



WYDE | Women's Leadership: Strategy on Social Norms Change

This strategy details WYDE | Women's Leadership's approach to transforming social norms that restrict women's participation in politics. It draws on insights from a 2025 Expert Group Meeting (EGM),¹ expert consultations, and UN Women's broader social norms framework. It aims to guide partners in implementing the WYDE Initiative, with transforming social norms as a key cross-cutting priority.

In this document, the term "social norms" refers to norms that impact gender equality and women's empowerment (rather than "gender norms"), while recognizing that these norms are rooted in intersecting ideologies, such as caste, race, class, and sexuality, which influence gender equality and women's empowerment, depending on the context.²

I. Understanding the impact of social norms

Women make up half of the world's population, but are underrepresented at all decision-making levels:

- Women hold just 22% of executive cabinet positions, with some cabinets having no women at all. Women lead just [28 countries](#) worldwide (UN Women, 2026).
- Women hold [27.5% of parliamentary seats globally](#), with women under 30 holding just 1.2%. (IPU, 2026).
- Women hold [35.6% of seats in local deliberative bodies](#) (UN Women, 2024).

Beneath these statistics are discriminatory social norms that silence women, limit their representation and participation in leadership and decision-making, and reinforce systemic inequalities across all areas of life.

Social norms can be understood as unwritten rules that define what is considered right and wrong, acceptable, or "normal" in a society. These rules are embedded in and shape the functioning of the state, market, community, and family, influencing what people do, how they do it, who does it and who benefits.

While some social norms foster social cohesion, many uphold discrimination, particularly those that determine who is considered suitable to lead and participate in political life, often favouring men. This limits women's access to leadership and decision-making opportunities, reinforcing men's dominance and patriarchal leadership models. Many discriminatory norms are rooted in longstanding beliefs justified in the name of religion, tradition, and culture, making them difficult to challenge and change.

- **Social norms impose universal barriers to women's leadership and decision-making at all levels, from households and communities to local, regional, and national governments, as well as parliaments.** They influence who leads and whose opinions are valued. Leadership and decision-making are typically associated with patriarchal models of masculinity, while domestic and caregiving roles are framed as feminine roles. These norms reinforce the idea that women should prioritize household responsibilities instead of public life or political office. Within politics, social norms also influence the types of roles women are assigned, often limiting them to areas such as education and social protection, rather than other fields like the economy, finance, or defense.
- **The norm that politics is primarily a male domain influences the entire political process.** Political parties, media outlets, and political institutions often act as gatekeepers, sidelining women's voices in leadership and decision-making roles. Although women and men have equal rights to vote, run for office, and hold leadership positions, discriminatory social norms ingrained

¹ The Expert Group Meeting brought together feminist scholars, policymakers, activists, and practitioners to chart a path forward for transforming social norms and ensuring women's full and effective political participation to address one of the most persistent barriers to gender equality in political and public life: discriminatory social norms. The Report is [accessible here](#).

² *UN Women. Ideologies, Institutions and Power: Addressing Discriminatory Social Norms*, 2026.

in institutions like political parties create unequal conditions that hinder women from exercising their political rights safely. Women candidates face higher recruitment standards, limited campaign financing, and biased media coverage. While men's competence is often assumed, women—especially from marginalized groups including low-income, racialized, Indigenous, young, LGBTI communities, and people living with disabilities—are constantly required to prove their capabilities. Women may also face pressure to vote based on male family members' preferences, undermining their right to a free and secret ballot. These factors contribute to women's exclusion from political processes, limited access to resources, and heightened vulnerability to violence and harassment.

- **Time poverty caused by unpaid care and domestic work—a burden disproportionately placed on women by discriminatory social norms—reduces their ability to engage in public life and makes them less likely to be recruited, nominated, or elected.** Women are also often expected to support men's political ambitions, while simultaneously managing domestic and caregiving responsibilities. When women do engage in politics, these same norms increase their risk of gender-based violence, online harassment, and backlash, often framed as retribution for stepping outside of their socially assigned roles within the home and family.
- **Children are exposed to discriminatory norms early in life, as they see mostly men in politics and decision-making roles.** This process of "gendered political socialisation"³ occurs at home, in schools, and through media exposure. In families where children observe their mothers performing most of the unpaid household chores while fathers participate in public life, this reinforces the idea that politics is not suitable for women. As children grow, this belief is further reinforced through public monuments, museums, and films that celebrate male political heroes, [boosting men's political ambitions while diminishing those of women](#). Boys are often encouraged to be assertive and ambitious, whereas girls are often encouraged to focus on nurturing and appearance.

