



POLICY BRIEF

WHY FEMINISTS SHOULD LEAD:

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP AS
KEY TO GENDER EQUITY



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.

We are most grateful to the AWESOME (Advancing Women’s Engagement: Strengthening Opportunities to Mobilise for Equality) consortium partners – Women Challenged to Challenge (WCC), Ethiopian Women with Disability National Association (EWDNA), Ssiqqee Women’s Development Association (SWDA), Forum for Women in Development (FOWODE) and Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA Kenya), for their in-depth insights and contributions to this research report. Their integral contribution towards co-conceptualizing the scope and nature of this feminist body of work was core towards its success. We hope that this feminist body of knowledge will also contribute to their work as feminist actors and movement holders.

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
FOWODE:	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:	Siqqee Women's Development Association
UDHR:	Universal Declaration of Human Right
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.



Summary

This Policy brief is anchored on a study commissioned by Womankind Worldwide through the AWESOME programme and its Women's Participation and Leadership thematic area. The AWESOME programme¹ is being implemented in Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda and aims to strengthen women's movements in these countries by making them cohesive, coordinated and more representative of diverse groups of women, including women with disabilities, resulting in a stronger collective voice to challenge social norms and influence policies and key decisions affecting them. The study and brief also featured analysis of Womankind Worldwide's other focus countries, Zimbabwe, Nepal and Afghanistan.

The study and policy brief have critically examined women's participation and leadership as key towards the realization of gender equity and equality. They have also expounded on intersectional feminist movements in the identified focus countries

This Policy Brief highlights the key findings from the study and provides recommendations to policy makers and relevant knowledge users who are instrumental in strengthening Women's Participation and Leadership in AWESOME focus countries, and overall Womankind Worldwide focus countries.

¹AWESOME is led by Womankind Worldwide in partnership with the Ethiopian Women with Disabilities National Association and Siqqee Women's Development Association in Ethiopia, the Federation of Women Lawyers (Kenya) and Women Challenged to Challenge in Kenya, and the Forum for Women in Democracy and National Union of Women with Disabilities in Uganda.



1. Introduction

The narratives behind women participation and leadership in Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Nepal and Afghanistan are heavily nuanced by the historical patriarchal practices that still prevail and impact women's decision-making opportunities. In public and private spheres of everyday life, the role of women has often been relegated to that of being seen and not heard. This is despite progressive policies that hinge heavily on affirmative action to give women more platforms and opportunities to engage in key decision-making opportunities whether socio-economically, culturally, or politically. There are other several intersectional factors that are impediments to many women taking up leadership positions more so in conservative and patriarchal societies that are found in the African and Asian contexts. These include intersecting factors such as economic barriers, education levels, socio cultural barriers and stereotypical reporting from the media.

This brief highlights the complexities of women's participation and leadership through the lens of intersectional feminism. Intersectional feminism was coined by civil rights advocate, Kimberle Crenshaw as the acknowledgement that every woman has their own unique experiences of discrimination and oppression. It considers the multiple layers of discrimination against women. This therefore means that one must evaluate other variables of marginalization affecting women such as gender, race, class, sexual orientation, physical ability etc. Examining intersectional feminism is critical in this context as it allows the fight for women participation and leadership to become inclusive of vulnerable groups of women including but not limited to women with disabilities, widows, and women in a lower caste system.

1.1. Background and Context

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 group². 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.³

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 2030.⁴ 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 CEDAW⁵ 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. 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.⁶

² Hasa (2020) Difference Between Discrimination and Oppression. Available online at www.pediaa.com

³ 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>

⁴ The 17 Goals. (2024) The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Sustainable Development. Available online at <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

⁵ 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>

⁶ 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.

1.2. Methodology.

The overall approach for this study and brief was a feminist and intersectional lens. Meaning that they sought to understand how gender and sex impact women's leadership and participation.

We collected primary and secondary data. We engaged in informant discussions and focus group discussions with various partners under the AWESOME project, Womankind partners and spoke with Womankind staff. Their perspective was useful in understanding the gaps in literature and the lived experiences of how women lead and participate in the jurisdictions under study. Their insights were also useful for identifying opportunities for enhanced leadership and participation and crafting appropriate recommendations as highlighted in this brief.

