

UN Women input to OHCHR draft guidelines on effective implementation of

the right to participation in public affairs

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1. UN Women, as established by UN General Assembly resolution 64/289 (2010), is the UN organization dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women. It is mandated to support inter-governmental bodies in their formulation of policies, global standards and norms on gender equality, and help Member States implement these standards through technical and financial support to those countries that request it and through effective partnerships with civil society. UN Women is also mandated to lead, promote and coordinate the UN system’s work on gender equality, as well as promote accountability, including through regular monitoring of system-wide progress. This input to OHCHR draft guidelines on effective implementation of the right to participation in public affairs is based on the extensive experience of UN Women in supporting women’s political empowerment and leadership worldwide. The aim of this contribution is not to repeat the existing normative framework and guidance on the right to participate in public affairs, but rather supplement this material by underscoring the rights of women’s participation, specifically.

**Main principles on women’s participation**

2. The rights of women to participate in public affairs, and to exercise their political rights on an equal basis, are fundamental to gender equality and sustainable development. These constitute human rights and are requirements of democratic governance. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)[[1]](#footnote-1) enshrines the principles of non-discrimination and equal enjoyment of political rights, including the right of women and men to take part in the government of their country. The Convention on the Political Rights of Women (CPRW), building on the UDHR, specifically protects the right of women to participate in the government of their country, and to access public services. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) asserts that every citizen has the equal right to participate in public affairs, vote and be elected through universal and equal suffrage, and to have equal access to public services.[[2]](#footnote-2) The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) articulates women’s equal right to participation in political and public life, including the right to vote in all elections and public referenda, eligibility for election to all publicly elected bodies and participation in the formulation and implementation of government policy,[[3]](#footnote-3) and commits States Parties to take appropriate measures to ensure women have equal opportunity to participate without discrimination.[[4]](#footnote-4)

3. A series of international commitments to gender equality highlight the right of women to participate in political and public life. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA) calls for removing barriers to equal participation of women. It established the goal of gender balance in governmental bodies and committees, public administrative entities and the judiciary. These calls were echoed in the Commission on the Status of Women Agreed Conclusions 2006 (E/2006/27-E/CN.6/2006/15) and the UN General Assembly Resolution 66/130 (2011) on Women and Political Participation. The UN Security Council, though its Resolution 1325 (2000), also urged Member States to ensure increased representation of women at all levels of decision-making in conflict resolution and peace processes.

4. Women’s political empowerment and right to participate in public affairs is located at the heart of sustainable development. This is because women’s full and equal participation and representation in public affairs – including, but not only, in political decision-making – are both enabling factors of gender equality and women’s empowerment, and goals in themselves. Women’s contributions to society through participation in public affairs is diverse and far-reaching. Substantial evidence shows that women’s participation in political processes improves them. Women’s participation and representation in decision-making ensures a State’s policy direction is more reflective of the needs and experiences of all society. It is in the interest of States to prioritize the political empowerment of women, and ensure the realization of their rights to participation in public affairs.

5. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, established by UN General Assembly Resolution 70/1 (2015) prioritizes gender equality and mainstreams women’s rights. Sustainable Development Goal 5 is dedicated to “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls,” and SDG 16 to “inclusive institutions.” Under Goal 5, Member States agreed to several targets, including SDG Target 5.5 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.” SDG Indicator 5.5.1, “proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments and in local governments,” will monitor progress towards this Target.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Barriers to women’s participation**

6. Targets set by Member States to achieve gender balance in leadership and decision-making positions have not been met, and progress is slow. Women are still underrepresented at all levels of decision-making worldwide. UN General Assembly resolution on women’s political participation 66/130 (2011) notes, “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.” As of today, women comprise 23.5 per cent of all national parliamentarians,[[6]](#footnote-6) and serve as heads of state and/or government in less than 20 countries.[[7]](#footnote-7) As recognized by the UN Secretary-General’s Report 68/184 (2013) on “measures taken and progress achieved in the promotion of women and political participation,” the global proportion of women elected to local government, or serving in public affairs generally, is currently unknown.

7. In the experience of UN Women, women’s political under-representation stems from several factors, including the combined effect of institutional and structural constraints that preclude women from realizing their rights to participation in public affairs. Examining these constraints helps focus attention on some of the obstacles that States and their women citizens face in the effective implementation of their rights to participate in public affairs. These obstacles include, but are not limited to: institutional resistance to women’s participation and inclusion in decision-making; the cost of campaigning and nature of certain electoral systems that reduce the opportunity for women to compete with men on an equal basis; practical difficulties to women’s participation, such as lack of access to identity documentation, restricted mobility, fewer resources or time to participate, especially when outweighed by social norms that keep women largely responsible for domestic work and child care; the perpetuation of gender-based stereotypes that suggest women should not participate or have a role in public affairs; and violence against women in politics, which precludes women from exercising their political rights.

**Good practices**

8. While any UN-formulated guidelines for Member States, particularly on matters related to public affairs and decision-making should espouse the principle that there is no single model or solution, particularly on electoral matters, more than two decades of regular, global data collection and qualitative research on women’s representation in national parliaments has enabled gender equality advocates to better understand the drivers of success for advancing women’s political participation, as well as their acceleration into decision-making posts. Enabling electoral systems and arrangements, temporary special measures (TSMs) including quotas, inclusive political parties and gender-sensitive institutions, political finance, support of civil society organizations (CSOs), and positive media portrayals of women leaders are all indispensable.