- **Discriminatory social norms drive widespread violence against women in politics, pushing many women out of public life.** Violence targeting women and girls in public spaces crosses political, legal, cultural, and societal boundaries, affecting both conflict and peace settings, across all levels of development. These discriminatory norms create environments in which violence against women in politics is normalized or ignored. Technology-facilitated violence against women and girls—such as sexual harassment, intimidation, or hate speech—is intentionally used to silence and discredit women, often leading them to self-censor or deplatform, undermining democratic processes and human rights.

II. Pathways to transform social norms for women's leadership

Transforming social norms for women's leadership and decision-making requires multiple approaches implemented simultaneously. Framework on social norms and related research identifies three intersecting, interrelated strategies⁴ that have proven effective in changing social norms, emphasizing that none works in isolation; rather, the "confluence of all three"⁵ enables change. Building on UN Women's framework, WYDE | Women's Leadership translates these strategies into three practical pathways to advance women's leadership, representation, and decision-making:

1. **Challenging and transforming narratives** that imply power belongs primarily to men, and replacing them with narratives of power redistribution and inclusive leadership that reflect the diversity of society and showcase the benefits of gender-balanced leadership. This requires collective reflection within political institutions on existing discriminatory narratives, as well as the co-development of egalitarian narratives through sustained dialogue and exchange. It also includes exposing myths, disinformation, and false narratives through evidence.
2. **Supporting material changes** to dismantle existing power structures and empower women in decision-making through formal mechanisms, such as gender quotas and institutional reforms, including the creation of gender-sensitive parliaments. This pathway also includes skills and capacity-building, as well as [improving access to resources such as childcare](#),

³ Angela L. Bos "This One's for the Boys: How Gendered Political Socialization Limits Girls' Political Ambition and Interest", 2022

⁴ Framework available upon request. Other relevant sources: UN Women, Measuring social norms for gender and development: Lessons and priorities, 2024; UN Women, Social norms, gender and development: A review of research and practice, 2023.

⁵ Idem.

education, funding, and economic opportunities. In addition, reforming informal practices, such as late-night meetings, exclusive social gathering spaces, seating arrangements, and other customs, is essential. All changes and reforms should be framed as beneficial to society as a whole, emphasizing their relevance to both individual and collective interests.

3. **Enhancing and empowering feminist and women's movements** to build bold coalitions, thereby strengthening their collective voice and agency to demand accountability, change power dynamics, and maintain progress. This includes building solidarity among women leaders (for instance, intergenerational dialogues, inter-party exchanges, mentoring, and regional/sub-regional networks), as well as mobilising support for women leaders from other women's collectives, such as women's business associations and trade unions. It also involves building coalitions and allyship with a broader range of stakeholders, including academia, media networks, and think tanks.

No single intervention can achieve change alone. Leaders must speak out against discrimination, community members should address local contexts, and families can serve as role models for children. Creative approaches, such as theatre, radio, social media campaigns, and role-playing, can shift mindsets by using culture and creative arts to reshape dominant narratives about women's abilities.

The media plays an important role in shaping narratives around women in politics. Balanced coverage can amplify women's voices and inspire future leaders, while biased reporting can portray women in politics as trivial, stereotyped, or incompetent. Online, the risks intensify: although social media offers powerful opportunities for engagement and amplification, it also enables the spread of extreme narratives and harmful social norms, exposing women to misogyny, hate speech, and harassment. Without safer and more inclusive media and digital spaces, women's political participation remains under threat.