The study focused on **Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Afghanistan** and **Nepal** as relevant contexts due to the work womankind undertakes.

Summary Of Facts

1. **Current Trends in Representation:** While women's legislative representation has increased globally, it remains low. Regional disparities persist and progress is slow-moving despite global advocacy.
2. **Legal and Policy Gaps in Practice:** Even where supportive laws exist, poor implementation perpetuates inequality. Legal frameworks alone are insufficient without actual practice and accountability.
3. **Gender Gaps in Political and Leadership Representation:** Women's limited presence in leadership reflects systemic inequalities and male-dominated electoral histories. These disparities affect all areas of life—from households to workplaces.
4. **Global Democracy and Women's Representation:** Lack of presence in political, economic, and social decision-making spaces weakens women's bargaining power.
5. **Structural Barriers and Patriarchy:** Patriarchal systems deeply control power, influence, and resources. Women disproportionately face poverty and material deprivation due to limited control over resources. Patriarchy justifies the subordination of women to preserve power.
6. **Persistent Discrimination and Gender Stereotypes:** Deep-rooted stereotypes perpetuate inequality and normalize the violation of women's rights. These discriminatory systems affect women across all their diversities.
7. **Restricted Access to Influence and Decision-Making:** Women are often excluded from processes and institutions that shape their lives—even within their own households. Their under-representation results in policies and laws that are non-responsive to their needs.
8. **Importance of Women's Leadership for Sustainable Development:** Women's participation is crucial to achieving the SDGs—especially Goal 5 on gender equality and leadership. Substantive equality (CEDAW) requires not just participation but meaningful inclusion and power-sharing.



Photo: Mercy Jaravani

Women's equal participation & leadership

is crucial to achieving internationally shared Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for universal peace and prosperity for people and planet by 2030

National Coordinator, Women's Coalition Zimbabwe (WCoZ)

2. Focus Countries Context Analysis

2.1. Kenya

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.

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 2022.⁷ 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.

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.

2.2. Uganda

Uganda has a comprehensive legal and policy framework that, in principle, promotes gender equality and supports women's participation in decision-making processes. Key legislation such as the 1995 Constitution, the National Gender Policies (1997 and 2007), and acts like the Equal Opportunity Commission Act (2007) and Presidential Elections Act (2000) are designed to eliminate discrimination and create pathways for women in governance. Reserved seats for women in Parliament and local governments, along with Uganda's commitment to Sustainable Development Goal 5, reflect these efforts. Notably, women currently make up 34% of Uganda's 11th Parliament, with significant representation in ministerial roles. Despite this progress, the implementation of these frameworks remains uneven, and social and structural barriers persist, limiting the full realization of women's leadership potential.

Public service policies like the Uganda Public Service Standing Orders (2010) provide guidelines on workplace conduct, including sexual harassment, but they fall short in addressing deeper gendered realities such as the unpaid care burden on women. Furthermore, Uganda's hostile stance towards sexual and gender minorities creates additional layers of exclusion, limiting public support and recognition of these groups. In the economic sphere, while the MSME Policy (2015) promotes inclusivity, and the Investment Code (1991) facilitates business, neither directly supports women's entry or advancement in these sectors. Professional bodies operate independently with limited transparency on gender inclusion in leadership, highlighting the gaps between policy intentions and practical outcomes for women, especially outside formal political spaces.

⁷ UN WOMEN, A Summary Analysis of Women's Performance in Kenya's 2022 Election, 2022.

Challenges for women in decision-making are compounded by personal, structural, and procedural obstacles. Studies have shown that women leaders often face capacity gaps, internalized stereotypes, and lack of institutional support. Patriarchy, sexual harassment, and power centralization hinder their effectiveness and presence in leadership roles. The focus on elective politics has led to neglect of women's leadership in socio-economic and community settings, where many women might prefer or be better positioned to lead. Marginalized groups—such as women with disabilities, refugees, rural women, and gender minorities—face additional exclusion from leadership opportunities due to entrenched cultural and political barriers. Encouragingly, civil society organizations are increasingly addressing these issues, signaling a shift toward recognizing and confronting the intersectional challenges women face in leadership and public participation.

