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THE INVOLVEMENT OF WOMEN AND MEN IN FORMAL AND INFORMAL DECISION-MAKING STRUCTURES: GENDER AND GOVERNANCE

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Abstract

Women are underrepresented not only in the political sphere but also in decision-making within the private sector, at the village level and in civil society. At the local level, men usually dominate positions of power, including as religious and traditional leaders, local politicians and village elders. Women's representation and leadership tend to be confined to areas that are traditionally 'feminine' such as social welfare. Women's representation in informal decision-making processes is often more common than their representation in formal positions and structures, but it tends to be hidden and therefore not as highly valued as it should be in order to deepen democracy at the local, national and international level, it is important to ensure that women and men are able to participate on equal terms in both formal and informal decision-making structures. Poor levels of participation and representation in decision-making bodies is exacerbated, for both men and women, by intersecting discriminations relating to ethnic group, socioeconomic status, religion, disability and sexual orientation.

Keywords*: Gender and Governance; Democracy; Good Governance; Gender Equality.*

INTRODUCTION

The involvement of women and men in formal and informal decision-making structures varies greatly between countries, though it is more patriachal. Therefore, it can be considered as more institutional as well as cultural, economic and societal factors limit women's opportunities and abilities to participate in decisionmaking. Lower Feminine percentage in political representation is therefore often used as an indicator of gender inequality (Clotts, 2017). Specifically, the 'proportion of seats held by women in national parliament' was chosen as one of three indicators to measure progress on SDG on gender equality and women's empowerment. Poor levels of participation and representation in decision-making bodies is exacerbated, for both men and women, by intersecting discriminations relating to ethnic group, socioeconomic status, religion, disability, and sexual orientation.

Women's Formal Participation and Representation

Gender differences in formal representation can be attributed in large part to both institutional and societal constraints. The latter encompasses the social norms that make it more difficult for women to leave their traditionally domestic roles for more public roles outside of the home (Beaman, 2019). Institutional constraints include barriers such as political systems that operate through rigid schedules that do not take into consideration women's domestic responsibilities, and the type of electoral quotas used (if any).

There has been considerable international emphasis on ensuring a more equitable number of women and men in democratic institutions, through the introduction of quotas for women in many countries. There is increased acknowledgement, however, that quotas are not enough to ensure that women's concerns are heard. Two reasons can be found for this. First, despite increased participation, women are still primarily a minority within patriarchal political systems, which means that it continues to be difficult for them to have their voices heard. Second, women politicians cannot be assumed to prioritise or even identify with the needs of other women (Bandera, 2020). Therefore, class, race, religion, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation and disabilities are some of the many differences that can divide women.

Nonetheless, quotas can have an impact on society's perceptions of women, with increasing acceptance of women as leaders reported in some instances (Beaman et al., 2009). There is growing recognition that combining quotas with skills development in leadership and capacity building can have a stronger impact and strengthen the opportunities for women's voice.

Barriers to women's election

Institutional, socioeconomic and cultural barriers limit women's effective participation in democratic elections. Politics is often viewed, by both men and women, as a male domain where women will struggle to make a contribution. In addition, party politics tends to be dominated by men, making it more difficult for women to get on party lists for election. Women's representation and leadership therefore tend to be more at the grassroots level and in social welfare positions.

Even where women have been able to secure office, they continue to face additional challenges compared to their male counterparts. These include both male and female opposition, inexperience of the political domain and low confidence. In addition, many female politicians find that it can be difficult to balance their public responsibilities with their domestic roles. In order to get elected, many female candidates choose to downplay the fact that they are concerned with 'women's issues', for fear this may alienate male voters. It has been argued that, order to reverse this negative cycle, there must be a significant number of women in positions of power before these issues will feature on the agenda. In some cases, particularly in fragile contexts, women may face intimidation or threats in running for office. This is primarily due to the fact that men or local customary authorities may feel that this threatens the traditional male hierarchy or patriarchal order.

Approaches to increasing women's democratic participation

A number of strategies have been popular among governments and donors to try to encourage more women into politics. These include training women for political candidacy, providing funding or capacity building on fundraising for women candidates, and including women as election monitors. Mobilising female voters is also considered important to get women elected into office and to deepen democracy. Gendered civic awareness and separate polling booths for women are some of the strategies that have been adopted. Globally, fewer than 19% of national parliamentarians are women (WDR). Quota systems have been used in a number of countries to advance

the representation of women. These have taken various forms, including sandwiching of party lists and reserved seats. While this has increased the number of women in political positions, they remain a minority in most countries. There is mixed evidence that quotas have resulted in issues of concern to many women, such as childcare and health care, featuring more prominently on the agenda. More analysis is needed in this area.

