

# Our Voice:

Women's Participation  
& Influence in Local  
Decision Making

Your Questions Answered

WE ARE WOMEN!  
WE ARE READY!



**OUR  
VOICE**



## What do we mean by women's leadership?

Women play important formal leadership roles across society, including in community organisations, private businesses, and in local and national governments. There are also many examples of women leading in informal positions, to bring people together to create change. An example of this is women coming together to build peace at the community level during times of conflict.

When we talk about increasing the representation of women in decision making, we are not just talking about increasing the numbers of women. Women must be able to put forward their priorities, opinions and experiences in order to have influence over decision making. This is why we use the terms 'participation and influence.'

## Why women's leadership at the local level?

Often when we talk about women's leadership, it's just to discuss women's representation at the national level, such as in Parliament. While this representation is important, it's also vital for women to have a voice at the local and community levels.

***Decisions made at the local level have a crucial impact on the everyday lives of women and girls.***

When we talk about the local level we mean decision making at state, provincial, district, village and community levels.

// Our dream is [that] there will be more women, young women, involved in the leadership.

Alzira Dos Reis from Fundasaun Alola  
Timor-Leste

Over 50% of the population in our country are woman so if women are not developed you can't change a country.

2 // Lway Moe Kham, Ta'ang  
Women's Organisation (TWO) Myanmar

## Why does women's participation and influence in decision making at the local level matter?

Women's equal and meaningful participation in all levels of decision making, and in both formal and informal spaces, is first and foremost a question of fairness and equality.

**Women have a right to participate in decisions that affect their lives.** This right is clearly stated in international human rights agreements and frameworks.

The meaningful participation of diverse women is also critical to make sure the needs and priorities of women are being heard and represented in policy decisions. *A survey conducted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union of 187 female parliamentarians from 65 countries revealed that 89% of these women believed they had a special responsibility to represent the interests and needs of women.*<sup>1</sup>

We also know that the leadership of women is crucial to building peace. *When women are included in a peace process, the resulting agreement is 35% more likely to last longer than 15 years.*<sup>2</sup>

Women and men can share the responsibilities of leadership and work together to solve problems and create solutions that will benefit their communities. **Greater participation of women in leadership is also beneficial for men.**

In addition, the more women there are in leadership positions, the more normalised women as leaders will seem to the general public. Women moving into leadership roles, from local to international levels, can contribute to combatting harmful gender stereotypes in communities and households. One woman leader can show a whole generation of future female leaders what is possible.

// So far we have only managed to get 1 woman sitting at the highest level of parliament...you can't compete with 49 men in the room and only one woman to influence the kind of change that needs to take place in Solomon Islands.

Pionie Boso, Women's Rights Action Movement

(WRAM) //

## What are the challenges?

Gender inequality remains a persistent global issue. In all countries in the world, at all levels in the community, women are treated differently simply because they are women. Women do not have access to equal power and resources, including in leadership.

**Under-represented:** At local levels, women are largely under-represented and lack influence in local decision making. Women from poor and marginalised groups, including women in rural areas, women with disabilities, women identifying as lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, trans, queer or intersex and female-headed households, are often further excluded from decision making processes.

**Unequal access to opportunities and resources:** Across Asia and the Pacific, women tend to have poorer access to education, assets, land, food, economic opportunity and reproductive health services than their male counterparts.<sup>3</sup> Many women are not aware of their right to take up leadership roles and all too often laws are not enforced to protect this right.

**Gender stereotypes:** Decision making at all levels is often viewed as the domain of men. Gender stereotypes, including negative attitudes about a woman's ability to lead in public or political spaces, impact on how women are perceived as effective leaders, even when they have the skills, experience and attributes necessary to be a good leader for their communities.



In regards to political leadership I think a woman has to sacrifice more to get into that space...you have to be seen to support the community and you have to maintain the family and the social obligations. I think it costs a lot more for women to be seen as a leader in the context in which we are working.



**Navigating elections:** Women running for political positions also face additional barriers including a lack of support from political parties, lack of access to campaign finance and balancing personal and political aspirations and roles.

**Targeted for violence:** Women can also be specifically targeted for violence and intimidation as they increase their participation in public life. An Inter-Parliamentary Union Study on the experiences of 55 women parliamentarians from 39 countries across five regions revealed that **81.8** per cent had experienced psychological violence during their parliamentary term.<sup>4</sup>

**Once in leadership:** Once women are elected the challenges continue. Women are required to navigate a male-biased political environment in both formal and informal spaces, often they have less access to resources (such as staffing, research support and transportation costs) and generally have greater family responsibilities to balance.<sup>5</sup>



Women's journey to political leadership is long and challenging. However, there is a glimpse of hope at the end of the tunnel and I want to encourage all of us to fight this common enemy together.

Dr Alice Pollard from West Are'Are Rokotanikeni Association, Solomon Islands



To exercise our right [to lead] we have two big barriers - one is violence and the other is financial. This is not just an issue for Cambodian women but for all women in the world. How can we address this together?

