



# Strengthening Women's Political Participation

## Key messages

- **Women remain underrepresented in politics at all levels across the world.** But women are often more active in politics than is generally assumed. Political participation takes many forms, and a functioning democracy fosters diverse initiatives at different levels of a society. Linking women's grass-roots movements to national politics can lead to powerful, lasting and positive changes in societies.
- **Participation in public decision-making is a human right.** Power or resource imbalances that lead to different forms of discrimination against groups of women in a society are in conflict with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination of Women (CEDAW), which have been ratified by most states in the world. It is our duty to close the gender gap through individual opportunities and welfare, and to uphold the principles of human dignity, equality, justice and freedom.
- **Women's political participation benefits the whole society.** Increasing women's share in decision-making in different sectors diversifies and enriches policies for the benefit of all citizens. Promoting women's participation in policy-making is also a prerequisite for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals

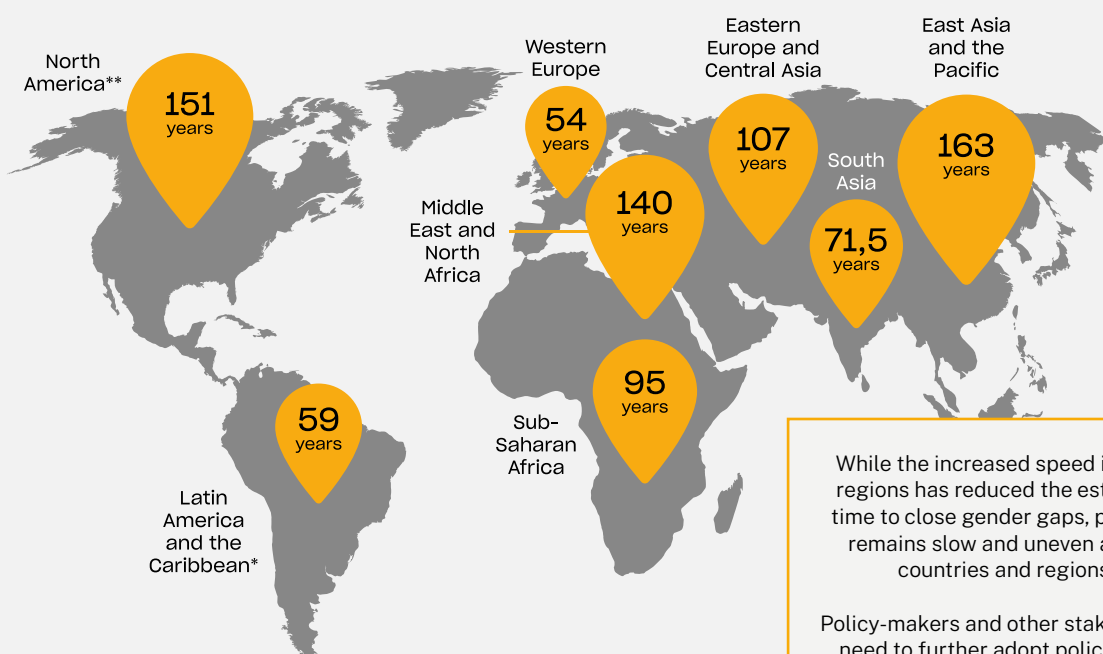


(SDGs). Investing in women is economically and environmentally sound, and good value for money with spillover effects to whole families. Gender equality in politics does not, however, materialise without targeted support and the empowerment of the underrepresented groups in politics.

- **Obstacles to women’s political participation are both practical and structural.** The barriers to women’s participation in public decision-making are context driven and range from practical challenges to discriminative practices embedded in decision-making structures. Structural obstacles are the most persistent, and boosting women’s access to politics alone does not yet guarantee equality in voice and influence. This underscores the need to identify and tackle structural power inequalities in the political systems.