Leadership and Participation

Globally, women are underrepresented in decision-making, not only in the political sphere, but also within the private sector, at the village level and in civil society organisations. This low participation is due to social norms which dictate their domestic roles and often leave them with limited time. Leadership and participation, especially in the political sphere, is often viewed as an area where men have superior knowledge. Traditional and religious leadership positions tend to be dominated by men. This is particularly problematic as these leaders are sometimes called upon by states to adjudicate disputes, especially in transitional justice situations, and can thus limit women's access to justice if they adhere to gender inequitable social norms. Women's leadership positions tend to be confined to organisations set up by and for women (Alam et al., 2025).

However, as recent DLP research on women's coalitions in Jordan, Egypt and South Africa has shown, existing or prior networks can facilitate the emergence of coalitions around new issues, for or against change (Van Notten, 2010). Women often have informal roles of influence, recognition and power within the community – as mothers, teachers, volunteers, entrepreneurs, as well as community leaders. Women's informal leadership (known as 'quiet leadership' in the Pacific) often has a focus on community service, but these leadership skills can be harnessed and formalised to give women political and formal decisionmaking power (Hossen & Pauzi, 2025).

Civil society participation

Civil society is often forgotten as a gendered domain. This can be partly attributed to failure to incorporate the household as a unit of analysis, and consequently forgetting to acknowledge the domestic responsibilities of women which impact on their time and energy to engage outside of the household. To understand participation in civil society it is important to look beyond a simple gender analysis and to incorporate an analysis of intersecting inequalities. Understanding which women and men are participating might reveal certain groups of men as being able to participate less than other groups of women. Actions can then be taken to particularly consult these hard-to-reach groups for programme interventions (Hossen & Pauzi, 2025).

Women's groups/organisations

Much of women's activism has been channelled through women's organisations, often mobilised around issues of particular concern to women. Women's organisations which work against patriarchal domination are often termed women's rights organisations. While women's rights organisations have had significant impact on a number of occasions, such as the women's peacebuilding movement in Liberia, women's groups often struggle to access funding and their scope for action is therefore often limited. The competition for scarce resources is also often a barrier to women's groups working cooperatively together (Rashed et al., 2025).

Gender-Responsive Budgeting

Interest in gender-responsive budgeting grew in the 1990s, alongside a more general interest in budget work within civil society (Budlender, 2005). It is driven by the premise that government policies, expenditure and revenue have different outcomes for women and men, girls and boys (and different groups of women and men, girls and boys). Such groups are distinct and have different needs and interests. Gender-responsive budget initiatives provide for assessment of the differing outcomes for different groups. The aim is not to establish separate budgets to address

gender concerns, but to ensure that government budgets are allocated in an equitable way that satisfies the most pressing needs of individuals and groups (Budlender and Hewitt, 2003).

Gender-responsive budgeting is not an isolated event, but an important aspect of gender mainstreaming and more effective public financial management. It focuses not only on the content of budgets, but also on the underlying policy process, in particular inclusiveness, transparency and accountability. Participatory budgeting initiatives have become a relevant aid instrument for genderresponsive budgeting and for the more general participation of civil society in budgetary processes. Gender-responsive budgeting requires a significant shift in thinking and practice in the way that budgets are designed and implemented. It involves ambitious initiatives such as opening up the budget process to a wider group of stakeholders, prioritising equality, and acknowledging the care economy (Mohd Pauzi & Shahadat Hossen, 2025).

Gender-responsive revenue generation

Much of the literature and work on gender-responsive budgeting focuses on the expenditure side (in particular, assessing the gender-specific effects of general government expenditure). The application of gender budgeting on the revenue side has been less defined. In order to get a full understanding of the income and gender impacts of government fiscal policy, however, taxation must be analysed alongside expenditure to reveal and address gender biases. The goal of gender revenue analysis is to: 'identify and monitor the flow of sufficient financial resources so that gender equity is achieved in revenue generation and women and men, and girls and boys, benefit equally from programmes and services' (Barnett and Grown, 2004: 1).

Involvement of non-state actors

The involvement of actors from outside the government executive in gender-responsive budgeting is important in supporting such work and in sustaining momentum for fiscal policy transformation and implementation. Gender budget work carried out within parliament and civil society can include research and efforts to influence the allocation of government money. This contributes to broader objectives of transparency, accountability and civic participation. Collaboration between civil society and parliament can also be effective in promoting support for and implementation of genderresponsive budgeting initiatives. Further, gender-responsive budgeting can be adopted not only by government, but also by nongovernmental organisations, foundations, and other private sector organizations.

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