Ros Sopheap from Gender and Development



# Women's Political Participation: A Snapshot <sup>6</sup>

The worldwide average of women's participation in national parliaments is 23.5% (2017).<sup>7</sup>

It is estimated that around 20% of councillors and 5% of mayors globally are women.<sup>8</sup>

Of 16,785 village tract or ward administrators in **Myanmar**, only 42 elected in 2012 were women.

**Myanmar** is ranked 165 out of 187 countries for women's representation in parliament with approximately 10.2% of women in parliament

In **Cambodia's** 2017 commune council elections, women were elected to 16.76% of seats.<sup>11</sup>

In the national parliament of **Cambodia**, women make up 20.3% of parliamentarians in the lower house, and 14.8% in the upper house.

Women in **Timor Leste** represent only 4.75% of community (sucos) chiefs.

A gender quota in **Timor Leste** has increased representation of women in parliament to 32.3% - higher than any other country in the Asia-Pacific!

The percentage of women in Pacific parliaments is 7.2% (2017)<sup>9</sup>, the lowest in the world.

Women's representation is also below the global average in Southeast Asia, at 18.09% (2016).<sup>10</sup>

In **Bougainville** in the last community government elections (2016), 1 woman was elected as president and 457 women were elected as vice president.<sup>13</sup>

In **Bougainville** 4 out of 33 Parliamentary seats are held by women.<sup>12</sup>

In 2014 elections, women were elected to 16% of seats in **Fiji's** national parliament.<sup>14</sup>

In the **Solomon Islands**, there is one woman in the national parliament

In the **Solomon Islands** 2014 provincial elections, 2 out of 107 councillors were female, and 1 woman was appointed to the Honiara city council.

Of 348 local level governments in **Papua New Guinea**, 10% of participants are female.

Not a single woman was elected at the most recent national election in **Papua New Guinea** in June 2017.

## What are our international obligations?

The equal right for all people to participate in public affairs is clearly set out in international human rights frameworks such as the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). These agreements demand measures are taken to ensure women's equal access to, and full participation in, power structures and decision making. International resolutions also call for the equal participation and full involvement of women in the maintenance and promotion of sustainable peace.

### The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Under Target 5.5 of the SDGs, Governments have committed to ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life. This target is supported by two indicators: the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments and local governments (5.5.1) and the proportion of women in managerial positions (5.5.2).



**Your country is a signatory to these agreements which means, as a duty bearer, you have an obligation to take measures to include more women in decision making.**

Lorena dos Santos, Marcia Sequeira and Eliezeria da Costa of ALFeLa. Photo: Anna E Carlile

In Asia and the Pacific, the Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration (2012) contains a commitment to accelerate women's full and equal involvement in decision making at all levels. The Regional Roadmap for implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific also undertakes to *"enhance women's leadership and decision-making in all aspects of society."*



You can't only change the government system you have to change the whole society.

Lway Moe Kham from Ta'ang Women's Organisation (TWO), Myanmar



## How can we measure change?

The SDGs contain an indicator in relation to the proportion of seats held by women in local governments (5.5.1b). Indicators are significant because they inspire action - what gets measured is more likely to get done. No country wants to be at the bottom of global rankings.

This indicator has been categorised as Tier 3 meaning that there is currently no internationally established methodology or standards available for this indicator. However, UN Women has been working to develop a model to produce comparable data across all countries and regions. This will generate data to shine a spotlight on how to accelerate progress on women's political participation at local levels.

## What can we do to create change?

Change is possible, but requires political commitment. The work of WAVE partners in Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Myanmar, Cambodia and Timor Leste, together with global and regional evidence, identifies a number of key areas which can be prioritised to support women leaders at all levels.

### Tackling Discriminatory Social Norms:

Supporting women's leadership requires tackling discriminatory social norms including restrictions on women's freedom of movement, unpaid caring responsibilities, acceptance of violence against women and other discriminatory perceptions that women are not suitable leaders. This requires a long-term approach that involves working with women and men of all ages. Male leaders can play an important role in supporting women's leadership including by challenging gender inequality in their communities.<sup>16</sup>



Loisy Auariri Wate of West 'Are'Are Rokotanikeni Association, Donna Makini of Women's Rights Action Movement, and Alice Aruhe'eta Pollard of West 'Are'Are Rokotanikeni Association. Photo: Gemma Carr

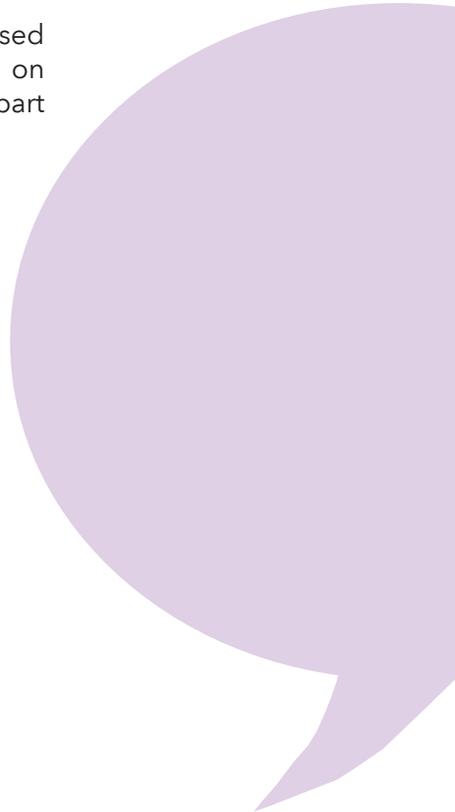
## Temporary Special Measures

Temporary Special Measures (TSMs) are temporary rules put in place to create opportunity for women in decision making positions. These can include mechanisms such as quotas, reserved seats and targets. The effectiveness of TSMs in increasing women's political leadership is well established.<sup>17</sup>