2.3. Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, although women contribute significantly to rural agricultural labor, their work remains unrecognized, and patriarchal norms continue to restrict their access to resources and participation in community decision-making. Social and cultural barriers—reinforced by male dominance—limit women's voices in public life. Gender-based violence is widespread, with one in three women experiencing physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, and 65% subjected to female genital mutilation. Education for girls has improved at the primary level, with enrolment rising from 21% to 91% over three decades. However, most girls do not progress beyond primary school due to security risks, long distances, and financial hardship. This educational gap severely limits women's capacity to engage in leadership and decision-making, reinforcing societal biases against women in leadership roles.

Economically, women face systemic disadvantages compared to men, particularly in accessing credit, markets, and making autonomous decisions within their households. The 2016 Ethiopian Demographic and Health Survey revealed that 30% of women are excluded from key family decisions, especially in matters of reproductive health, where male partners often dominate choices around birth control and maternal care. These disparities have profound effects on maternal and child health outcomes. Harmful traditional practices like early marriage, childbearing, and female genital mutilation further entrench inequality and hinder women's personal and collective advancement. While there is a need for more current and qualitative data, the continued prevalence of such practices underscores the urgency of transformative gender-responsive interventions.

Legally, Ethiopia's constitution upholds gender equality, with Article 25 ensuring non-discrimination and Article 35(3) supporting women's right to participate in political life. Affirmative action policies were introduced to address historical gender inequalities, contributing to notable milestones such as the appointment of Ethiopia's first female president and a gender-balanced cabinet in 2018. Women now constitute 41.5% of parliamentarians—an achievement driven by gender quotas within the Prosperity Party. However, women remain underrepresented in party leadership, and quota-driven representation does not always translate into meaningful political influence. Female participation in the 2021 elections declined, partly due to increased insecurity. Deep-rooted gender stereotypes persist, with many Ethiopians viewing women primarily as caregivers, thereby excluding them from genuine leadership roles in government and public institutions.

2.4. Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe, a nation of thirteen million people, has been shaped by a complex history of colonialism, liberation, and post-independence struggles. Since gaining independence in 1980 through the Lancaster House Constitution, which safeguarded white minority property rights, political and economic challenges have persisted, influencing the nation's strained relationship with former colonial powers like the United Kingdom. Women have historically played key roles in Zimbabwe's liberation, dating back to the 1896-97 Chimurenga War, yet their contributions were often marginalized, particularly after independence, where their exclusion from top political structures became evident. Nonetheless, their participation was crucial to the revolutionary movement, as the fight for freedom was incomplete without the active involvement of women.

Post-independence, Zimbabwean women began organizing more formally through clubs and community-based projects, evolving into structured organizations. A pivotal moment occurred in 1983 during Operation Clean-Up, when over 6,000 women were unjustly arrested under accusations of prostitution, prompting widespread outrage and activism. This event led to the formation of the Women's Action

Group (WAG), a prominent rights organization that has continued to speak out against gender-based violations. Legislative reforms in the early years of independence, such as the Sex Disqualification Act and equal pay regulations, advanced women's legal rights. Momentum from global events like the 1995 Beijing Women's Conference further energized Zimbabwe's women's movement, inspiring constitutional advocacy. However, from the 2000s onward, there has been growing political repression, especially targeting women activists, though the 2013 Constitution still reflects gains achieved through tireless advocacy by women's rights defenders.

Despite constitutional guarantees for gender equality—specifically in Sections 56 and 80—women's participation in leadership, both in politics and the private sector, remains limited. Quota systems have helped improve representation in parliament, but local government and business sectors still reflect significant gender disparities. Economic inequality persists, with women overrepresented in the informal sector and facing systemic obstacles to accessing resources. Organizations like WAG point out that while the law supports equality, implementation often depends on selective interpretation, and numerical representation alone does not ensure equity. There remains a disconnect between legal provisions and lived realities, underlining the need for deeper structural and cultural transformation to achieve meaningful gender parity in Zimbabwe.