- **Governments, donors and political parties must step up their efforts.** Political parties play a key role as agents of change in gender equality. With outreach to different public decision-making bodies, ranging from the parliaments to international cooperation agencies, and to voters and citizens at large, political parties can act as catalysts to change both the political systems and the political cultures of a state. The inclusion of women is also smart politics. It is likely to bring about positive change in the everyday lives of people and positively influence the reputation of the involved political parties.

### How long will it take to close gender gaps in different regions at the current pace?



While the increased speed in some regions has reduced the estimated time to close gender gaps, progress remains slow and uneven across countries and regions.

Policy-makers and other stakeholders need to further adopt policies and practices to accelerate this process going forward.

\*Thanks to accelerated speed registered across some countries in the region in 2020.  
 \*\*Reflecting lack of progress in the region in 2020.

Source: The Gender Gap Report, World Economic Forum 2020.

Forty years after the entry into force of CEDAW, women continue to be underrepresented in high-level decision-making structures in all sectors, including politics. Less than 7 % of the world's states have female heads of states or heads of government, and on average, less than 25 % of the parliamentarians across the world are women (IPU & UN Women, 2020). Gender equality, including in politics, is however not an alternative approach, it is a commitment that is also enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Arising from the fundamental values of freedom and political equality, diversity in politics is a foundation of a functioning democracy. It directly reflects the diversity in a society and enables citizens to exercise their legitimate reflexive control in a public sphere, and thereby builds trust in public decision-making and stability in a society.

The reasons for the persistent inequalities between women and men in public decision-making are complex and manifold, varying from structural, cultural and social barriers to very practical barriers that women face in their access to different levels of public decision-making. Too tight electoral schedules and other political schedules, time constraints because of domestic and care taking responsibilities, and other professional endeavours, denied access to education (particularly higher education), a lack of skills, a lack of knowledge of the political systems, and mobility constraints are all factors that make it difficult for women to pursue political careers. Electoral campaigning is also costly, and worldwide, women have significantly lesser financial means and less power to decide on how to use one's income.

Whilst the practical obstacles are many, it is the structural barriers that are hardest to overcome. *Structural barriers* refers to the web of social, normative, institutional and material constructions that encompass a set of formal and informal rules and codes of conduct (Young, 1990). Structural inequalities are challenging to detect, and changing them takes time. In addition, a positive change requires firm and targeted action, and collaboration with those holding and claiming power. Generally, socio-cultural and religious values, and the roles of women and men in families mirror the ways in which public life is organised in a society. Especially in patriarchal societies, women are still not necessarily considered as political agents by men or even by women themselves. Furthermore, the prevalence of gender-based violence, which continues to be high globally, has been identified as one of the major constraints of women's access to and participation in decision-making, posing as much a practical problem as a structural problem within societies and their social and political systems.

## Demo Finland's twin-track approach to boosting gender equality in politics

Demo Finland, with its partner organisations, has built the capacities of today's politicians and future politicians in Myanmar, Tunisia, Nepal, Ethiopia, Tanzania and Zambia since 2005. Demo Finland's approach to increasing gender equality in politics is twofold: it aims to empower and build the capacities of women politicians and it advocates for and provides support to political parties in investing in gender equality. Demo Finland's programmes aim to support women's participation by creating positive attitude change towards women politicians and equipping both women and men with essential skills with which to participate in politics at different levels of public decision-making. Boosting women's participation and gender mainstreaming also involves changing the existing narratives: bringing women's perceptions, experience, knowledge and interests to bear on policy-making, planning and decision-making alongside those of men. Often this involves developing organisational inclusion strategies and the guidelines of political parties, but equally importantly, it involves actually making women's views transparent and their voices heard systematically in the training curricula.