***Of the 47 countries in the world with 30% or more women's participation in national parliaments, 41 countries (85%) use at least one form of quotas system.***<sup>18</sup>

Increasing the numbers of women can positively impact attitudes on the value of women's leadership.<sup>19</sup> Research has also shown that unless women make up at least one quarter to one third of a body's membership, their meaningful participation can be limited.<sup>20</sup>

Quotas alone do not guarantee increased influence for women or increased focus on women's priorities. It is crucial that TSMs form part of a broader, comprehensive approach.



## Supporting and Resourcing Women's Rights Organisations

Research consistently demonstrates that women's rights organisations play a key role in supporting women to develop the skills, knowledge, networks and confidence to take on leadership roles and to meaningfully participate in and influence leadership spaces.<sup>21</sup>

They provide a way to reach marginalised women, including women with disabilities, rural, indigenous, elderly, ethnic minority and widowed women. Local women's organisations also understand the challenges facing women, which shape their leadership opportunities and can provide support to women throughout their leadership journeys.<sup>22</sup>

## Supporting local level leadership

It is important that women's participation and influence at local and community levels is also prioritised for collecting data, evidence of what works, and promoting the importance of women's leadership. This must also include support for young women's leadership in both formal and informal roles.<sup>23</sup>

Local level participation can provide opportunities for women to assume leadership positions such as in church groups and community organisations. These can be important spaces for skills development and 'proving grounds' for female leaders.<sup>24</sup>

## Sustained support throughout the electoral cycle

The experiences of WAVE partners demonstrate the importance of providing support to women throughout the entire election cycle - that is before, during and after elections.<sup>25</sup> This support must include working with political parties to reform party policies, procedures and structures such as introducing gender quotas for candidate selection.<sup>26</sup>

Once elected, female parliamentarians need continued support to navigate male-dominated spaces and to effectively advocate for change in support of women's rights. Support models that have proved effective include mentoring, coaching and women's parliamentary caucuses.<sup>27</sup>



Nan Htwe Thu MP and former Senator Penny Wright, Photo credit: Shwe Wutt Hmon

## Case Study

### Mentoring the next generation of Myanmar's women leaders

Mentoring programs can provide much needed support and solidarity for women on their political journeys. In 2017, Akhaya Women collaborated with IWDA to pair six recently elected Myanmar MPs with six Australian former and current MPs in a mentorship program. The Myanmar MPs are from four different political parties and six ethnic groups, promoting important cross-party engagement.

The mentoring program was based on exchange visits, with the Australian MPs meeting their partner MP in Myanmar, followed by Myanmar MPs travelling to Australia to observe the Federal and Victorian state governments in action. The women discussed strategies on how to engage with their own parties and male colleagues, how to communicate and campaign to their constituencies, and how they balance competing responsibilities. The Myanmar MPs reported learning about the value of formal recognition of women in parliament, the importance of supporting youth education about politics, the success of party quotas and the opportunities presented to women when childcare is offered and resourced for parliamentarians. They are also now operating an informal, cross party women's caucus with a joint commitment to supporting gender equality reforms.

Based on the success of the pilot program, there is a great interest from other women MPs to be involved in the next round of mentoring, commencing in March 2018.



A participant in the Bougainville Young Women's Leadership Forum. Photo: Harjono Djoyobisono

## Do you want to join us?

WAVE is launching Our Voice: a campaign to increase the representation and effective participation of women, with a broad commitment to gender equality and women's rights, in decision-making at local levels across Asia and the Pacific by 2020.

## We are women! We are ready! Why not join us?

Our Voice is stronger when we work together for change. If you are interested in finding out more about the campaign please get in touch.

Email: [iwda@iwda.org.au](mailto:iwda@iwda.org.au)



Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the  
Netherlands

## Endnotes

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# What is WAVE?

Women's Action for Voice and Empowerment (WAVE) is a civil and political participation program focusing on equal representation and visibility of women and men, and funded by the Government of the Netherlands.

WAVE aims to build demand for and capacity of women to take their place in governance and decision making.



*The WAVE program was designed by and for women in six countries of the Asia Pacific region.*

WAVE is also a movement, bringing women's organisations and the public together to challenge widespread imbalances of power that negatively affect women and their human rights. WAVE has five years (2016 to 2020) to deliver on its promise to women, including women already in politics, women and young women with potential for political or civil leadership and advocates for women's empowerment spanning all gender and tiers of society.

To find out more visit: <https://iwda.org.au/wave/>