2.5. Nepal

The story of women's leadership in Nepal is one of resilience, persistence, and transformative activism. Since the early 1900s, feminist movements in the country have challenged patriarchal norms and advocated for women's rights. Major political shifts, including the transition from monarchy to a federal democratic republic, created new spaces for advancing human rights. A key milestone was the adoption of the 2015 Constitution, which enshrined equal rights for women and other marginalized groups. Considered one of the most progressive constitutions in South Asia regarding gender equality, it laid the foundation for the increased visibility and inclusion of women in governance and public life.

Women's political participation in Nepal has seen marked improvement, particularly at the local government level, due to constitutional mandates and gender quotas. The 2017 and 2022 elections resulted in over 40% of local government positions being held by women—a significant leap forward. However, despite this numerical progress, women continue to face challenges in accessing executive roles, confronting persistent societal biases, and struggling with unequal access to resources and political support. Deep-rooted patriarchy still limits women's influence in both public and private spheres, as they contend with structural barriers such as poverty, lack of land ownership, and economic marginalization that are compounded by gender-based discrimination.

Addressing these inequalities requires multifaceted approaches centered on education, economic justice, and inclusive development. While urban areas have seen some progress, rural women—particularly those affected by caste, ethnicity, geography, disability, and poverty—remain disproportionately excluded. Feminist and community-led initiatives such as WEL, KIRDARC, and WSDP are helping bridge this gap through vocational training and leadership programs tailored to local contexts. Innovative models like Solar Sister, Girls in Technology, and women-led cooperatives showcase how Nepali women are actively redefining leadership. These programs go beyond traditional development models by challenging socio-cultural barriers and promoting women's autonomy, signaling a grassroots-driven reimagining of a more just and gender-equitable Nepal.

2.6. Afghanistan

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.

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 8

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.

⁸ Anami, 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/>

Photo: Horia Mosadiq is an Afghan human rights activist.



3. Normative Framework For Womens Participation And Leadership

Included below are excerpts on the key international and regional instruments that entrench women's right to participation and leadership.

INSTRUMENT	PROVISION
Universal Declaration on Human rights	Article 1: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brother (sister) hood. Article 7: All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination. Article 8: Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him/her by the constitution or by law. Article 21: • Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives. • Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country.
International Covenant on Civil and Political rights	Article 3: The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to ensure the equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of all civil and political rights set forth in the present Covenant. Article 23: 1. The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State. 2. The right of men and women of marriageable age to marry and to found a family shall be recognized. 3. No marriage shall be entered into without the free and full consent of the intending spouses. 4. States Parties to the present Covenant shall take appropriate steps to ensure equality of rights and responsibilities of spouses as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution. In the case of dissolution, provision shall be made for the necessary protection of any children Article 25: Every citizen shall have the right and the opportunity, without any of the distinctions mentioned in article 2 and without unreasonable restrictions: • To take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives; • To vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors; • To have access, on general terms of equality, to public service in his country.

INSTRUMENT	PROVISION
Convention on the Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women	States Parties condemn discrimination against women in all its forms, agree to pursue by all appropriate means and without delay a policy of eliminating discrimination against women and, to this end, undertake: • To embody the principle of the equality of men and women in their national constitutions or other appropriate legislation if not yet incorporated therein and to ensure, through law and other appropriate means, the practical realization of this principle; • To adopt appropriate legislative and other measures, including sanctions where appropriate, prohibiting all discrimination against women; • To establish legal protection of the rights of women on an equal basis with men and to ensure through competent national tribunals and other public institutions the effective protection of women against any act of discrimination; • To refrain from engaging in any act or practice of discrimination against women and to ensure that public authorities and institutions shall act in conformity with this obligation; • To take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women by any person, organization or enterprise; • To take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to modify or abolish existing laws, regulations, customs and practices which constitute discrimination against women; • To repeal all national penal provisions which constitute discrimination against women. Article 3 States Parties shall take in all fields, in particular in the political, social, economic and cultural fields, 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.
International covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights	Article 3: The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to ensure the equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of all economic, social and cultural rights set forth in the present Covenant.
Beijing platform for Action	G. Women in power and decision-making We reaffirm our commitment to: 8. The equal rights and inherent human dignity of women and men and other purposes and principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations, to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights instruments, in particular the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, as well as the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women and the Declaration on the Right to Development; We are determined to: 24. Take all necessary measures to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and the girl child and remove all obstacles to gender equality and the advancement and empowerment of women; 25. Encourage men to participate fully in all actions towards equality; 26. Promote women's economic independence, including employment, and eradicate the persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women by addressing the structural causes of poverty through changes in economic structures, ensuring equal access for all women, including those in rural areas, as vital development agents, to productive resources, opportunities and public services; 32. Intensify efforts to ensure equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all women and girls who face multiple barriers to their empowerment and advancement because of such factors as their race, age, language, ethnicity, culture, religion, or disability, or because they are indigenous people;

