁸⁹

Significant efforts were also made to enhance women’s participation and leadership (WPL) across various sectors. A National Action Plan for Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA) was developed to coordinate government and international efforts to empower women. This included programs focused on building women’s leadership skills, increasing their representation in decision-making roles, and providing capacity-building workshops to develop competencies in governance, entrepreneurship, and public service.

Efforts to improve women’s access to health services led to expanded maternal health programs, better availability of female health workers, and targeted campaigns to reduce infant and maternal mortality. Education initiatives, such as the National Education Strategic Plan, worked to increase girls’ enrollment in schools, reduce dropout rates, and improve female literacy—especially in rural areas where girls’ education had historically been neglected.

Women’s access to community representation was also strengthened by supporting Women’s Shuras (local councils) and grassroots organizations, enabling women to participate in local decision-making and dispute resolution processes. Additionally, specialized institutions were established to promote women’s empowerment, such as the Ministry of Women’s Affairs and independent bodies tasked with advocating gender equality and protecting women’s rights.⁹⁰

Despite these advances, challenges remained, including ongoing security threats, social resistance to women’s participation, and infrastructural limitations. Nevertheless, these combined efforts marked a notable period of progress for Afghan women’s rights and leadership before the political upheavals of 2021.

However, since the Taliban’s return to power the status of the rights of Afghan women has significantly deteriorated with a more systemic obliteration of any progress achieved when they were previously ousted and some form of democratic change was manifested in the country in the decade before 2021. For example, a decree from December 2021 mandates that women must be accompanied by a male relative when travelling for more than seventy-seven kilometers from home, and in more restrictive locations this mandate applies for any form of movement for women. For those without male relatives, this scenario is even more dire. Education access has also been systematically dismantled since the

⁸⁹ Adili, A. Y., & van Bijlert, M. “Afghanistan’s Incomplete New Electoral Law: Changes and Controversies.” *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 22 Jan. 2017. Document ID 1068653. Reproduced on ecoi.net. Retrieved from <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/1068653.html>

⁹⁰ Krishnan, N., & Wieser, C. “Women’s Voices Should Help Shape Afghanistan’s Future.” *World Bank Blogs*, 7 Mar. 2017. World Bank. Retrieved from <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/endpovertyinsouthasia/women-s-voices-should-help-shape-afghanistan-s-future>

return of the Taliban in 2021 and as at 2023 girls cannot undertake high school or university education thus erasing any progress made previously and further shrinking space for women and girls to actively participate in society.

As of early 2025, the Taliban have issued over 105 decrees targeting women's rights and freedoms since their return to power in August 2021. These decrees encompass a wide range of restrictions, including bans on education, employment, public presence, and legal access, effectively instituting a system of gender apartheid in Afghanistan

For example, the Taliban's PVPV law, decreed on 31 July 2024, codifies a system of gender apartheid, turning what were previously a series of decrees into a legal framework. It empowers the Ministry of Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (MPVPV) to police dress, mobility, speech, and behaviour—with punishments ranging from verbal warnings to arrests.

“When I go out, my father is worried about me leaving the house, and I am stressed about leaving the house even with my full hijab. These changes started with my family, and the changes that came to me personally, when I see checkpoints, I adjust my hijab and put my phone away to pass them.”

— Woman respondent, Kabul ⁹¹

In another example, the introduction of the new [Taliban 'vice and virtue' law](#) has had a significant impact on the rights and freedoms of Afghan women. This law has effectively stripped Afghan women of their basic human rights and dignity. It has also rolled back much of the progress made in women's rights over the past two decades, isolating women from public life and worsening gender inequalities in Afghan society. This order, which enforces strict social codes, particularly targeting women and their role in society, threatens not only the rights and freedoms of Afghan citizens but also the stability and security of the broader region and international community.

Over 105

Number of decrees issued by the Taliban targeting women's rights and freedoms since their return to power in August 2021; encompassing a wide range of restrictions, including bans on education, employment, public presence, and legal access, effectively instituting a system of gender apartheid in Afghanistan.