III. Time to act: Everyone has a role to play

Transforming social norms requires action at every level—by institutions, communities, and individuals—to challenge harmful stereotypes and strengthen women's participation, leadership and representation. The WYDE Women's Leadership social norms strategy builds on each partner's unique strengths, mandates, and stakeholders, collectively contributing to social norms change:

- **Decision-making institutions** play a critical role in advancing women's leadership at all levels. They can create and promote opportunities for women to lead by showcasing examples of women leaders in action, and by amending rules and practices that favour men, including sitting times, dress codes, and other practices based on male dominance in institutions. The following institutions have specific means of action:
 - › **Parliaments** have the authority and responsibility to shape the legal and policy environment and influence social norms by passing gender equality laws, establishing internal gender equality policies, institutionalizing quotas, enforcing anti-violence and anti-harassment protections, and supporting women's caucuses. They can engage the public through outreach and partnerships to challenge stereotypes, including by involving male Members of Parliament. Parliaments should commit to becoming gender-sensitive institutions.
 - › **Local governments** are uniquely positioned to model inclusive governance and shift public perceptions, as they are the level of government closest to communities. They can normalize women's leadership through awareness campaigns, by showcasing the benefits of inclusive leadership, promoting women to leadership positions, and serving as entry points for women's political careers. They can also enact gender-responsive policies, advance equality through universal local public services and care systems, and guarantee the participation of diverse grassroots women's organizations in local decision-making.

- **Political parties** play a crucial role in determining who leads and how leadership is defined. They are responsible for unlocking the pipeline to power by selecting candidates, adopting quotas, training women candidates, providing adequate resources, and enforcing anti-harassment policies. Beyond increasing numbers, quotas transform parties and institutions by creating a knock-on effect that leads to changes within party culture, codes of conduct, and meeting structures.
- **Women's organizations, youth-led organizations, and grassroots organizations**, as actors embedded in communities, are uniquely positioned to challenge social norms locally, elevate women's leadership, and build inclusive political cultures from the ground up. Their vital contributions include:
 - › **Using community ties** to elevate women leaders, empower candidates through training and mentorship, finance activities of women's rights organizations, and advocate for gender-responsive policies.
 - › **Providing stepping stones** to promote women's leadership by offering opportunities to assume decision-making roles at the grassroots level, gradually building confidence, voice, agency, and skills for future political leadership. Organizations and coalitions at local, regional, or global levels—such as the Feminist Municipal Movement or the Generation Equality Action Coalition on Feminist Movements and Leadership—expand reach and multiply impact.
- **Individuals** have a foundational role in challenging and reshaping social norms through everyday actions and choices. They influence social norms about leadership, whose voices matter, and drive change.
 - › **Women leaders and role models** can share their life journeys of overcoming challenges, creating pathways for others to follow, lead, and succeed. The more women lead in visible decision-making positions, the more 'normal' and achievable it becomes for others to follow.
 - › **Young women leaders** can build strong coalitions, participate in decision-making, and consistently advance gender equality.
 - › **Men in leadership positions** can use their influence to challenge sexist norms by calling out discriminatory behaviour among peers, championing reforms, promoting narratives that support women's contributions to decision-making, nominating women to leadership roles and supporting the elimination of violence against women in politics.
 - › **Educators and teachers** play a foundational role in shaping future generations by teaching children to value women's leadership, building girls' confidence, and challenging stereotypes through curricula.
 - › **Household members and families** can challenge the gendered political socialisation of children by leading by example, ensuring balanced roles at home, and by supporting girls in leadership roles throughout their childhood, building confidence and self-esteem.
 - › **Journalists and the media** can challenge stereotypes by showcasing positive representations of diverse women leaders across news, social media, and entertainment, and by ensuring that media coverage does not contribute to any form of violence and harassment.
 - › **Former Members of Parliament and locally elected leaders (both men and women)** can share their experiences to attest to how much parliaments and local governments lose when women's needs and perspectives are excluded in addressing crucial local and national priorities.
 - › **Respected community politicians** can model inclusive behaviour and actions by holding local dialogues, consulting with women during election periods, and inviting feedback from women in their communities.