INSTRUMENT	PROVISION
Sustainable Development Goals	Goal 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls 5.1 End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere 5.1.1 Whether or not legal frameworks are in place to promote, enforce and monitor equality and non-discrimination on the basis of sex. 5.5 Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life 5.5.1 Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments and local governments 5.5.2 Proportion of women in managerial positions 5.c Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels 5.c.1 Proportion of countries with systems to track and make public allocations for gender equality and women's empowerment
African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights	Article 2: Every individual shall be entitled to the enjoyment of the rights and freedoms recognized and guaranteed in the present Charter without distinction of any kind such as race, ethnic group, colour, sex, language, religion, political or any other opinion, national and social origin, fortune, birth or other status. Article 3: 1. Every individual shall be equal before the law. 2. Every individual shall be entitled to equal protection of the law. Article 13: 1. Every citizen shall have the right to participate freely in the government of his country, either directly or through freely chosen representatives in accordance with the provisions of the law. 2. Every citizen shall have the right of equal access to the public service of his country. Article 18: 1. The family shall be the natural unit and basis of society. It shall be protected by the State which shall take care of its physical and moral health. 2. The State shall have the duty to assist the family which is the custodian of morals and traditional values recognized by the community. 3. The State shall ensure the elimination of every discrimination against women and also ensure the protection of the rights of the woman and the child as stipulated in international declarations and conventions.

INSTRUMENT	PROVISION
Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa	Article II ELIMINATION OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN - States Parties shall combat all forms of discrimination against women through appropriate legislative, institutional and other measures. In this regard they shall: - include in their national constitutions and other legislative instruments, if not already done, the principle of equality between women and men and ensure its effective application; - enact and effectively implement appropriate legislative or regulatory measures, including those prohibiting and curbing all forms of discrimination particularly those harmful practices which endanger the health and general well-being of women; - integrate a gender perspective in their policy decisions, legislation, development plans, programmes and activities and in all other spheres of life; - take corrective and positive action in those areas where discrimination against women in law and in fact continues to exist; - support the local, national, regional and continental initiatives directed at eradicating all forms of discrimination against women. - States Parties shall commit themselves to modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of women and men through public education, information, education and communication strategies, with a view to achieving the elimination of harmful cultural and traditional practices and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes, or on stereotyped roles for women and men Article IX RIGHT TO PARTICIPATION IN THE POLITICAL AND DECISION-MAKING PROCESS - States Parties shall take specific positive action to promote participative governance and the equal participation of women in the political life of their countries through affirmative action, enabling national legislation and other measures to ensure that: a) Women participate without any discrimination in all elections; b) Women are represented equally at all levels with men in all electoral processes; c) Women are equal partners with men at all levels of development and implementation of State policies and development programmes - States Parties shall ensure increased and effective representation and participation of women at all levels of decision-making.
The Istanbul Convention	Article 1 – Purposes of the Convention The purposes of this Convention are to: - Protect women against all forms of violence, and prevent, prosecute and eliminate violence against women and domestic violence. - Contribute to the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and promote substantive equality between women and men, including by empowering women. - Design a comprehensive framework, policies and measures for the protection of and assistance to all victims of violence against women and domestic violence. - Promote international co-operation with a view to eliminating violence against women and domestic violence. - Provide support and assistance to organisations and law enforcement agencies to effectively co-operate to adopt an integrated approach to eliminating violence against women and domestic violence. Article 4 – Fundamental rights, equality and non-discrimination - Parties shall take the necessary legislative and other measures to promote and protect the right for everyone, particularly women, to live free from violence in both the public and the private sphere. - Parties condemn all forms of discrimination against women and take, without delay, the necessary legislative and other measures to prevent it, in particular by:-- embodying in their national constitutions or other appropriate legislation the principle of equality between women and men and ensuring the practical realisation of this principle; prohibiting discrimination against women, including through the use of sanctions, where appropriate; abolishing laws and practices which discriminate against women. - The implementation of the provisions of this Convention by the Parties, in particular measures to protect the rights of victims, shall be secured without discrimination on any ground such as <i>sex, gender, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, state of health, disability, marital status, migrant or refugee status, or other status</i>

