Sida

Women's Participation in Politics

Women's participation in politics is essential for development cooperation and humanitarian assistance. It is a question of human rights, a prerequisite for sustainable development and relevant for all aspects of multidimensional poverty. Women's participation in politics is on the rise, but huge challenges remain. This brief provides keys to promote women's equal participation in politics.

WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

By most measures, women's participation in politics has expanded over the past decades. In 1995, 11% of national parliamentarians were women; today (2022) the number is 25%.[1] In local political bodies bodies, 36% of elected members are women.[2] However, before we see equal political participation at all levels, there is a long way to go. In political processes, women worldwide have a collective status as outsiders, and men are disproportionally dominant in political institutions.

Women's participation in politics is linked to all other areas of gender equality; gender-based violence, women's economic empowerment, women's and girls' human rights, sexual and reproductive health and rights, equal care work and so forth.[3] It is also relevant for all aspects – and necessary for the eradication – of all dimensions of poverty: the distribution of resources, opportunities and choices, power and voice and human security. [4] The women's movement and women's human rights defenders are core actors in all aspects of change towards gender equality, and not least when interpreting and taking action to improve women's participation in politics.[5]

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Photograph: Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning

Today, as democracy and human rights in general, and women's and LGBTQI rights in particular, are under threat in many parts of the world[6], this broad context is even more important to take into consideration.

While recognising this context, this brief focuses on women's participation in what may be referred to as formal political processes at all levels, from global and national arenas to local communities. The brief uses the concept **women's participation in politics** to mark this focus.[7] Women's participation in formal politics includes elections, political parties, policy-making, and legislative bodies at all levels.

1   https://data.ipu.org/content/parline-global-data-national-parliaments
2   https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation/facts-and-figures
3   LINK to Gender Tool Box.
4   https://cdn.sida.se/publications/files/sida62028en-dimensions-of-poverty-sidas-conceptual-framework.pdf
5   See for example websites and publications by Association for Women in Development/AWID: https://www.awid.org, Just Associates/JASS: https://justassociates.org, Kvinna till kvinna: https://kvinnatillkvinna.org and Oxfam's report "Women, Voice and Power" 2021: https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/women-voice-and-power-how-transformative-feminist-leadership-is-challenging-ine-621202/.

6   See for example Kvinna till kvinna's report "The Fierce and the Furious": https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/publications/the-fierce-and-the-furious/, Eldén & Levin Expert Group for Aid Studies/EBA report "Swedish Aid in the Era of Shrinking Democratic Space" 2018: https://eba.se/rapporter/swedish-aid-in-the-era-of-shrinking-democratic-space-the-case-of-turkey/8657/
7   Other aspects that are closely linked to participation in formal politics but that are not covered in this brief include women's participation in peace processes, environmental negotiations, media and the private sector.

POLICY FRAMEWORKS

Article 7 of the **Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women** (CEDAW, 1979) concerns the elimination of discrimination in political and public life. It guarantees women the right to vote, formulate and implement government policy, hold public office and perform public functions at all levels, and to participate in non-governmental organisations.[8]

In the **Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action** (1995), women in power and decision making is one of twelve areas of concern: The declaration states that "women's equal participation in political life plays a pivotal role in the general process of the advancement of women".[9] The 65th Commission on the Status of Women in 2021 had a thematic focus on women's full and effective participation in decision-making and in public life, including elimination of violence.[10] In the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SDG's), the commitments from CEDAW and beyond are confirmed.[11] Three of the goals have targets that are particularly relevant for women's participation in politics. The most explicit is SDG 5 (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls) which includes a target on women's full participation and equal opportunities at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life. It makes governments accountable for progress in the number of women in national and local decision-making. Also SDG 10 (Reduce inequality within and among countries) and SDG 16 (Promote peaceful and inclusive societies including justice for all and inclusive institutions at all levels) have a direct policy relevance for women's participation in politics.