⁹¹Anami, Jill. "From Nairobi to Kabul: No Safe Space for Women Everywhere!" *Womankind Worldwide*, 23 July 2025. Retrieved from <https://www.womankind.org.uk/from-nairobi-to-kabul-no-safe-space-for-women-everywhere/>

“The Taliban’s ‘vice and virtue’ order is a set of strict regulations imposed by the Taliban government, which governs public behaviour, dress, and social interactions, particularly targeting women. These regulations are enforced by the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, a body tasked with ensuring that Afghan society adheres to the Taliban’s interpretation of Islamic law.”⁹²

Afghan women are increasingly isolated with 18 percent, according to UN Women, reporting that they have not had any contact with other women outside of their immediate family in periods ranging from three months to longer. These restrictions on freedom of movement have significantly impacted how women organize collectively at community level let alone nationally to realize some form of dissent or even dialogue. They have little or no space to influence decisions impacting their lives from the family unit, their communities and subsequently in Afghanistan’s society. In the words of various activists in exile – Afghan women are being erased. With the shrinking civic space in the country, the Taliban has banned women NGO workers, women have been removed from leadership positions including as board members of NGOs and forced these organizations to replace the word “women” with “men” in project documents.

The systematic rollback of women’s rights in Afghanistan under the Taliban is a devastating setback for the country and its people. This reversal erases years of progress and denies millions of women and girls the chance to live with dignity, freedom, and opportunity.

Consequently, the current political state in Afghanistan serves as a dire example of what a world would look like without women actively participating and leading in society.⁹³



⁹² **Rahmani, Maryam.** “The Taliban’s ‘Vice and Virtue’ Order.”

Womankind Worldwide, 3 Sept. 2024. Retrieved from <https://www.womankind.org.uk/the-talibans-vice-and-virtue-order/>

⁹³ *Ibid*

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Inequality can be done away with, only by establishing a new society, where men and women will enjoy equal rights, resulting from an upheaval in the means of production and in all social relations. Thus, the status of women will improve only with the elimination of the system that exploits them."

Thomas Sankara

Pan African Revolutionary and Leader of Burkina Faso

CHAPTER

04

FINDINGS

4. Findings

This section of the study highlights some of the key findings from the data collected and is presented in two key sections. The first is a summary of the barriers that hinder women's participation and leadership, and in the second section we focus on strategies and opportunities that have been deployed to enhance women's participation.

One key point relates to the scope of women's participation and leadership, which is often discussed within the context of political governance and electoral processes and leadership. While literature shows that women's participation is not limited to these spheres, this is the context in which it is often discussed, based on a theoretical assumption and hypothesis that if participation and leadership is fostered at the highest levels of governance, these principles would organically filter down to all levels of society. While this has not been the case due to the various barriers indicated below, there is a tentative agreement that ensuring women's active participation in the making of decisions at all levels within their spheres of influence, and their ability to take up positions of leadership, is likely to lead to positive outcomes with respect to redressing gendered forms of discrimination and inequities.

4.1. Barriers to women's participation and leadership.

4.1.1. Deep seated patriarchal norms that promote gender inequality.

In the contexts we reviewed, the concept of leadership is linked to patriarchal constructs creating a misleading narrative that gives room for the continued existence of democratic roll-backs including fallacies about women's ability as political leaders.⁹⁴ These deep-seated cultural notions are also a challenge in other contexts such as Afghanistan where religious practices are interwoven with law and governance to further compound the barriers to women's participation and leadership⁹⁵.

For example, Afghan women face severe restrictions in movement in every facet of society without male physical presence, particularly men who are relatives. In addition to these restrictions women are required by law to cover themselves completely from head to toe in public. This comprises a full body covering which only leaves a mesh for vision. All in all, women are encouraged to stay home entirely unless necessary. As highlighted in the previous chapter, the Taliban is not only restricting the participation of women in everyday life and removing any access or opportunity to influence decisions pertaining to their existence – the Taliban through harmful dogma and authoritarian oppression is inadvertently erasing women from Afghanistan's society.