6. Barriers To Women's Participation And Leadership

6.1. Socio-cultural Barriers.

In most majority world settings, leadership as concept is linked to attributes associated with masculinity because of the social, cultural, religious and patriarchal constructs creating a misleading narrative about women's ability as political leaders.⁹ This emanates from the attitude that women could not be effective in leadership, which requires masculine traits of the society such as courage, decision-making skills, rationality, and other skills, which had been constructed by the society as masculine characteristics.¹⁰ These deep-seated cultural notions and attitudes are also a challenge in contexts such as Afghanistan where religious practices also contribute to the barriers in women participation and leadership.¹¹

As already alluded to, most majority world countries operate within patriarchal societies with strong cultural and religious influences. There is a constant and fallacious belief that women are supposed to be led but not to lead. Traditional attitudes towards gender equality influence women's advancement in political participation.¹² Women are seen as guardians of culture and traditions, and therefore society holds them responsible for imparting cultural values to the younger generation. These are, in most cases, used by their male opponents to marginalize and justify why women should be excluded from participation processes.

Barriers in education levels for women act as a huge hindrance in empowering them for everyday decision-making opportunities. For instance, in Ethiopia, only half of girls who enrol in primary schools ever make it to grade 5. Majority of the girls are unable to transition to secondary and tertiary school due to distance, personal security, and economic challenges.¹³ This limits their chances of engaging in decision making processes given their limited educational backgrounds and strong socio-cultural perceptions against women's leadership.

Although in Kenya and Uganda, many women have emerged in positions of national significance in politics, business, and civil society, women's space for leadership remained limited and in some instances donor dependent. Insecurity, harassment, immobility, religious extremism, and corruption are common barriers in society against the woman's voice in these contexts. Concepts such as gender equality remain largely misunderstood as invoking rebellion against societal order. Women in positions of authority are perceived as merely symbolic, lack social support, have weak decision-making and enforcement power, and lack access to sources of financial and human capital.

One woman

out of 11 presidential candidates in 2023, had to wage a legal battle to get herself on the ballot in Zimbabwe.



⁹ Mari Tripp A., Casimiro I., Kwesiga J. and Mungwa A. (2009) African women's movements. Transforming political landscapes, New York, Cambridge University Press.

¹⁰ Sjoberg L. (2009) Feminism and Styles of Political leadership in J. Masciulli, M. A., Mochanov and W.A. Knight (eds), The Ashgate Research Companion to Political Leadership, Aldershot, Ashgate, 179-76.

¹¹ Aarya Nijat, Jennifer Murtazashvili, (2015) Women's Leadership Roles in Afghanistan, USIP.

¹² 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

¹³ USAID, Gender and Women's empowerment in Ethiopia 2020.

Unfortunately, men remain largely disengaged and often alienated from efforts to promote women's participation and leadership, which they associate with physical or sexual attributes rather than intellectual capacity and the ability to lead and make decisions.

The situation is even more daunting for vulnerable groups such as women with disabilities who 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. This demonstrates that there are several layers of barriers to women voicing out their concerns as some are more marginalized than others depending on their circumstances.