The third **EU gender action plan** (EU GAP III) states that women continue to be under-represented as voters, political leaders and elected officials, and that change is slow at all levels. EU GAP III also points at violence against women in public life as a substantial hindrance and identifies the advancement of equal participation and leadership as an area of priority.[12] Also other regional frameworks, for example the **Maputo protocol**[13] on the rights of women in Africa, identify women's right to participation in the political and decision-making processes as a key issue.[14]

The **Policy framework for Swedish development cooperation and humanitarian assistance** points out the representation of women and girls and their political participation and influence as a long-term policy direction.[15]

KEY ISSUES AND DILEMMAS

The increase of women's participation in politics has been accompanied with an increase in research about how women's relative political presence shapes the form, nature and content of politics. Below are some of the key issues and dilemmas addressed.

When addressing women's participation in politics there is a need to shift from a sole focus on individuals towards an increased **focus on gendered institutions**. This shift enables us to look at the impact of formal and informal rules, roles and practices for inclusion and exclusion of different groups.[16] This contributes to less of a focus on women's actions and responsibility for their own exclusion and more to a greater emphasis on what enables institutional change. It helps us move away from 'changing women' towards 'changing the system'.[17]

Gender policies for political parties

International IDEA has a Framework for developing gender policies for political parties as they are gatekeepers for women's political power and voice. It builds on the insight that not only is the number of women an indicator of a party's commitment to gender equality but also that the presence of women in different spheres of political decision-making, and the presence of gender equality in proposals and activities are key considerations. This includes factors such as leadership formation, internal decision-making processes, internal oversight and institutional development, candidate recruitment, party programmes, platform development and, outreach to voters and campaigns.

Moreover, there is a need to incorporate an **intersectional perspective** that recognises that neither men nor women nor non-binary persons are homogenous groups, and that identities, roles, privileges and vulnerabilities intersect in complex ways. It shows how political representation reproduces power structures, privilege and disadvantages, but also how complementarity advantages are at play when individuals with several vulnerabilities (for example ethnic minority working class women) gain inroads to political power.[18]

8   This is complemented by article 4 concerning temporary special measures to accelerate gender equality. https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms-discrimination-against-women
9   Page 79. https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/pdf/BDPfA%20E.pdf
10 E/CN.6/2021/3
11 https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda
12 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_2184
13 The Maputo Protocol was originally adopted by the "Assembly of the African Union" in Maputo, Mozambique on July 11, 2003. The official document is titled "Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa.
14 https://au.int/en/treaties/protocol-african-charter-human-and-peoples-rights-rights-women-africa

15 https://www.government.se/49a184/contentassets/43972c7f81c-34d51a82e6a7502860895/skr-60-engelsk-version_web.pdf
16 E.g. Madsen, Diana (ed). 2020. Gendered Institutions and Women's Political Representation in Africa. Zed Books.
17 Piscopo, Jennifer M. 2019. "The Limits of Leaning in: Ambition, Recruitment, and Candidate Training in Comparative Perspective." Politics, Groups, and Identities 7(4): 817–28.
18 E.g. Severs, Eline, Karen Celis, and Silvia Erzeel. 2016. "Power, Privilege and Disadvantage: Intersectionality Theory and Political Representation." Politics 36(4): 346–54.

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A goal is to include marginalised groups for whom it can be said "when they enter, we all enter".[19]

Political parties are gendered institutions. As organisations are mainly built by and for men, they are permeated by informal rules and practices that benefit those already in power. Seemingly gender-neutral formal rules can have gendered consequences[20], and research has shown that clientelism (the exchange of goods or services in exchange for political support) is detrimental for the inclusion of women.[21] Thus, it is important to not only seek to increase women's ambition to run, but to also look at **political parties as gatekeepers**. This means that not only the supply of women who are willing and able to run for office must change, but that parties' demand for women is equally – and often more – important.