## The benefits of diversity in decision-making and the socio-economic returns of investing in gender equality in politics

Diversity in gender in politics plays a role, albeit a contested one, in selecting the types of policy issues that the elective representatives seek to advance. While it is not the case in all countries in all settings, evidence shows that women legislators hold more liberal attitudes and are likely to adopt more liberal policies across sectors (Dingler et al., 2019). There are several proven, positive links between macroeconomic decision-making and equality between women and men. Lowering tariffs in trade sectors in which women are more active and increasing women's access to trade financing, are trade policy issues that are likely to be put forward if women have seats in the macro-economic policy negotiation tables. And the more open trade and export policies the country has, the more women are employed and the greater the share of the female work force in global value chains (The World Bank, 2020).

Alongside economic prospects, education plays a crucial role in one's individual capabilities and opportunities in life when exercising and deciding upon economic activities, and there is a strong positive correlation between gender parity and the higher education levels of women. Women who are active in politics around the world are also usually highly educated themselves, and experience from many countries shows that women find it important to advance equal education policies if they have the power to do so.

Greater economic resources at women's disposal or higher education do not, however, yet guarantee equal economic opportunities. Women must also be empowered to make informed decisions in the whole decision-making nexus, from private to public spheres. Evidence shows that, at household level, increased control of family income by women tends to lead to spending decisions that increase the welfare and health of the whole family and that women who are influential in national or party politics have often had both a culture of political participation at home and solid support from their families to pursue political careers (ODI, 2015). Increasing women's power to decide on both household spending and public policies is therefore causally linked to improvements in maternal and child health and education of children – especially girls in the families – and women's inclusion is likely to lead to both more and better social policies that target to the whole society (Buller et al., 2018; Cornish et al., 2019). Studies also show that women are generally more prone to make sustainable-consumption and lifestyle choices than men, and that

greater gender equality in political decision-making has led to more rigorous environmental policies, particularly policies aiming to lower CO2 emissions (McKinney & Fulker, 2015; Cohen, 2014; Johnsson-Latham, 2007).

Investing in women and in their participation in public decision-making thus makes economic, social and environmental sense, and including women both as targets and agents of macro-economic and other national policies has proven to benefit whole economies in the long run. The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) estimates that improving gender equality in employment and work could increase GDP per capita in Europe by up to 9.6 % by 2050. Globally, it is estimated that the world's GDP could increase as much as by 26 % if women had the same economic opportunities as men (Agence Française de Développement, 2019).

### No success in achieving the SDGs without gender equality

With 10 years left for the achievement of the SDGs, the progress thus far will not be enough to achieve any of the 17 goals (UN, 2020). Empowering women for the achievement of the SDGs is both a goal and a cross-cutting objective for the achievement of all 17 goals. Giving women more footage in the decision-making is smart sustainability politics: it increases the communities' resilience, leads to more rapid recovery from the pandemic and accelerates the progress towards achieving the SDGs. The first-hand knowledge that women hold on social, economic and environmental issues all over the world is yet to be captured in public policy, including climate policymaking, and could be a game-changing asset in developing more people-oriented sustainability and welfare policies.

#### Demo Finland's focus SDGs



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



SDG 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries



SDG 16: Promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies

## Power in politics and gender: From the recognition of power inequalities to a positive change

### Whose job is politics?

In Zambia, gender equality has become important rhetoric in public decision-making, but in practice, women continue to face many obstacles in their paths from electoral candidacies to party leadership. Electoral campaigns are costly affairs with great risks for the candidates, and often otherwise-promising women candidates cannot afford campaigning or the high fees for candidacy. Discriminative attitudes are persistent as well: politics is still not considered to be a woman's job by many men that hold political power.

Demo Finland has worked with Zambia National Women's Lobby (ZNWL) to boost women's political participation at national and district levels since 2013. Over the years, Demo Finland's and the ZNWL's joint initiative The Women in Politics Platforms has grown into effective and strong network of the women's wings of the political parties and women politicians across party lines. The programme supports women politicians from municipal to national levels by changing negative attitudes towards women in politics, by building advocacy and other crucial skills in politics and by offering peer support and coaching in moving issues of common interest up in the political agendas. At the core of the programme is multiparty dialogue and the building of cross-party collaboration.