Many women may emerge in positions of national significance in politics, business, and civil society but space for leadership remains limited and in some instances donor dependent⁹⁶. Insecurity, harassment, and corruption are also common impediments in this sphere. Women in positions of authority are perceived as symbolic, lacking in social support, as having weak decision-making and enforcement power, and lacking access to autonomous sources of financial and social capital. Men remain disengaged and often alienated from efforts to promote women's leadership, which they associate with physical or sexualized attributes rather than intellectual capacity. In the Afghanistan example, this was exacerbated in 2021 when the Taliban took over the country.⁹⁷ The return to school for all Afghan girls over the age of 12 was then indefinitely postponed, leaving 1.1 million girls and young women without access to formal education. Further, in December 2022, university education for women was suspended until further notice, affecting over 100,000 female students attending public and private higher education institutions.⁹⁸

On August 21st, 2024, the Taliban released fresh edicts banning, among other things, the sound of women's voices in public including the internet and social media, the playing of music, and the transport of solo female travellers.⁹⁹ The case of Afghanistan also highlights the critical role of leveraging on religion in restricting the participation of women in public spheres and leaving them with no say in political affairs.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁴ Matandela, M. (2020). The convergence of patriarchy and democratic rollback in the East and Horn of Africa. In *Challenging patriarchy: The role of patriarchy in the rollback of democracy* (pp. 13–20). Heinrich Böll Stiftung.

⁹⁵ Aarya Nijat, Jennifer Murtazashvili, (2015) Women's Leadership Roles in Afghanistan, USIP.

⁹⁶ KR6

⁹⁷ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/24/one-year-taliban-still-attacking-girls-right-education#:~:text=The%20Taliban's%20misogynistic%20regime%20has,respect%20girls%20right%20to%20education>. Accessed 1/11/2023.

⁹⁸ Belquis Ahmadi, Hodei Sultan, Taking a Terrible Toll: The Taliban's Education Ban, USIP 2023

⁹⁹ <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/08/22/middleeast/taliban-law-women-voices-intl-latam/index.html> Associated Press, via CNN. Accessed 4/2/2025.

¹⁰⁰ Afghanistan is deemed to be an Islamic religious conservative country.

Across these contexts, it has been a consistent challenge to counter the deep-seated, gendered and misinformed notions and beliefs about women's roles that have been accepted by society. Nevertheless, women who have had better access to socio-economic and political opportunities continue to rise to challenge and normalize their position and voice in decision making processes.

4.1.2. Socio-economic and cultural barriers.

Traditional attitudes towards gender equality influence women's advancement in participation and leadership.¹⁰¹ This is further exacerbated by the burden of household chores that women are culturally expected to perform, and the disproportionate care burden that sees them take on an estimated 76% of unpaid care work globally, and which limits the time they have available to take up other work of their choosing, including pursuing leadership opportunities.. Women are also seen as guardians of culture and traditions, and therefore society holds them responsible for imparting even the cultural values that oppress them to younger generations. These beliefs are, in most cases, used by their male counterparts, from family members to fellow national inhabitants, to marginalize and justify why their exclusion from participation processes.¹⁰²

Lack of support by families and community deters women from participating in decision making and taking up leadership positions. Where patriarchal norms and attitudes reign supreme within a family set up, some spouses are not supportive due to stereotypes that are held about such women. A husband can tell the wife, "If you take up this position, you are no longer my wife," which may deter women as there would be a strain on their marriage. Wangui Stoeffler further highlights an example of Nobel Laureate Wangari Maathai's divorce where her ex-husband in his submissions asserted that she was "too educated, too strong, too successful, too stubborn and too hard to control."¹⁰³

Whilst the indomitable feminist leader denied all charges the divorce was granted, she refused to drop her husband's name and in a show of resistance and independence added a letter to alter it to her preference - 'Maathai'. Amidst her emboldened work, her divorce and the allegations made were constantly leveraged to smear her reputation by supporters and some members of the Moi regime who were at the centre of environmental crimes that she vehemently fought against. Incredulously, in November 1989 during a parliamentary seating members slandered Maathai based on this case, as she campaigned against the grabbing of Uhuru Park by the regime to build a 60 storey skyscraper¹⁰⁴.

For women living with disabilities, the situation is even more daunting, they are often an afterthought in decision making processes. Through their lived experiences, they do not have as much say pertaining to their rights, welfare, and services. Often, funded initiatives do not target enhancing the capacities of such double or triple marginalized women to rise above the socio-economic and cultural barriers within their communities and society.¹⁰⁵

Many women are discouraged from venturing into political leadership due to the heavy financial implications involved in the process, such as a supporting team, campaign materials, transport, supplies of relevant clothing and more. There is therefore a need to nudge political parties to financially assist women after assessing their candidature at the national and subnational level. This intervention could be in the form of reducing nomination fees for women and actively supporting them with effective campaigning strategies and funding campaigning materials. An example of equitable measures aimed at advancing women's leadership and participation in the political field.