6.2. Economic Barriers.

Many women are discouraged from venturing into leadership (at least in the political contexts) due to the heavy financial implication involved in the process. For instance, in Ethiopia, 80% of the population resides in rural areas and women provide much of the agricultural labour in these communities.¹⁴ However, their contributions often go largely unrecognized, and their male relatives often restrict access to resources and community participation.

Customarily, access to productive resources such as land is largely dependent and regulated by men.¹⁵ These issues contribute to the low socio-economic status of women because they prohibit women from accessing education and social status, which results in feminization of poverty. This has often been the case due to prevailing gender stereotypes on the socio economic and cultural 'role of the woman,' in society impeding their agency to participation and leadership roles.

Traditional attitudes towards gender equality influence women's advancement in participation and leadership. 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.

6.3. Political Barriers

Women continue to be underrepresented in the decision-making arena due to lack of political good will in implementation of enabling legal and policy frameworks.

There are several African countries who are parties to progressive legal frameworks enhancing women 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 provisions notwithstanding, out of 11 presidential candidates in 2023, only one was a woman, and she had to wage a legal battle to get herself on the ballot. Still in the 2023 race for National Assembly seats, 70 women faced off against 637 male candidates, and only 22 women were elected despite Zimbabwe's many progressive provisions and the tireless efforts of politicians, activists, and civil society organizations.

¹⁴ USAID, Ethiopia Fact Sheet Empowering Ethiopian Women July 2017

¹⁵ Agbalajobi, D.T. (2010). Women's participation and the political process in Nigeria: Problems and prospects. *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, 4(2), 075-082. Retrieved from <http://www.academicjournals.org/ajpsir>

7. Policy Recommendations For Womens' Participation And Leadership

Despite legislative progress and affirmative action for women's participation and leadership, they still face several socio economic, cultural and political layers of barriers. Subsequently, the following are the policy recommendations for the Womankind Focus Countries.

7.1. Women's Economic Justice and Transformative Leadership

- To advance women's participation and transformative feminist leadership, the state should lead in designing and implementing intersectional, community-driven economic justice programs grounded in human rights and equity frameworks. These initiatives must centre women's voices, experiences, and leadership, and invest in grassroots feminist groups as agents of change rather than passive recipients.
- Economic justice alone is not a prerequisite for leadership, but it is critical to dismantling systemic barriers and affirming women's autonomy. While access to financial and social resources is essential for enabling women's participation, particularly in political spaces, it must be coupled with measures to address persistent discrimination and harassment.

7.2. 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 participating in decision making. A key barrier is patriarchy which manifests in discriminatory norms that limit women's participation and render women marginalised and oppressed.



Photo from left to right: Edinah Masiyiwa, Wadzanayi Vere & Fiona Tinarwo from Women's Action Group, Zimbabwe

- It is pertinent to nurture women's 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 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.
- Additionally, 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.

7.3. Affirmative action.

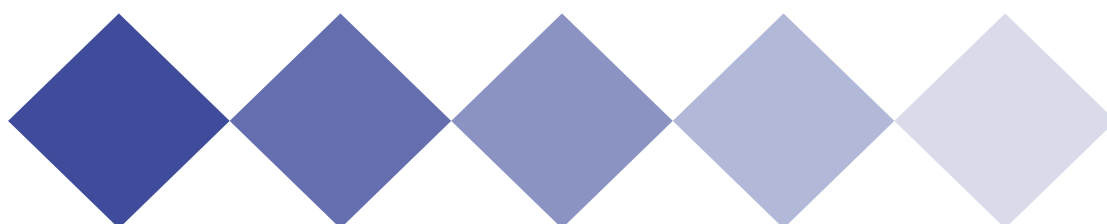
- Affirmative action has been a common tool used to enhance women participation and leadership. Unfortunately, this is not enough when the implementation aspects are missing such as has been the case in Kenya and Uganda.
- Beyond the policy and legal frameworks more forms of affirmative action need to 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.

7.4. Recognizing and addressing intersecting layers of inequality.

- Aside from the socio-cultural challenges, it is crucial to address other layers of inequality that intersect with a women'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.

