

WOMEN IN DECISION MAKING AND LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

Around the world, women now have more influence over the decisions that affect their lives. In even the most conservative societies, feminists and gender advocates have been able to forward more equitable policies and outcomes. Important drivers of women's political power and influence include improved access to education and material assets, more equal and inclusive politics, strong women's movements and women being effective political operators. Increase in women's political power is not uniform. Some women have more influence than others, both within and between countries. Men continue to dominate some sectors and the most powerful positions in society. Women in positions of power may not champion gender equality: women and their interests are diverse. The international community can better support women's political leadership by investing in women's education and economic assets, their organisations and their political apprenticeship; focusing on political systems and not just elections; and supporting locally led and problem-driven responses.

Keywords: Leadership, decision-making power and influence

Introduction

This briefing is about women's decision-making power, in particular their ability to influence political decisions about the distribution of public authority, rights and resources. We look at the reasons for women's increased presence in public life around the world, and why women in some socioeconomic groups, sectors and countries have less political power than others. We also examine when and how women have power and influence in practice, and what they seek to achieve. Finally, we provide recommendations on how the international community can better support women's access to decision-making and leadership. This is not a uniform global trend, however. Women's political power differs between regions and countries and, within countries, between sectors and socioeconomic groups. Three main factors enable or constrain women's decision-making power and leadership and explain which women gain political power, when and how.

Leadership means the individual and collective capabilities to mobilise 'people and resources (economic, political and other) in pursuit of particular ends'¹. This includes the political aspect of mobilisation – that is, the ability to navigate power relations to secure desired outcomes through contestation and negotiation, the co-option and persuasion of allies and the outmanoeuvring of opponents. Leadership therefore involves the ability to influence the ideas and behaviour of others and is effective

when it translates into outcomes, whatever the content of those might be. Leadership may or may not coincide with public positions of authority.

Decision-making power is the ability to influence decisions that affect one's life – both private and public. Formal access to positions of authority and to decision-making processes is an important, if insufficient, condition for women to have decision-making power in the public domain. In fact, decision-making power is a composite of access, capabilities and actions that shape whether women have influence over the polity or decisions about their private life. Having influence with, over and through people and processes is therefore central to both leadership and decision-making power.

Gains in women's decision-making power

Women are more visible in public life now than they have been at any other point in modern history. Globally, women have more access to positions of authority than they did 30 years ago – from the judiciary to parliament, from professional associations to the boardroom.

In the past 30 years, the gender gap in several aspects of public life in low- and middle-income countries has narrowed significantly. The global proportion of women national parliamentarians – the most common measure of this – fell from 11.3% to 22% between 1995 and 2015. By 2011, women made up 40% of the formal labour force and 27% of judges worldwide. Women are even starting to make inroads into solidly male areas, such as

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senior police force (9% by 2011) and the boardroom, with women CEOs of Fortune 500 companies going from 0 in 1995 to 26 in 2015 [8].

Institutions are rules and norms that shape people's behaviour and interactions in social, political and economic life. Four changes to formal (written) rules have been instrumental to the increase in women's access to decision-making.

- First, the extension of civil and political rights has made it more possible for women (and men) to participate in public and economic life.
- Second, many countries are progressively eliminating laws that discriminate against women specifically.
- Third, democratisation has given much greater numbers of women experience of political office – including poorer women in those countries with elected local government.
- Fourth, positive measures, such as a sectoral or party quotas, have been critical to reducing the representation gap in many countries, particularly within national legislatures.

Critically, how formal rules work also depends on their interaction with informal (unwritten) rules, social norms and practices. These include customary and religious law and informal political norms, such as patronage-based or 'big man' politics. They also include norms that are so 'hidden' people may not even recognise their effect on their behaviour, such as patriarchy, sexism or racism [9].

Variations in women's decision-making power

Too often, strategies to support women's decision-making focus on institutions, structures or capabilities in isolation, with limited appreciation of the linkages between them

Structures

Structures are the deeper social, economic and political endowments, groupings and patterns that shape a society. They tend to be persistent over time: for example, socially constructed categories and identities, such as class, gender, ethnicity or sexuality, endure for centuries. But structural changes that reduce inequalities are ultimately what are required to close the representation gap. Urbanisation, economic diversification and changes in the gendered division of labour are slowly shifting social beliefs and expectations in developing countries. For example, women moving into traditionally masculine jobs in larger numbers in Zambia is 'disrupting' gender stereotypes about women's capabilities *vis-à-vis* men and the associated cultural

expectations about the roles women and men should perform. Women's participation in the formal labour market has challenged restrictions on women's mobility in Bangladesh.