4.1.3. Lack of an enabling legal and policy framework.

There are several African countries who are parties to progressive legal frameworks enhancing women's leadership. Still, this has not been adequate in addressing the existing barriers to women's rights and participation in decision-making processes. For instance, Zimbabwe is signatory to key women's rights and gender equality instruments, including the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. These instruments form the backdrop for women's participation politics and public administration in Zimbabwe. Section 56 of the Zimbabwean Constitution protects the right of every woman to vote and contest elections as a candidate. The Electoral Act in Section 3 goes further to explicitly prohibit gender-based discrimination in political campaigns. Zimbabwe even created a "women's quota", setting aside 60 out of 270 parliamentary seats for women.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰¹ Kuada J. 2010. Culture and leadership in Africa: a conceptual model and research agenda, *African Journal of Economic and Management Studies*, vol. 1 (1), 9-24. DOI: 10.1108/20400701011028130

¹⁰² KR4

¹⁰³ Stuhlhofer, Eunice Wangui. 2022. "Black, Female, and Divorced: A Discourse Analysis of Wangari Maathai's Leadership with Reflections from Naleli Morojele's Study of Rwandan and South African Female Political Leaders" *Societies* 12, no. 1: 23.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid

¹⁰⁵ KR 5

¹⁰⁶ <https://hivos.org/opinion/new-approaches-needed-to-improve-womens-political-participation-in-zimbabwe/> accessed 5/11/2023.

These provisions notwithstanding, out of eleven presidential candidates in 2023, only one was a woman, and she had to wage a legal battle to get herself on the ballot. Additionally, in the 2023 race for National Assembly seats, 70 women faced off against 637 male candidates (a mere 11% of the candidates), out of which only twenty-two women were elected. Despite Zimbabwe's many progressive provisions and the tireless efforts of politicians, activists, and civil society organizations, the 2023 elections plunged Zimbabwean women further into the shadows of political participation. The elections reflected a nation still deeply enshrined in gender biases and socio-cultural stereotypes on the role of women in society. Violence against women was also a barrier, with limited provisions on addressing spates of attacks on women aspirants.

One of the other barriers is poverty. There are women interested in taking part at the grassroots level as councillors but the prohibitive fees being charged to participate means that most women cannot access these resources. This is a challenge that deters women from taking up leadership positions.¹⁰⁷

Enabling legal and policy frameworks need to be implemented in good faith for progress to be seen in enhancing women's participation and leadership. Laws are also not entirely sufficient. There needs to be accountability measures to ensure that states have ratified frameworks and committed to gender equality and that they are taking progressive steps to enhance women participation and leadership.

4.2. Opportunities for Women's participation and Leadership.

4.2.1. Women leading from the margins.

Despite the barriers noted above, women have been innovatively leading and exercising leadership within their respective spheres. Women have leveraged on opportunities to lead outside mainstream decision-making processes within their societies, such as in local councils, church groups, savings groups, resident or village groups, and local empowerment initiatives. This has built their own capacities and strengthened their confidence in engaging more opportunities for leadership and participation in decision making.

Participants we engaged shared examples of how women have been doing this.

In Ethiopia for example, grassroots levels trainings and capacity strengthening initiatives have encouraged women to take up leadership positions.¹⁰⁸ " This can also include participation of women as leaders in the labour force, at work.¹⁰⁹ This would gradually break down the prejudices held against women's ability to lead" - highlighted SWDA, a Womankind partner working in Oromia, Ethiopia which has a high prevalence on gender-based violence. Under the AWESOME project, they work with and in factories, with women working in various industries in that region. The program raises awareness and interaction with factory owners and advocates, and lobbying management within factories to give women opportunities for leadership and work with law enforcement to stand for the rights of women in factories in identified economic processing zones.

A key impact of this intervention has been the organization of the women working in the factory in groups towards various goals, including savings and personal development. Trainings within the factory include peer to peer discussions where the women are encouraged to show up on time, and leadership positions in the group revolve amongst the women so that the platform allows for everyone to have a chance at a higher role with more responsibility. The snowball effect of this has been a group of empowered female factory workers who are able to articulate their goals and speak with confidence on the issues that affect them.¹¹⁰

4.2.2. Solidarity for and by women.

Another opportunity or strategy exists in the coming together of women to exercise their collective power and agitate for the recognition of their rights. Solidarity in this way, would challenge the prevailing social norms and practices that look down upon amplifying women's voices.