Even if the progress in enacting gender equality policies is to be celebrated, much remains to be done to understand and expose the gendered nature of different types of inequalities and the root causes of the unequal sharing of power in societies. Power in politics comes in many forms and affects actors in decision-making in many ways. It is also rarely limited to the ruler and the ruled. Exercising power is a joint venture of many agents within a structure. Women are affected by unequal power relations in two ways: in their *power to access politics* and *power to influence in political decision-making*. A partial problem is the persistent, low gender knowledge, which is often combined with

ineffective or no means to develop effective gender mainstreaming processes. This in turn risks reducing gender mainstreaming to being a tokenistic effort, both in policymaking and in daily politics (Cavaghan, 2017). Gender equality and women's rights have also been threatened by anti-gender movements in recent years. Initiatives with the goal of hampering gender equality – combined with the increasing number of authoritarian regimes, the general deterioration of the respect for human rights, anti-European views and the shrinking space of the civil society in the political dialogue – call for the evidence-based strategic engagement of a range of political ideologies and views, and an open dialogue between the different interlocutors in policymaking (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018).

**Power to access politics.** Women's political participation is often greater than statistics state. Measuring women's access to politics is chiefly limited to electoral and party politics, but a functioning democracy caters for a wide range of political influencing: ad hoc movements, community and neighbourhood associations, protest groups and voluntary organisations, which are exactly the types of initiatives that attract women's participation in influencing and enacting change (Joly & Wadia, 2017). Women have also shown great resilience in many conflict-torn countries. For example, in Uganda, Sierra Leone and Liberia, female ex-combatants and victims of armed conflicts have taken active roles, often without recognition, in the peace building and post-conflict reconstruction of their communities and formed women's peace movements and networks (cf. Mlambo & Kapingura, 2019). The challenge, therefore, lies not so much in mobilising women as it lies in the creation of opportunities for women to become agents in politics at different decision-making levels. Often women have valuable knowledge and understanding of the situation in their own communities, but they lack the financial and individual capacities – especially the required level of formal education – to pursue their candidacies for political parties. A fundamental first step is to facilitate women's access to vote: to ensure that voting places are accessible and that women have what it takes to make informed voting decisions and to choose their preferred candidates, as well as become candidates themselves. Positive examples also exist. With targeted support and a determined drive for change, small community initiatives have grown into movements and further led to registering new political parties by women in different countries in Africa (Tripp et al., 2009).

**Power to influence in politics.** While balanced political representation between women and men still remains a goal rather than a state of affairs, women's average political leverage in the European Union has slowly improved over the decades. Encouragingly, also women from ethnic minorities are relatively well represented in European politics, in some cases even overrepresented, compared with men with similar backgrounds. Importantly though, there is no evident link between the political representation of women and the fulfilment of policy preferences of the political groups they represent (EP, 2020; Mügge et al., 2019). Access to political structures alone therefore does not guarantee influence in decision-making, but to what extent one's gender matters in gaining political leverage is a sum of many factors, including one's personal skills and capabilities in navigating a political system. Evidence also shows the importance of critical mass: men's policy preferences are perhaps still generally better mirrored in the legislation, but where there is a critical female representation, women's policy preferences are highly reflected in the related legislature processes, particularly on issues that affect women directly. These have often included social issues (Dingler et al., 2019).

### Demo Finland's support to Schools of Politics in Tunisia and Myanmar

Demo Finland, with its partners NIMD and CEMI, has implemented training programmes for male and female politicians in multiparty settings in Tunisia and in Myanmar. Stretching over a period of several years, the School of Politics programmes have targeted enhancing political skills: learning about political theories, political and electoral systems, electoral campaigning, enhancing skills for dialogue and making political speeches, working with the media and a wide spectrum of voters, understanding the division of power and channels of influence, and gender equality in politics. The schools have also equipped the participants with knowledge of democratic systems, international treaties, constitutions, laws, the legislative processes, national sectoral policies and identifying law and policy gaps, and knowledge on how to strengthen democracy and enact change. The political parties that participate in the programmes have been systematically asked to propose an equal number of female and male participants for the trainings. To date, the programmes have involved around 800 present and future politicians of Tunisia and Myanmar.



