Political Participation of Women

Topic Background
Women’s participation in political life and public decision-making is fundamental to equitable societies and effective governance. When women are able to participate in the decision-making process – as active citizens, educated voters, and effective leaders – entire communities benefit.\(^1\) Despite progress, today many women from the local to the global level are restricted from political participation because of gender-related barriers. Globally, there are 37 States in which women account for less than 10 percent of parliamentarians in single or lower houses, as of August 2015, including 6 chambers with no women at all [4]. In the 2017-2018 women’s report, these numbers stayed the same. Women are overlooked and excluded from the decision-making process which negatively impacts their future and wellbeing.

Although women have proven their ability to be leaders and agents of change, currently, only one in five members of lower or single houses of parliament worldwide is a woman.\(^2\) The discrimination against women actively excludes them from political positions. Other factors that impact participation also include violence against women, poverty, lack of access to quality education and health care, and the double burden of paid and unpaid work. Constitutional barriers restrict the rights of women, including political involvement. The absence of women’s voices and concerns in the decision-making process leads to an underrepresentation of women issues.

Women's participation is fundamental to democracy and essential to the achievement of sustainable development and peace but faces several structural barriers, “women in every part of the world continue to be largely marginalized from the political sphere, often as a result of discriminatory laws, practices, attitudes and gender stereotypes, low levels of education, lack of access to health care and the disproportionate effect of poverty on women.”\(^3\) Removing these obstacles is the key to achieving gender equality and closing the widening gender gap. Expanding women’s political participation and leadership, education, and economic

empowerment are central to providing equal opportunities for women everywhere. Gender equality, removing obstacles, equal opportunities, and ending violence against women are essential to ending social norms and stereotype to women and help promote women leaders within political institutions.

**Past UN Actions**

UN-Women works on women’s leadership and participation by supporting reforms in constitutions, laws and policies; promoting gender-responsive measures for women’s participation in politics; and engaging gender equality advocates.\(^4\) UN Women has set core strategic priorities to increase women's participation and leadership, to advance women's economic empowerment, to end violence against women and girls, to prioritize gender equality in national plans and budgets, and to make sure that women play a central role in peace talks, peace-building and reconstruction and recovery.\(^5\)

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women(CEDAW),\(^6\) adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 18, 1979, is an international treaty rooted in goal of acquiring equal and fundamental human rights for women. CEDAW outlines the principle of equality and establishes an international bill of rights for women and also provides an action agenda for countries to adhere to ensure the equal treatment of women. Over 50 countries have ratified CEDAW, however some countries have signed and not ratified including United States and Palau.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action calls for removing barriers to equal participation and is a visionary agenda for the empowerment of women. It still remains today, the most comprehensive global policy framework and blueprint for action. It is a current source of guidance and inspiration to realize gender equality and the human rights of women and girls, everywhere.\(^7\) The Platform for Action covers 12 critical areas of concern that are as relevant today as 20 years ago: poverty; education and training; health; violence; armed conflict; economy; power and decision-making; institutional mechanisms; human rights; media; environment; and the girl child.\(^8\)

The 2011 UN General Assembly resolution on women’s political participation (A/RES/66/130) calls on member states to address several issues including an electoral systems review, removal of discriminatory barriers, promote awareness and recognition, investigate allegations of violence, and encourage greater involvement of marginalized women.\(^9\)

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Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are also working everywhere to advance women’s political participation. The Asia Foundation (AF)\textsuperscript{10} is an international development NGO that works to dismantle obstacles to women’s political participation and empowers women across Asia to play active roles in political and decision-making processes. AF has also supported programs to enhance women’s civic engagement, promote women’s participation in peacebuilding, and strengthen gender-responsible policymaking. The Women in Parliaments Global Forum (WIP) is a non-governmental organization dedicated to advancing society by building a network between Women in Parliaments. WIP optimizes the power of communication and connection to build new communities of support for women in politics everywhere. Both organizations work towards empowering women and increase political participation at every level.