The importance of solidarity for and by women to augment women's leadership opportunities was further buttressed through the various interviews and group discussions we held. According to one participant, it is important for women in positions and spaces of influence to think about how they can also use their influence to mentor and hold space for other women – essentially uplifting others following similar paths. "You have to continue with the solidarity work once you are inside the system, constantly thinking

¹⁰⁷ KR4

¹⁰⁸ KR2, KR3.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Read about the SWDA(Ssiqqee Women's Development Association) Case study here: <https://www.womankind.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Safe-At-Work-Safe-in-Society-Guide.pdf>

through how to navigate those [political] systems which are not made for you and really complex which can be difficult to navigate”¹¹¹.

Partners such as FIDA Kenya and WCC amongst others not mentioned here have catalysed efforts towards this recommendation. As highlighted in earlier chapters, their political leadership academies have created a platform to encourage mentorship, learning and solidarity. Through the Vote a Dada campaign they continue to hold space for women leaders at all levels of Kenyan society amplifying discourse on the role of women and persons with disabilities in political leadership and contribute to increasing the number of women elected in the six elective positions in the Kenyan electoral process. WCC a DWRO, also holds space for women political leaders living with a disability leveraging on media to raise awareness and harnessing it to amplify the voices of these leaders thus building collective power.¹¹²

4.2.3. Civil Society Engagement and Support

Another key opportunity is with respect to the support and solidarity offered by civil society organizations towards the realization of gender equity especially through promoting women's participation and leadership at all levels. Through civil society engagement there have also been efforts to raise awareness and amplify the innovative ways women are exercising their agency and participating in decision making and exercising leadership even in contexts where there is seeming disempowerment and discrimination. Civil society actors also have access to requisite resources that would be able to push forward the work necessary to ensure that across all levels in society, there is an awareness of the importance of equality in decision making and the importance of equal representation in leadership.

In this regard forging good collaborations and allies within civil society is key in ensuring that active strides are made towards ensuring that women's participation and leadership is attained and is also important for pushing the state to adhere to its legal responsibility to provide a suitable framework for this. It was noted with concern by one participant that civil society seem to have forgotten their mandate, which is to hold the state accountable to the commitments they made within human rights and legal frameworks. In competing for resources and considering other interests, civil society actors have sometimes forgotten what their core function should be, which is to function as an ally for the constituency they seek to support.¹¹³

4.2.4. Efforts towards state accountability for women's participation.

The state should also hold itself accountable for enabling women's participation. As can be seen in various contexts, despite a robust legal framework promoting and supporting female leadership, there is still a huge gap where political goodwill is missing. Hence the state ought to undertake transparent processes to ensure that women are effectively included in decision making processes. For example, in Nepal, the Constitution of 2015 guaranteed 33% of all seats in the Constituent Assembly to women, which was previously unimaginable.¹¹⁴ The country also embraced women's roles in high political office, including a woman President since 2015. The country's first female Chief Justice of the Supreme Court was appointed in 2016. Similarly, Nepal had the first female unopposed elected Speaker of the Parliament of Nepal in 2015. Through government support, the political participation of women in the Council of Ministers has also increased slightly.¹¹⁵ 2017 became a landmark year for Nepal as it conducted the first elections since the adoption of its Constitution in 2015 and the first at local levels after more than 17 years under the federal republican political system. It was also a successful year in terms of women's political empowerment and social inclusion.¹¹⁶ At the local level, 41% of newly elected officials were women, along with 34% provincial assembly seats reserved for women. The provincial elections of 2017-2018 saw participation of women candidates in almost all the major political parties, underscoring this as a historic moment in terms of gender inclusion. Women achieved their quota of 40.4 % mandated by the Nepal Election Commission, including the higher posts of mayor and deputy mayor, in which parties were required to include at least one, woman candidate in either of the posts.¹¹⁷

¹¹¹ KII 1 28112023

¹¹² AWESOME Consortium, Annual Report Narrative Y3 2023. Unpublished Internal Report, 2024.

¹¹³ FGD 1 11012024

¹¹⁴ Dahal, G. (2017). Constitution of Nepal and political development: adaptation and challenges of implication. *Janapriya Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, vol.6, 148-159

¹¹⁵ Upreti, Bishnu R.; Upreti, Drishti; and Ghale, Yamuna (2020). *Nepali Women in Politics: Success and Challenges*. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 21(2), 76-93.