IV. Key messages on social norms for women's political participation and representation

This section presents sample key messages that summarize the main concepts and ideas presented above. These messages align with and support the work of WYDE | Women's Leadership on transforming discriminatory social norms. They can be further tailored for WYDE partners' needs and customized for social media using #WYDEWomenLeadership or your specific WYDE component hashtag.

The key messages are organized into two parts: the first part focuses on the WYDE | Women's Leadership programme and social norms (informative), while the second part outlines clear calls to action to challenge and transform these norms (action).

Part 1: Messages on WYDE Women's Leadership and transforming social norms

- Women make up 50% of the population but hold just 27.5% of parliamentary seats globally and 35.6% of seats in local deliberative bodies, and lead only 28 countries. WYDE | Women's Leadership is transforming social norms and systems that limit women's political participation and representation at all levels.
- Discriminatory social norms and practices, including those that result in time poverty, keep women out of decision-making, from households, communities, to parliaments. WYDE | Women's Leadership works to change narratives and frameworks, and to strengthen feminist movements for lasting change.
- Social norms are the invisible rules that shape who leads, who speaks, and whose voice matters. They reflect what is seen as "normal" or "acceptable," but when rooted in gender stereotypes, they can be deeply discriminatory.
- Some social norms restrict women's political participation by defining leadership as masculine and caregiving as feminine. From parliaments to households, norms too often determine who makes decisions—and too often, they exclude women.
- These norms are reinforced by the media, political parties, and institutions that perpetuate the idea that men are the "right" leaders.

- Social norms can change and do change over time. Influential leaders, collectives and social movements, as well as institutions, can therefore help establish a new norm if they believe that the existing norm can and should be changed.
- To transform norms, we must rewrite the narrative: power belongs to everyone, not just men. Power must be shared between women and men, particularly those from marginalized and poor communities, as a necessary condition for achieving justice and democracy.
- Transformative change requires combining new narratives, highlighting new experiences, encouraging robust laws and frameworks, as well as mobilizing and supporting strong feminist movements and coalitions. From quotas and childcare access to bold role models and creative activism, change occurs when multiple forces converge.

Part 2: Calls to action to challenge and transform social norms

- Change takes all of us:
 - › Parliaments must pass equality laws and ensure internal rules on hate speech and discrimination.
 - › Parties must end exclusionary gatekeeping and support women candidates.
 - › The media must showcase diverse women leaders and ban all stereotyping.
 - › Local governments must promote feminist municipalism.⁶
 - › Civil society must elevate women's voices.
 - › Households can challenge discriminatory norms at home, inspiring families and children to truly embrace representative leadership.
- Normalize women's leadership by amplifying their voices in politics, media, and public life.
- Challenge stereotypes in homes, schools, and workplaces. Children must see that leadership has no gender and that anyone can have ambition.
- Support feminist movements and coalitions pushing for systemic change and accountability.

⁶ Read more about the [Feminist Municipal Movement](#).

- Men in leadership positions must call out discriminatory practices, promote women, and change the culture of decision-making spaces, including through combating violence against women in politics.
- Everyone, including parliamentarians and locally elected representatives, must stand up against harassment and discrimination faced by their women colleagues.
- All parliamentarians and local representatives should model zero-tolerance behaviour and advocate for violence-free and harassment-free parliaments and local governments.
- Members of Parliament, local representatives, and members of political parties play a crucial role in shaping societal norms and transforming discriminatory practices. What they say and do matters.
- Political parties must adopt quotas, strive for parity in their party structures, support women candidates, and dismantle barriers to entry into the political arena.
- The media must start showcasing diverse women leaders with integrity and depth to avoid harmful stereotypes.
- Lasting change requires all of us. Shifting mindsets is as crucial as changing laws. Together, we can build truly inclusive and democratic societies.

V. About WYDE | Women's Leadership and social norms change

WHAT IS WYDE | WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP?

[WYDE | Women's Leadership](#) seeks to ignite a global movement to strengthen women's and young women's democratic engagement. Launched in 2024 with €11.5 million in EU funding over three years, the programme supports women's political participation and representation in decision-making, focusing on those most often overlooked. It is part of the [Women and Youth Democratic Engagement initiative \(WYDE\)](#), funded by the European Union to empower youth and women globally as key development and change actors.