# Rising to the challenge: Recommendations for strengthening women's political participation

## Recommendations for donors

- Commit to long-term support for gender equality and SDGs. To increase women's access to politics is an extended agenda with no quick wins and requires the involvement of both men and women. Increasing women's access is cost-effective: financial investments in training and skills enhancement are relatively low compared to the potential returns in the long run.
- Be aware of false assumptions and maintain a flexible approach to support. Knowing enough about the partner country's formal and informal decision-making structures is key in finding solutions that work locally. Experience has shown that women are politically more active than donors assume, but their ways of influencing may not fit into the frameworks known to the international community. Introducing policy frameworks and programmes without adequate knowledge and advice from local communities and groups might undermine progress that has already been achieved.
- Create incentives for increasing equality between women and men in the partnerships. Rewarding progress towards gender equality in concrete ways will be likely to lead to success in other areas of strategic collaboration as well.
- Target financial support to empower women's participation in politics. Mainstreaming policies must be backed with resources for skills enhancement, the strengthening of public communication mechanisms and information sharing, ensuring accessibility to voting registers and other fundamental support.
- Engage also with male party leaders and male allies on inclusion issues to facilitate buy-in and commitment to institutional and sustainable change within political parties.

## Recommendations for national governments

- Lead by example. Collaboration and mutual learning are key in understanding what works.
- Introduce measures to increase women's participation in politics. Women's participation in public decision-making must be increased regardless of the political system of a country. Not all political schools of thought are present everywhere, but with CEDAW and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights being adopted by nearly all states in the world, gender equality is a universally accepted goal.
- Create incentives and reward success – invest in change. Create access to public funding in order for parties, parliaments and other institutions to adopt internal reforms for the greater inclusion of women.
- Take a critical look at the current electoral system. Evidence points to many types of inequalities at different stages of election processes, ranging from women's access to voting to inequalities in the opportunities to pursue political careers and candidacies. Support and leadership from governments is needed for the elimination of discriminative electoral practices.
- Tap into knowledge. Women's grassroots movements may be political in moving forward issues of common interests, but without political ideology, supporting women's groups and increasing women's access to politics across party lines may create new forms of collaboration and lead to policy changes that help the achievement of the SDGs and have a tangible, positive impact on citizens' lives.
- Strengthen gender-sensitive public financial management. No gender mainstreaming effort is effective without gender budgeting and targeted resource allocation to sectors in which gender inequalities persist.

## Recommendations for political parties

- Analyse the costs and benefits of the inclusion of women in party functions. The returns are likely to be higher than the investment, increasing both the success of political agendas and support for the party.
- Make inclusion a priority and embrace different strengths and talents, including those of women, within the political party. Recognising and breaking stereotypical thinking patterns and giving opportunities to party members with different strengths will increase the party's political leverage.
- Promote men's engagement in supporting their female peers, nominate key entry points and influential persons, particularly male champions, of gender equality in the party.
- Invest in the party members by increasing technical capacities, knowledge and skills. Investing in youth and women's wings will ensure skilled politicians now and in the future.
- Reach out to the citizens in order to create a culture of the public engagement of both women and men. Share information on the benefits of equality in politics at all levels and engage community members.
- Make inclusion and internal democracy a priority in the strategic planning. Strategy formulation processes should not be either overly complicated or too ambitious, and different interest groups within a political structure should have a say and participate in formulating them. The active participation of women and men in the process increases ownership and commitment to the strategy.
- Ensure gender parity in nominating electoral candidates. The change begins in the home territory: voluntary party quotas can both increase women's share in politics and show a positive example to others.



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Author: Riina Pilke

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