7.5. Role of 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 pro feminist leadership agenda.
- There should be measures to ensure that cyber bullying against women in decision making processes is strongly dealt with within the justice system.



8. Call to Action

8.1. Governments and State Actors

- Design and implement state-led, community-driven economic justice programs that centre women's voices, are rooted in human rights law, and dismantle systemic barriers to women's participation and leadership.
- Ensure full implementation—not just creation—of existing gender equality laws and policies, including affirmative action and temporary and permanent special measures to improve women's representation in both political and non-political spaces.
- Institutionalize political education and civic training through gender-responsive, rights-based initiatives to raise awareness about women's participation and leadership.
- Collaborate with feminist organizations and community actors to embed feminist values in public institutions and to create inclusive, equitable decision-making structures.
- Invest in local-level leadership opportunities by resourcing women's political participation between election cycles and not only during campaigns.

8.2. For Women's Rights Organizations (WROs) and Civil Society

- Build and fund feminist economic organizing hubs that empower women as leaders and not just service recipients.
- Support intersectional leadership development through education, mentorship, and safe spaces for women from marginalized groups (e.g., rural women, disabled women, LGBTQIA+ individuals, refugees).
- Raise collective awareness on patriarchy, gender norms, and discrimination, and advocate for cultural transformation through grassroots organizing and community dialogue.
- Document and elevate women's everyday leadership contributions, particularly in informal and traditional spaces, to challenge dominant patriarchal narratives.

8.3. For Media and Journalists

- Mainstream gender-sensitive reporting by integrating women's voices and leadership across all content areas—not confined to "women's sections" or gender-specific features.
- Promote diverse and competent representations of women in traditionally male-dominated fields like politics, defence, business, and sports as experts, editors, and stakeholders.
- Hold media accountable for online gender-based violence, and actively report and challenge cyberbullying, harassment, and misogynistic attacks against women leaders and candidates.
- Use media platforms for public education, fostering positive dialogue on gender equality, justice, and feminist leadership for all age groups and demographics.

8.4. For Communities, Cultural Leaders, and Educators

- Engage men and boys in gender discourse to shift the burden of gender equity from women alone and to transform collective understanding of gender beyond binary framings.
- Leverage local cultural knowledge and traditions to challenge harmful norms and uplift inclusive gender narratives that recognize all identities.
- Amplify community-based feminist education initiatives, focusing on political literacy, leadership skills, and self-confidence, particularly for those in marginalized groups.

8.5. Regional and International Partners

- Support and study feminist leadership models from the Global South, applying insights from successful grassroots innovations and movements.
- Invest in care work advocacy by promoting fair wages and legal protections for caregivers, recognizing their labour as critical to both society and the economy.
- Facilitate cross-regional learning and collaboration, enabling feminist advocates to refine and replicate strategies that have proven effective in similar socio-political contexts.

8.6. For Donors and Development Partners

- Fund long-term capacity building programs, not just project-based interventions, to support women's leadership across political, economic, and social sectors.
- Support intergenerational and intersectional organizing, ensuring that programs reach young women, elders, and those across multiple identities and lived experiences.
- Encourage data collection and analysis on women's participation beyond electoral outcomes—focusing on sustained influence, leadership outcomes, and systemic change.

8.7. Final Call to All Stakeholders:

- We must shift from a tick-box approach to gender equality toward a transformational, feminist leadership model rooted in dignity, justice, inclusion, and sustainability.
- Leverage existing laws, community strengths, and feminist innovations to reimagine leadership and decision-making spaces where women—in all their diversities—can thrive and lead with agency, confidence, and power.

9. Conclusion.

As states make efforts towards achieving gender equality, more needs to be done 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 a patriarchal system, 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 voice of women in their spheres of influence and creating a safe, enabling environment for them to engage in participation and leadership. Women have skill sets that can be valuable, and which should be leveraged upon in driving innovative socio-economic solutions 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 leadership.



Photo: Jackline Bartenge, and Velma Anindo

Why Women Should Lead

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP AS KEY TO GENDER EQUITY