A common question in both practice and research is whether women's participation in politics makes a difference. It is striking that we rarely consider how men's overrepresentation affects policy and politics.[22] The simple answer to this question is that it does not matter: women should have the same right to participate in politics as men, regardless of political views or what they accomplish. With an intersectional perspective, the lines of interest that women represent cut across different groups. This said, research has been devoted to this question and it is possible to see effects of women's participation in politics. For example, in many developing countries there is a link between the number of women in politics and the priority of health issues.[23]

Violence against women in elections

The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) works to eradicate violence against women in elections through a tool suite of research, legal strategies and digital initiatives. The tool builds on the insight that online and offline violence against women in elections is a threat to the quality of democracy. It is a violation of political and human rights that harms voters, candidates, election officials, activists, and security and political professionals worldwide.

Over one hundred countries have adopted some form of **electoral gender quota**, and seventy five countries have made them mandatory by law.[24] There are two main types: candidate quotas that specify a minimum number of women on each party list, and reserved seats that earmark seats for women. Parties learn and adapt to the presence of quotas, and this adaptation does not necessarily facilitate the representation of women. Quotas provide **opportunities for organisational change, but it does not come about automatically.** For example, if there is no stipulated rank-order for candidate quotas, parties often put the required number of women in non-electable slots far down on the list.[25]

The progress in women's participation in politics has not come about easily. **Resistance to progress** takes many shapes and forms. Women's increased participation has sometimes spurred the most direct form of resistance: **harassment, intimidation and violence**. Violence that targets women in politics because they are women seems to be on the rise.[26] However, we do not yet know exactly what is on the rise: are women in politics attacked more than men, are there more women to attack, or is there simply a greater attention to the issue, leading to more

19 Crenshaw, Kimberle. 1989. "Demarginalising the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." University of Chicago Legal Forum (1): 31.

20 Bjarnegård and Zetterberg. 2019. "Political Parties, Formal Selection Criteria, and Gendered Parliamentary Representation." Party Politics 25(3): 325–35.

21 E.g. Bjarnegård, Elin. 2013. Gender, Informal Institutions and Political Recruitment: Explaining Male Dominance in Parliamentary Representation. Palgrave Macmillan; Daby, Mariela. 2021. "The Gender Gap in Political Clientelism: Problem-Solving Networks and the Division of Political Work in Argentina." Comparative Political Studies 54(2): 215–44; Nazneen, Sohela. 2017. "Negotiating Gender Equity in a Clientelist State: The Role of Informal Networks in Bangladesh." In Gender and Informal Institutions, ed. Georgina Waylen. Rowman & Littlefield.

22 See however Bjarnegård, Elin and Rainbow Murray (eds). 2018. Critical Perspectives on Men and Masculinities. Politics & Gender 14(2).

23 E.g. Clayton, Amanda, and Pär Zetterberg. 2018a. "Quota Shocks: Electoral Gender Quotas and Government Spending Priorities Worldwide." The Journal of Politics 80(3): 916–32.

24 Hughes, Melanie M., Pamela Paxton, Amanda B. Clayton, and Pär Zetterberg. 2019. "Global Gender Quota Adoption, Implementation, and Reform." Comparative Politics 51(2): 219–38.

25 Bjarnegård, Elin and Pär Zetterberg. 2016. "Political Parties and Gender Quota Implementation: The Role of Bureaucratised Candidate Selection Procedures." Comparative Politics 48 (3).