¹¹⁶ Lotter, S. (2017). Gender gap, gender trap: negotiations of intersectionality and patriarchy amongst women elites in Nepal. *International Quarterly for Asian Studies*, Vol.48, 1-2, pp. 97-115

¹¹⁷ Asia Foundation, [The Asia Foundation]. (2018). *Nepal's locally elected women representatives: exploratory study of needs and capacity*. Nepal: Australian Aid and The Asia Foundation.

From the foregoing, when the government is willing to advance women's participation and leadership, progress is seen not just at the national level but also at the grassroots. Although the quota system may not necessarily be the most ideal way of enhancing women participation and leadership, it has been a steppingstone in normalizing their decision-making capabilities. As such, it remains important to ensure that the government is kept accountable in implementing their progressive legislative provisions on gender equality in leadership.



Photo: Womankind Worldwide partners left to right: Alice Munala from Women Challenged to Challenge, Elizabeth Gichohi from FIDA Kenya & Liepollo Lebohlang Pheko- a South African political economist and feminist

“

Women belong in all places where decisions are being made. It shouldn't be that women are the exception.”

Ruth Bader Ginsburg (Late)

American Lawyer, Jurist,
Gender Equality Activist and Justice of the
United States Supreme Court

CHAPTER

05

RECOMMENDATIONS

5. Recommendations.

This study has established that despite legislative progress and various special measures to support women's participation and leadership including in politics and governance, they still face multiple layered barriers in accessing political leadership offices. It is on this basis that it makes the following recommendations.

5.1. Women's Economic Justice and Transformative Leadership.

We recommend the design and implementation of state-led and anchored, community driven and intersectional economic justice programs and initiatives. These should be anchored by virtue of human rights law, economic and other strategies for equity as enshrined in various treaties and declarations, alongside national policies. Vesting this duty in the state as a key method of supporting women's participation in decision making and the uptake of leadership roles.

These strategies should centre women's voices, lived experiences, and leadership in the design and governance of these economic initiatives. Secondly, they should provide a framework to invest into grassroots and self-help groups such as feminist organising hubs and not merely service beneficiaries. Economic justice is not a pre-condition for leadership, but it is part of an intersectional and holistic strategy to dismantle systemic barriers, affirm women's autonomy in all their diversities and subsequently, foster transformative feminist leadership that is inclusive, collaborative and accountable.

As highlighted above, a key barrier to women's participation and leadership is lack of sufficient resources including financial, and social capital to allow them to meaningfully participate in decision making and lead. However, whilst economic resources are pertinent in contributing towards women participating in leadership and more so in the political arena, it has been established that it will not stop discrimination and/or harassment.

5.2. Awareness raising aimed at structural change

It is important to raise awareness on what the state obligation is with respect to women's participation and leadership, and to challenge stereotypes and biases that prevent women from taking up these positions and from participation in decision making. As highlighted above, a key barrier is patriarchy which manifests in discriminatory norms that limit women's participation and render women unequal.

It is pertinent to nurture women's confidence and leadership capacities, and this must go hand in hand with confronting the root causes of exclusion, particularly patriarchy, systemic discrimination and harmful gender norms that devalue women's voices in both formal and informal governance spaces. This is a recommendation that can be collectively realized by various stakeholders including those working on WPL within the women's and feminist movements across the countries highlighted here and other similar contexts.

This can be realized by creating safe, affirming and empowering spaces where women especially those from marginalized communities – can build collective leadership, assert their voice and access mentorship, information and opportunities. Secondly, investing in political education, civic awareness and participatory and collaborative spaces of learning to strengthen women's awareness of their rights, structural barriers they face, and the power within that they hold as changemakers. In addition to individual skills building, awareness raising should be directed at demanding the transformation of social, political and cultural structures that have historically silenced and excluded them.

State actors can fortify the above approaches by implementing gender responsive and transformative policies such as quotas, affirmative action, temporary special measures. They can also work collaboratively with non-state actors including WROs and civil society at community level to embed feminist leadership values and principles into everyday decision-making processes across various facets of everyday life.