Social ruptures and shocks can also produce rapid structural change. In particular, large-scale conflict has catalysed shifts in gender relations. The disruption of traditional gender roles and stereotypes during war is one reason for this. For instance, in El Salvador, Peru, Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka, not all women returned to their prewar roles at the end of the conflict; some women continue in new found leadership roles, for instance in new civil society organisations [7]. But peace processes and constitutional reform during and after conflict have also provided opportunities for women to renegotiate their share of rights and resources, on paper at least, as part of larger political reforms. While women still rarely have an actual seat at the negotiating table, they have been effective in influencing outcomes, including through strategic networking and lobbying with key decision-makers [8-9].

After conflicts or regime change, male elites often backslide on formal commitments to women's rights, as was seen in Latin America in the 1980s and after the more recent Arab Uprisings. For example, of the 44 African countries that have rewritten their constitutions since the 1990s, 75% of those that did so after conflict have quota provisions, compared with only 25% of those that did not experience conflict – and, on average, the post-conflict African countries have double the number of women members of parliament.

Capabilities

Women must draw on a range of capabilities to take advantage of the opportunities institutional and structural changes present. Female politicians tend to be educated, middle-class, often professional – particularly those who engage in politics outside their immediate communities. A girl's future political power is therefore often directly related to her family's socioeconomic status and her parents' attitude to education for girls – and, in particular, to *higher* education. Families can also be a critical training ground for women leaders. Living in a politically active household can equip women with the nous and connections necessary to be effective political operators – as when parents or spouses are involved in community activism, trade unionism or national office, for instance. Student politics, volunteering and professional life are other key opportunities for women to build their political skills, their reputation and a constituency [10]. 'political apprenticeship' – more so even than political parties or formal training programmes in political skills. The private

sphere also informs women's power in the public sphere into their adulthood. Women have less time and fewer resources than men because of the gendered division of domestic and reproductive labour. Financial and moral support of husbands and other close family members is therefore often instrumental to a woman's political career [17]. And women who have economic capital, in the form of ownership of and control over resources, income and assets, are more likely to have decision-making power in the home – particularly when this economic capital is combined with cultural and social capital, such as education [18]. Women's political power also depends on their collective capabilities. Women organising with other women is critical to their questioning of men's dominance and to the solidarity needed to challenge it. Strong, independent women's organisations are also instrumental to achieve changes in gender laws and practices, especially in areas that are likely to generate strong resistance, such as with violence against women or family law [19]. Much less is known about women's role within political parties and faith-based organisations, and the implications of this for women's political power. The power to decide in institutions and social structures combine and interact shapes women's actual influence in decision-making processes. These relationships are the political economy of women's decision-making. They help explain variations in women's political power and leadership.

The anniversaries of the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995) and UN Security Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (2000) provide political opportunities to push the agenda on women's political power and leadership.

Five ways to push the agenda on women's political power and leadership:

1. Invest in women's organisations and movements

Support to women's organisations should always be a priority while short-term benefits might be difficult to predict or report, the importance of strong, independent women's movements to gender gains over time cannot be overstated. Women's organisations need to arise from domestic processes of contestation, however; attempts by foreign actors and funders to drive agendas can undermine domestic capacity and voluntarism and create backlash.

2. Focus on political systems, not just elections

There is clear value in supporting mechanisms to increase women's representation, through quotas, women's caucuses and whole-of-electoral-cycle

support to women candidates and politicians, but whether and how these mechanisms work to increase the decision-making power of different women will depend on the wider political system. To be effective, support to women's political power must pay attention to how different features of the system work together, including electoral rules, party system, regime type and political culture.

3. Invest in political apprenticeship

Women develop political skills and experience in a range of ways and through different modes of political action. Political parties are essential to women's influence once elected, but may not be the most important training grounds for women politicians. Supporting schools and civic associations can be effective ways to extend opportunities for political apprenticeship to greater numbers and groups of women. Donors therefore need also to invest in a range of potential pathways to women's leadership, with a country's political economy shaping decisions.

4. Invest in women's education and economic assets

It will be an opportunity missed if increased spending for women's leadership goes only to bigger gender programmes that focus directly on women's political participation. Economic and social capabilities provide a building block for political capabilities. There is a clear opportunity to indirectly support women's decision-making power through education, but also economic programmes that increase women's access to property, land, livelihoods, other capital and business opportunities. Existing initiatives can be adapted so they not only help achieve women's economic empowerment but also enhance women's role in decision making in business and economic policy.

5. Be locally led and problem driven

Support to women's decision-making needs to be driven by actual opportunities for reform in specific contexts. Identifying specific problems also helps move away from generic gender interventions. Instead, it is important to focus on the obstacles to women's capacity for influence and decision making in different political, social and economic roles and the opportunities to achieve concrete outcomes in gender equality gains. The presence and willingness of local reform champions is therefore critical, as are adaptive programmes that allow them to work politically and flexibly.

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