WYDE is implemented by UN Women (lead agency), International IDEA, Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), and United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) as well as by eight civil society organizations (among which five are members of the Generation Equality Action Coalition on Feminist Movements and Leadership). Together, we strengthen women's leadership in political and public life through networking, dialogues and capacity building, while fostering transformative social norms change.

WYDE | Women's Leadership takes an integrated approach to transform social norms and shift cultural attitudes and practices that portray women's roles in communities and society as incompatible with political power. WYDE | Women's Leadership and its partners are leveraging diverse partnerships to mobilize for positive social change, tackling not only men and boys, but also key decision-makers in parliaments and local governments, political institutions and communities—through capacity building, intergenerational dialogues, advocacy and campaigns. The media is engaged as an agent of change throughout the programme and trained to challenge negative stereotypes and transform narratives around women's political participation, so that women are perceived as equally legitimate and effective leaders, including in legislatures, executive positions as well as in political parties. Civil society organizations are also implementing eight WYDE grants⁷ which include social norms change as a transversal component.

7. In Argentina, India, Liberia, Malawi, Nepal, Nigeria, South Sudan and Syria.

WHAT THE PARTNERS ARE DOING UNDER WYDE | WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

UN Women: As the WYDE | Women's Leadership secretariat, UN Women promotes cross-cutting engagement across WYDE components while leading the implementation of grants awarded to support the Generation Equality Action Coalition on Feminist Movements and Leadership and to promote women's leadership and social norms change globally. UN Women leads movement-building, coordinates advocacy, convenes stakeholders, generates global knowledge and data on violence against women in politics.

International IDEA: International IDEA collaborates with regional and national actors to shift gender norms and enhance women's political representation using the Access = Participation & Representation = Transformative (APRT) framework. International IDEA also runs Young Women's Empowerment Academies, regional dialogues, and media trainings using transformative gender norms methodologies.

Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU): IPU advocates for gender-sensitive parliaments and develops tools to address violence against women in politics. They provide Young Parliamentarians with the Empowerment Series of Briefings, sharing tools and guidance to prevent violence against women in politics and engaging MPs to support women in parliaments. The IPU also promotes intergenerational dialogues between senior and young MPs and through organising dialogues, fosters links and partnerships with civil society, including AC6 leaders.

United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG): UCLG champions gender equality as a cross-cutting priority in local governance through its extensive network of more than 250,000 local and regional governments across all regions. UCLG leads the Feminist Municipal Movement and mobilizes thousands of locally elected women to enhance the participation and role of women in local and regional governments. Through global movement-building, advocacy and high-impact partnerships, and knowledge co-creation, UCLG advances equality and democracy in local governance while providing women mayors and governors and male allies with guidance on feminist leadership, local policies for care, social norms as well as violence against women in politics.

Civil Society Organizations – WYDE Grantees: 16 women's rights organizations across four regions received over \$2,043,000 in grants to advance the collective vision and strategies defined within the Generation Equality Action Coalition on Feminist Movements and Leadership. Each project includes a specific component on trans-forming social norms, through various strategies including community-based advocacy with traditional and religious leaders, empowerment trainings, media engagement, local campaigns, HeforShe plans and much more.⁸

European Union (EU): The EU is providing political vision, funding, and leadership to the programme in its broader efforts to advance democracy and gender equality worldwide. The EU's commitment to gender equality as a fundamental value drives WYDE's vision and supplies the necessary resources for global impact, supporting the EU Action Plan on Democracy and Human Rights 2020-2027, the EU Action Plan on Gender Equality in External Action 2021-2027, the EU Youth Action Plan in External Action 2022-2027.

The Women and Youth Democratic Engagement (WYDE) flagship programme has made gender equality central to all interventions (WYDE Civic Engagement, WYDE Political Parties, WYDE Freedoms and WYDE InterPares). This strategy on social norms for women's political rights will enable each partner to ensure that their interventions are transformative and tackle the root causes of gender inequalities in political and civic engagement, and public life.