By virtue of the various human rights treaties states have adopted that promote women's right to participation and equal representation in leadership at all levels, states can lead these awareness raising initiatives in collaboration with WROs and the broader feminist movement working on WPL and intersecting issues. State actors through engagement with their administrative officers at a grass root level, and through a commitment to ensure representation at a governance level including through implementation of quota systems and other special mechanisms.

5.3. Deepening Social Engagement with Gender Equity as a central concept

An expansive viewpoint is further required to deepen social engagement with gender as a central concept. Because of the instant focus on women whenever it is discussed, “gender”, while having very clear biological and sociological definition, has become a de facto catch-all synonym for “women”, further entrenching the idea that wherever it is brought up, matters for women, about women, concerning women alone are being brought to the fore. Due to the patriarchal relegation of women’s issues to the periphery, not requiring full engagement or attention, men do not routinely consider themselves as participants within wider “gender” discourse. Further to this, concepts like gender tend to be framed via activist lenses, or by development project agendas, with certain kinds of women leading the charge in these matters. Further still, the cemented ideas around gender binary and fixed gender identities completely erase anyone outside those experiences, such as trans people, non-binary people, gender-queer folk, non-heterosexual people and more.

There is far more existing cultural awareness of individual diversities within our communities than we give African people credit for—but the exercise of power by institutions like the state, majority faiths and media have created and expanded new realities that paint non-White people as immovable in homophobia, misogyny and other bigotries as their normal ways of being. Awareness raising should therefore begin by including work with existing and emerging cultural translators, gatekeepers and curators to share more authentic narratives that create room for all peoples under the umbrella of “gender.” Indeed, as part of this feminist revolution we must engage at all levels in dialogue and dissent.

5.4. Necessary measures for enhanced representation

Affirmative action has been a common tool used to enhance women participation and leadership. Unfortunately, this is not enough when the implementation aspects are missing, such as has been the case in Kenya and Uganda. Discrimination between males and females routinely starts in the family. In Nepal, research findings showed that women are not included in the decision-making process, and that most opportunities and benefits available in the society are monopolized by males¹¹⁸. Women’s participation in socio-cultural and political activities depended upon the attitudes of their male relatives. The need to uplift women in Nepal was eventually realized, and the affirmative steps to meet this need were undertaken. Various incentive programs were launched along with the call for greater awareness to overcome prevailing stigma attached to the social plight of women. Some of the major activities included formation of self-help groups for women, and involving women in educational, health and income generating activities both at the district and local levels. Efforts have also been made to develop women’s social prestige, exercise of ‘power-within’ and feeling of equality by fostering learning spaces and subsequently setting the stage for their leadership status in society as well as their communities and families¹¹⁹. As a result, women’s role in decision making increased. This can also be observed in the political aspect, women’s representation increased significantly.¹²⁰

More forms of affirmative action need to be implemented to enhance women leadership not only at the political level but also in other areas of their everyday lives. An opportunity lies at the local community level. Women’s existing chances to voice concerns, make decisions for themselves and their families, and participate in development initiatives should be cited, documented, expanded, and increased. Aside from leadership roles, the space and room for the voters’ and women’s political communities could do with more resource investment to allow them to learn, grow and expand. The vast majority of women’s and political activation happens parallel to campaign and electoral season, and this unfortunately decentres women by making them mere supporting characters whose only job is to arrive at a voting booth. However, there is a lot of room to reiterate and amplify women’s significant existing contributions, as well as showcase women’s work beyond women candidates’ campaigning and electioneering, and the role of the political party outside of election time. This should be a whole separate exploration and engagement from a programmatic and strategic lens.

¹¹⁸ Upreti, Bishnu R., Drishti Upreti, and Yamuna Ghale. “Nepali Women in Politics: Success and Challenges.” *Journal of International Women’s Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2, Apr. 2020, Article 8. 5th World Conference on Women’s Studies, Bangkok, Thailand. <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol21/iss2/8>.

¹¹⁹ Lotter S. (2017). Gender gap, gender trap: Negotiations of intersectionality and patriarchy amongst women elites in Nepal. *Internationales Asien Forum. International Quarterly for Asian Studies*, 48(1), 97–115.

¹²⁰ Haug M., Aasland A., & Aasen B. (2019). Attitudes towards women’s participation in local politics in South Asia. *Forum for Development Studies*, 47(1), 1–21.