26 Krook, Mona Lena. 2009. Quotas for Women in Politics: Gender and Candidate Selection Reform Worldwide. Oxford University Press.

reports?[27] What is clear, however, is that the form of violence that women in politics face is different compared to men. Violence takes place in the private and public spheres, online and offline, and women globally face more sexual violence than men do.[28]

Today, we are witnessing a worrying backsliding of democracy, attacks on feminism and attempts to roll back progress in women's human rights, particularly in areas of sexual and reproductive rights and family law.[29] Nevertheless, **gender equality has become and remains a strong international norm**.[30] Gender mainstreaming remains a key instrument for the UN and donors, and women's political empowerment is part and parcel of democracy promotion programs. This is cause for celebration – and caution. Autocratic leaders and parties are aware that they can benefit from gender equality reform adaptation. This has led to **autocratic genderwashing**: the instrumental use of gender equality reforms to seek legitimacy and bolster democratic appearance without real democracy. Many autocrats seek to portray themselves as champions of gender equality and, by doing so, they can bolster democratic appearances without really becoming more democratic.[31] Thus, the improvement of women's participation in politics constitutes progress, but has also made gender equality part of a strategic game, and contextual, critical evaluation on how this game is played is always necessary.

SIDA'S PARTNERS WORK

Sida's work to strengthen women's participation in politics takes many forms and involves support to different kinds of organisations. This includes support to women's rights organisations working with a broad spectra of women's political participation, civil society organisations focusing on women's participation in formal politics, as well as multilateral bodies and party-affiliated organisations.

The **challenges and hindering factors** in work to strengthen women's participation in politics defined by Sida partners include:[32]
- Discriminatory gender norms, social and cultural attitudes, misogyny, patriarchal and power structures.
- Structural barriers that reinforce discriminatory norms, legislation and policy.
- Lack of will to change expressed at all levels: international, national, local – from states, parties and individual men (and women).
- Lack of access to and control over resources.
- Violence, intimidation and harassment against women in politics.

Rwanda: Women in Parliament World Leader

Rwanda is a prime example of women's participation in politics, with more than 60 % in parliament. In 2021 the Green Forum, one of Sida's partners within the PAO (Party Affiliated Organisation) support organised discussions for local groups on politics, gender and productive and reproductive work. The results showed that despite impressive numbers at national level, the path to gender equal participation at all levels is long and difficult. The obstacles that women face – from the perceptions of women's ability to the expectations and sheer workload of women in productive and reproductive work – still hinders women's participation and influence in politics.

These **challenges are addressed** by Sida partners in various ways:
- Acknowledging that changing norms is complex, difficult and takes time. Partners stress the need to work at all levels – from global norms and standards to making norms visible in everyday political life – with a broad perspective including support to local women's rights organisations.
- Changing political and organisational structures including fair (meritocratic) nomination processes and the strengthening of internal party policies on gender equality and against harassment and violence.
- Addressing violence through awareness-raising on violence against women in elections and in politics, and to end impunity for violence.

27 Bardall, Gabrielle, Elin Bjarnegård, and Jennifer M Piscopo. 2020. "How Is Political Violence Gendered? Disentangling Motives, Forms, and Impacts." Political Studies 68(4): 916–35.

28 Bjarnegård, Elin, Sandra Håkansson, and Pär Zetterberg. 2022. "Gender and Violence against Political Candidates: Lessons from Sri Lanka." Politics & Gender 18(1): 33–61; Bjarnegård, Elin (forthcoming).The continuum of election violence: Gendered candidate experiences in the Maldives', International Political Science Review; Esposito, Eleonora, and Sole Alba Zollo. 2021. "'How Dare You Call Her a Pig, I Know Several Pigs Who Would Be Upset If They Knew'*: A Multimodal Critical Discursive Approach to Online Misogyny against UK MPs on YouTube." Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict 9(1): 47–75; Kuperberg, Rebecca. 2018. "Intersectional Violence against Women in Politics." Politics & Gender 14(4): 685–90; Kuperberg, Rebecca. 2021. "Incongruous and Illegitimate: Antisemitic and Islamophobic Semiotic Violence against Women in Politics in the United Kingdom." Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict 9(1): 100–126.

29 E.g. Roggeband, Conny, and Andrea Krizsán. 2018. "Reversing Gender Policy Progress: Patterns of Backsliding in Central and Eastern European New Democracies." European Journal of Politics and Gender 1(3): 367–85.