8. Factsheets for each project are [available here](#).

KEY RESULTS AFTER TWO YEARS OF IMPLEMENTATION

During its first two years, WYDE | Women's Leadership reached the following results:

1,924

WOMEN LEADERS

(politicians, activists, mayors, MPs) enhanced their skills through mentoring, networking, academies, and dialogues.

16

WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS

including members of the Generation Equality Action Coalition on Feminist Movements and Leadership, funded across Africa, Asia-Pacific, Latin America-Caribbean, and Arab States. These 16 grantees work with marginalized groups, including internally displaced women, women with disabilities, Indigenous women, LGBTI women, and Dalit women.

19

INTERGENERATIONAL CONVENINGS AND DIALOGUES

organized in 5 regions and bringing together women leaders among others to explore social norms transformation.

32

JOURNALISTS

trained to challenge gender bias and stereotypes in the media.

VI. Resources and work on social norms change under WYDE

WYDE | Women's Leadership has produced several resources as part of its advocacy work. These materials address topics such as women's leadership and decision-making, violence against women in politics, social norms and gender stereotypes related to women's political participation, and the role of women in parliaments. The resources include [social media packages](#), articles, interviews, and an educational video on social norms and women's leadership and decision-making. More

specifically, social media packages include relevant data, policy recommendations, expert quotes, or quotes from women in politics, and key advocacy messages. Interviews and articles support the educational work in understanding social norms while also offering concrete advice to women navigating power and politics.

These resources are available for use through the WYDE | Women's Leadership programme and the wider WYDE community. Contact the WYDE team (wyde@unwomen.org) for editable formats or to inform us of your resource usage.

A. Social media packages

In the context of WYDE's Expert Group Meeting focusing on Transforming Social Norms to Advance Women's Political Participation⁹ (Feb 2025)



In the context of WYDE Regional Intergenerational Dialogue in Istanbul (quotes from civil society leaders, parliamentarians and institutional experts)



Further packages can be found [in this Dropbox](#).

9. Read [UN Women article on UN Regional Information Center: Transforming Social Norms to Advance Women's Political Participation](#), April 2025.

B. Selection of articles and interviews focusing on social norms change (2025):

[In the words of Emma Muteka: “My age, gender and marital status were scrutinized, because they thought that if I don’t have children and therefore do not run a household, how could I actually run an office?”](#), UN Women.

[Take Five: Sonia Palmieri: “Women need a support network of like-minded politicians to help navigate these challenges, because facing delegitimization alone can be disheartening and may even push women to leave politics altogether”](#), UN Women.

[“Women’s voices are often challenged, and deliberate obstacles—like financial constraints and exclusion from political networks—make it harder for them to participate”](#) Naila Kabeer, Professor Emerita, London School of Economics and Political Science, UN Women.

[Challenging institutional gatekeeping for gender equality: a conversation with Jennifer Piscopo, Professor of Gender and Politics and Director of the Gender Institute at Royal Holloway, University of London](#), UN Women.

[Transforming Social Norms to Advance Women’s Political Participation](#), UN Women.

[Debunking social gender norms through the Young Women’s Empowerment Academies](#), International IDEA.

[Fireside chat with Mayor of Banjul and Member of the UCLG Standing Committee on Gender Equality](#), UCLG.

[The Feminist Municipal Movement leads the way to equality and democracy through the localization of Beijing+30 at CSW69](#), UCLG.

[Local Leaders gather to define priorities on women’s political participation and social transformation towards Beijing+30 and beyond](#), UCLG.

[Local Women Leaders in Seine-Saint-Denis Unite to End Violence Against Women in Politics](#), UCLG.

C. Existing videos focusing on social norms

This educational video features social norms experts as they explain how social norms constitute an obstacle to women’s participation in decision-making, how we can address and change these discriminatory social norms while sharing some of the concrete tools to challenge social norms.

The interviews were collected during the Expert Group Meeting (EGM) on social norms, convened in February 2025 in Brussels by UN Women under the Women and Youth Democratic Engagement (WYDE) | Women’s Leadership Initiative.



“How Social Norms shape who leads and decides in politics” Video accessible [here](#).



“Empowering Women Leaders Globally”. Video accessible [here](#).