5.5. Addressing intersecting layers of inequality.

Aside from the socio-cultural challenges, it is crucial to address other layers of inequality that intersect with a woman's ability to engage in decision making processes; this includes access to education, addressing gender-based violence and enhancing women's economic abilities. In Kenya, there has been significant work done towards increasing women's participation in private and public administration as part of the attainment of the goal of gender equality. Some of the activities being undertaken have included advocacy and lobbying, awareness and consciousness raising, constitutional literacy, educative campaigns, and training workshops. Focus should also be given to marginalised communities of women such as refugees and women with disabilities as they are often left out and face more layers of inequality. They too should rightfully access opportunities in decision making processes within their communities. This can be done by holding and ceding space for them to exercise their agency and amplify their voices on socio economic cultural and political affairs in society.

Some wider social advocacy opportunities exist outside the political arena that also create room for more intersectional engagement regarding women's leadership. Discussions have been ongoing for several years recently about the economics of care work and how the non-remuneration and ongoing non-recognition of women and girls for essential child, home, elder and invalid care, as well as wider community care, subsidizes the cost of humanity's participation in capitalism as we know it. Aside from this, the unending need for these and related labours creates a market for human trafficking, with modern slavery continuing to resist ongoing efforts to eradicate it due to the ongoing subsidies created by non or underpayment of relevant labourers. As such, any conversation about decent work and the work of the future, aside from understandable foci, women's participation in tech and artificial intelligence, should also include discussions about, and strategies toward, fair remuneration of care workers at all levels of society by all benefiting stakeholders. This can also include conversations about class solidarity, collaboration with trade unions and labour advocates, and more.

5.6. Engaging the media.

The media is key in breaking down socio-cultural stereotypes in women participation and leadership. Media reporting can either reinforce or deconstruct socio-cultural impediments to women leadership, hence the need to meaningfully engage with media houses and print to enhance a pro-feminist leadership agenda. Representation matters and in this regard the media can function as an ally highlighting the positive examples of women's leadership and the various ways women are every bit as competent as men in making decisions. Additionally, rather than cheerleading for women from special pullout sections and thus creating spaces that are intentionally gendered silos, it is crucial to mainstream women as drivers and subjects in all forms of media, throughout the entire program or publication, on all days of the week. This can include training, foregrounding, and expanding opportunities for women in all arenas, especially politics, defence, international relations, security, business, and sports which are traditionally dominated by men, as conversation drivers, editors, experts, leading stakeholders, and participants, not just hosts and moderators.

On the other hand, there should be measures to ensure that cyber bullying, harassment, stalking and violence against women is strongly dealt with, especially within the justice system. In some instances, media has been complicit in the online bullying and profiling of female candidates running for political positions, and who occupy positions of leadership. They have also gotten away with the excuse that it is "not that serious" and that an apology can be given or a settlement paid if any damage can be proved to have been done, taking advantage of the limited case law and porous justice system. Aside from the need to engage in gender sensitive reporting that is empowering to women, the media can itself be a forum for public education about these matters to all demographics including children, a platform for discussion about better social and community relations, and a better reporter and analyst of cases and justice processes where cases are being tried as regards violence against women, both online and off.



6. Conclusion.

As individual states and regional blocs make efforts towards achieving gender equality, much more action needs to be taken to address the intersectional layers of inequalities barring women from participation and leadership and decision-making processes within informal or traditional leadership spaces in the community. In the prevailing patriarchal systems, it is also about looking at other ways of leadership in which women can be at the fore. This includes ongoing efforts to amplify the voices of women in their spheres of influence, and creating a safe, enabling environment for them to engage in participation and leadership alongside their male counterparts in equitable societies, challenging the dominant patriarchal ways of life and societal evolution. In terms of law and policy, countries do not necessarily need more laws. Instead, they need to implement the frameworks they have for increased impact in enhancing women's leadership.¹²¹

Feminist thinkers, academics, strategists, advocates, teachers, organizers, and community builders all over the world, especially outside the global North, have already built successful and sustainable models for this which can and should be studied, tested, refined, and drawn from. Women's existing skill sets should also be leveraged in context, and trained and amplified beyond the grassroots, in driving innovative socio-economic solutions that are needed by all within the community.

In terms of law and policy, countries do not necessarily need more laws. Instead, they need to implement the frameworks they have for increased impact in enhancing women's leadership.



¹²¹ KR 2.

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