Women’s representation in local governments has made a difference. Research on panchayats (local councils) in India discovered that the number of drinking water projects in areas with female-led councils was 62 per cent higher than in those with male-led councils. In Norway, a direct causal relationship between the presence of women in municipal councils and childcare coverage was found.\textsuperscript{11}

In 2019, Rwanda had the highest number of women parliamentarians worldwide. Women there have won 61.3 percent of seats in the lower house.\textsuperscript{12} The Rwandan genocide left only 70% of the country's remaining population as female. The female demographic majority and the introduction of quotas requiring 30% of political and government candidates to be women have brought about real change in national and local politics and across public positions. For instance, half the country’s 14 Supreme Court justices are women. Boys and girls now attend compulsory primary and secondary schools in equal numbers, and new laws enable women to own and inherit property.\textsuperscript{13}

**Possible Solutions**
The unequal political participation of women is a big problem for the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, Gender Equality and SDG 10 Reducing Inequalities. A target of SDG 5 states that women should be ensured the full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life. This can be achieved by reducing inequalities of outcome, including by eliminating discriminatory laws, policies and practices and promoting appropriate legislation, policies and action. Additionally, it is important to eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable.

\textsuperscript{10} “The Asia Foundation.” The Asia Foundation. \url{http://asiafoundation.org/}
\textsuperscript{12} “Women in national parliaments August 2015.” Inter-Parliamentary Union. \url{http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation/facts-and-figures-shash.M8Pynxom.dpfu}
\textsuperscript{13} “Lessons from Rwanda's female-run institutions.” The Guardian. \url{https://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/jul/01/lessons-rwanda-female-run-institutions-mps}
There are several challenges that stand in the way of women’s participation in politics but under the UN sustainable development agenda, full participation can be achieved through three main ways:

*Reducing Inequalities*: Discriminatory laws and institutional barriers that unfairly prevent women from receiving equal access to opportunities should be abolished. The elimination of discriminatory legislation will allow women to claim their equal rights through appropriate legal protections and access to justice. Constitutional reform will ensure women’s fair access to political spheres as voters, candidates, elected officials and civil service members. Establishing legal protections will help form a foundation for women’s participation in national and local policy. Additionally, setting goals and quotas will help keep progress on track and hold institutions accountable for increased participation.

*Gender Equality*: Governments and all political parties should do their part to empower women and ensure that women have full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life full participation of women in leadership. Incorporating a women’s perspective into policy work will impact policy change that benefits women and girls. As previously mentioned, the women’s involvement in local governments in India and Norway have had positive impacts on the increase of water projects and childcare coverage.

*Quality Education*: Gender disparities in education should be eliminated to ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for girls and women. Civic engagement training for women can provide equal access to information about elections to cast informed votes and help build their capacity.

In Conclusion, it is important to note that the inclusion of women in the political process benefits everyone. Women bring diverse perspectives to the decision-making process that positively impact women and families. By providing women equal access to education and resources and removing discriminatory laws that restrict equal participation, we can empower women all over the world and provide them with opportunities to succeed.

“In a time of global interdependent challenges, we can no longer afford to waste the potential of half the world’s population. Given the challenges that we face today, from climate change to economic models under increasing strain, to high unemployment and poverty to growing pressures on natural resources, we need the best leaders we can find, and many of these leaders are women. Women bring their own insights and perspectives, and diversity improves decision-making.” – Michelle Bachelet, UN Women Executive Director. 2011

**Further Research**
- UN Women
- Millennium Development Goal 5 – Gender Equality
- The Asia Foundation
- The World’s Women 2015 Report

**Worksheet Questions**
1. What country has the highest number of women parliamentarians? What is the percentage?
2. What is CEDAW and when was it ratified?
3. What are some of the ways Rwanda helped address gender inequality? Give 2 examples of concrete solutions they used.
4. Which 2 SDGs are most impacted by the lack of political participation of women?
5. Who was the executive director of UN women in 2011?