9. The following are actions that Member States may wish to consider to ensure their women citizens’ right to participate in public affairs:

a. Supporting the development and implementation of robust legal frameworks and administrative arrangements that facilitate women’s participation. This includes relevant reforms to constitutions, gender equality laws or party statutes, and policy actions such as setting numerical targets for women in leadership positions with temporary special measures (TSMs) and reforming party statutes.

b. Expanding the pool of qualified and capable women to run for election, including through initiating programmes that boost women’s confidence and capacity to lead, enhancing their campaign strategies and techniques and promoting linkages with supportive CSOs.

c. Transforming gender norms so that women are accepted as legitimate and effective leaders including through developing campaigns that sensitize the media and electorate on the need for women in public life at all levels.

d. Supporting women leaders in gender-sensitive political institutions, including parliament, political parties and EMBs, to attract, promote and retain women leaders, and highlight the constructive contribution they make to decision-making.

**Recent studies and reports**

10. There is established and growing evidence that women's leadership in political decision-making processes improves them:

a. Women demonstrate political leadership by working across party lines through parliamentary women's caucuses - even in the most politically combative environments - and by championing issues of gender equality, such as the elimination of gender-based violence, parental leave and childcare, pensions, gender-equality laws and electoral reform.[[8]](#footnote-8)

b. Parliaments with greater numbers of women have been found to perform oversight functions more effectively, and public perceptions of parliament may be more positive when more women are represented.[[9]](#footnote-9)

c. At the local level, women’s inclusion in decision-making bodies has been shown to make a difference. Research on *panchayats* (local councils) in India uncovered that the number of drinking water projects in areas with women-led councils was 62 per cent higher than in those with men-led councils.[[10]](#footnote-10) In Norway, a direct relationship was found between the presence of women in municipal councils and the availability of childcare.[[11]](#footnote-11)

d. In conflict-affected contexts, women’s participation and representation in public life brings credibility to peace processes and negotiations, as their presence and influence is essential for unifying divided communities and rallying peace-building actors.[[12]](#footnote-12)

e. Women’s leadership raises girls’ and young women’s educational attainment and career aspirations.[[13]](#footnote-13)

11. An Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) study on Sexism, Harassment and Violence Against Women Parliamentarians in 2016 found troubling levels of violence against women members of parliament (MPs). Psychological violence, the most widespread form, was affecting 81.8% of the survey respondents from all countries and regions. Of the psychological violence reported, 44.4% of those surveyed said they had received threats of death, rape, beatings or abduction during their parliamentary term. The study also confirmed that the psychological abuse experienced by women MPs is often of a sexual nature, and cyber violence is a main channel through which it is perpetrated.[[14]](#footnote-14)

12. UN Women has also published several studies and reports related to the right of women to participate in public affairs, most notably:

a. *Preventing violence against women in Elections: A Programming Guide* (UN Women and UNDP, 2017). The publication brings to light the scourge of violence against women in elections. It seeks to identify the specific components of violence against women in elections, including types, tactics, victims and perpetrators, and presents options for policy and programming responses based on current good practices. It also provides examples of definitions and methods from all regions that may prompt ideas for actions according to each country’s national context. This guide is intended for those best positioned to prevent and mitigate violence against women in elections, including national electoral stakeholders, such as members and leaders of political parties, electoral management bodies, CSOs, women’s groups and gender equality activists.

b. *Inclusive Electoral Processes: A Guide for Electoral Management Bodies on Promoting Gender Equality and Women’s Participation* (UN Women and UNDP, 2015). The publication focuses attention on the role of electoral management bodies (EMBs) in encouraging the participation of women across various points in the electoral cycle. The Guide is directed to electoral administrations and the international assistance providers who support them, and highlights the important work being carried out by both by offering concrete examples of steps that can be taken to remove remaining barriers that continue to affect women’s participation in electoral processes. The Guide presents strategies to mainstream gender equality within the organizational structure of the EMB and in the organization and administration of the election by the EMB.

1. Articles 3, 13, 19, 20, 21 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Article 25 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Article 7 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Article 8 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Inter-Parliamentary Union is the custodian agency for SDG Indicator 5.5.1a (women in national parliaments) and UN Women is the custodian agency for SDG Indicator 5.5.1b (women in local governments). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Inter-Parliamentary Union, Women in National Parliaments (single/lower house), situation as of 1 December 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. UN Women calculation based on information provided by Permanent Missions to the United Nations. Some leaders hold positions of both head of government and head of state. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Inter-Parliamentary Union (2008). Equality in Politics: A Survey of Men and Women in Parliaments. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Kinyondo, Abel Alfred, Riccardo Pelizzo, and Aminu Umar, “A functionalist theory of oversight.” African Politics & Policy 1, no. 5 (2015): 1-25; Pelizzo, Riccardo, and Frederick Stapenhurst, “Parliamentary oversight tools: A comparative analysis.” London. Routledge, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. R. Chattopadhyay and E. Duflo, 2004, “Women as Policy Makers: Evidence from a Randomized Policy Experiment in India,” *Econometrica* 72(5), pp. 1409–1443, as cited in UN Women, Facts and Figures: Leadership and Political Participation [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. K. A. Bratton and L. P. Ray, 2002, “Descriptive Representation: Policy Outcomes and Municipal Day-Care Coverage in Norway,” *American Journal of Political Science*, 46(2), pp. 428–437, as cited in UN Women, Facts and Figures: Leadership and Political Participation. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. T. Carothers (2016). “Democracy Support Strategies: Leading with Women’s Political Empowerment”. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Beaman Lori, Duflo Esther, Pandi Rohini, Topalora Petia. 2012. “Female Leadership Raises Aspirations and Educational Attainment for Girls: A Policy Experiment in India.” Science 335: 582–86. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. IPU (2016), “Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians.” Available at: <https://www.ipu.org/news/press-releases/2016-10/ipu-study-reveals-widespread-sexism-harassment-and-violence-against-women-mps> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)