30 Towns, Ann E. 2010. Women and States: Norms and Hierarchies in International Society. Cambridge University Press.

31 Bjarnegård, Elin and Pär Zetterberg, 2022. How Autocrats Weaponize Women's Rights. Journal of Democracy 33(2).

32 Relevant Sida partners were asked in spring 2022, to provide input on hindering factors, how they adress challenges and their best practices and recommendations for work on women's participation in politics. Ten partners answered the call, representing UN (UN Women), civil society organisations (Kvinna till Kvinna/KtK, Just Associates/JASS, International Foundation for Electoral Systems/IFES, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance/IDEA) and Party-affiliated organisations (PAO) (Centre Party International Foundation/CIS, Christian Democratic International Center/KIC, Green Forum/GF, Jarl Hjalmarson Foundation/JHS, Olof Palme International Center/OPIC).

- Raise awareness about the fact that a prerequisite for change is willingness to change among those (men) in power – at individual and structural level, within and outside institutions.
- Support political awareness and political debates among young women, men and non-binary persons.

A political academy for women

Kvinna till kvinna's partner organisation in Tunisia, Awat Nissa, runs a political academy for women. The academy offers capacity-building for women active in politics, regardless of where they are situated in the political spectrum, with a focus on young women. The academy allows women to meet across party-lines, share experiences and discuss challenges. "Meeting other women working for the same cause makes me feel stronger" says Nawrez, one of the participants – "I believe in myself and don't hesitate to speak my mind"

ENTRY POINTS AND AREAS FOR DIALOGUE

Stress that all women's participation in politics across gender, age, caste, class, disabilities, religion, ethnicity, age and sexual orientation is **a matter of human rights** and a prerequisite for the eradication of poverty and for sustainable development.

Look at **parties as gatekeepers** and strive to change not only the supply of women available for political engagement at all levels, but also the demand for women in politics.

Move away from a sole focus on individual change, towards structural change of **gendered institutions**, and how formal and informal rules and practices influence the inclusion of women and other marginalised groups.

Improve women's participation in politics and change underlying hindrances such as discriminatory norms and practices through **support to actors that makes this participation possible**, such as women's rights organisations.

Strengthen women in politics throughout their lifespan, from young to old, through education and networks and increase access to **family planning, sexuality education, SRHR and equal care work** in order for more women to have time and energy for political engagement at all levels.

Apply an intersectional perspective that recognises that neither men nor women are homogenous groups, and that identities, privileges and vulnerabilities intersect in complex ways.

Identify and use **male allies and upstanders** for women's participation in politics at all levels: from husbands, fathers and friends to ministers and political party leaders.

Acknowledge **gender quotas** as important tools for change towards gender equal participation in politics but be critical of the way they are designed and used. However, be aware that they do not necessarily lead to substantial change and need to be accompanied with other gender equality efforts.

Be aware that **resistance against progress** takes many shapes and forms. Adjust to context, and recognise and persistently address intimidation, harassment and gendered political violence – and impunity for this violence – as a core question for democracy.

Build on the fact that gender equality has become and remains a strong international norm. At the same time: be aware of how it can be used as **autocratic genderwashing** in efforts to increase women's participation in politics, to legitimise democratic appearance without real democratic change.

Ensure that women in politics have **access to power and resources** on equal terms with men, in all institutions, organisations and processes, at all levels.

FURTHER READINGS AND RESOURCES

UN Women: Various tools relevant for women's leadership and participation in politics, and a list of UN norms and standards from CEDAW and beyond

IFES: Tool for the eradication of violence against women in elections

IDEA: Framework for developing gender policies for political parties

iKNOW Politics: Joint platform of IDEA, IPU, UNDP, UN Women for women's equal participation in politics and government

Just Associates (JASS): Intersectional power analysis

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