

AN ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP AND PARTICIPATION IN MALAWI

A POLICY BRIEF
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This Policy Brief seeks to provide an overview of the situation of Women in Leadership in Malawi. Global evidence further shows that greater diversity amongst decision-makers matters. Where women have access to senior positions, it enables public institutions to recruit from a larger talent pool and when companies have a greater share of women on their boards and as senior managers, they perform better financially. In Malawi, women make up 22.92% of the National Assembly and only 20% of the board members in the 54 statutory Boards are women. While the gender gap is widening, with Covid-19 further exacerbating this gap, women persist and continue to prove that when they lead, they bring transformative changes to entire communities and the world at large.



FOR EQUALITY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Women's leadership and participation is an avenue for women's right to equal opportunity and participation across all spheres of society. It is also key to accelerating economic growth and development and has proven to have long-term benefits for societies and the environment. A report by the Business and Sustainable Development Commission argues that gender equality in the workplace can help unlock more than US\$12 trillion in new market value linked to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Guaranteeing the rights of women and giving them opportunities to reach their full potential is critical not only for attaining gender equality but also for meeting a wide range of international development goals. There is overwhelming evidence that lends credence to this assertion – women's leadership and participation are key!

The importance of women in leadership has further been legitimized in key global and national policy frameworks such as the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Generation Equality Forum Commitments, and the Malawi National Gender Policy.

Despite these progressive laws and policies, there has been little progress in entrenching and enhancing women's participation and leadership. Global statistics collected UN Women show that, as of September 2021, only 26 women serve as Heads of State and/or Government in 24 countries. UN Women further reiterates that gender equality in the highest positions of power will not be reached for another 130 years; if the progress for accelerating change remains stagnant

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Women have shown great leadership during this pandemic, demonstrating empathetic and servant leadership that has cushioned families, organizations and countries from the devastating impacts of the pandemic. Global evidence further shows that greater diversity amongst decision-makers matters. Where women have access to senior positions, it enables public institutions to recruit from a larger talent pool and when companies have a greater share of women on their boards and as senior managers, they perform better financially.

It is for these reasons that this policy brief looks into existing gaps and opportunities in policies that can help increase women's representation in key leadership positions and achieve Sustainable Development Goals as well as Generation Equality Commitments in Malawi.

SITUATION ANALYSIS

WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN AFRICA

Equal representation of women in public institutions is a key human rights issue that besides existing laws and policies, many countries are lagging behind on. To date, more men than women are managers but, in some countries, the dynamics are beginning to change. The Africa Gender Index (2019) Report shows that in four countries; Namibia, Lesotho, Botswana and the Seychelles more women than men are now in managerial and professional posts. In Rwanda, South Africa, Lesotho, Namibia and Uganda, deliberate steps have been taken through legislation and quotas to increase the number of women in political positions, yet the numbers are still very low. Rwanda on its own continues to lead in women's representation in national parliaments, with 61.3% of parliamentary seats held by women. While no other country surpasses gender parity in this regard, 15 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa demonstrate female representation in national parliaments that surpasses the global average.

IMPORTANCE OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

Women's participation in politics helps advance gender equality and affects both the range of policy issues that get considered and the types of solutions that are proposed.

When women are put in leadership positions, they bring unique and innovative solutions to development problems and are more likely than men to implement gender transformative initiatives in response to public needs.

. In addition, parliaments with a larger proportion of women tend to promote legislation that addresses women's needs and promote gender equality. It is therefore important to take active steps to address gender inequality in public and private leadership; gender-based quotas have proven to be an important tool.



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CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP AND PARTICIPATION

Established gender norms perpetuate unequal power relations between men and women and this limits women's participation. Policies and practices that reflect these norms such as uneven distribution of unpaid care work and unequal pay inhibit women from full and equal participation in all sectors of society.

Women further are faced with multiple social and structural barriers in leadership, rooted in gendered norms and stereotypes that in most instances promote the idea that women's style of leadership 'weak', mainly because of their ability to show empathy. Although women leaders were faced with political challenges during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, their collectively strong performance raised public awareness of and support for women as political decision-makers. However, during normal times, women leaders experience more resistance, backlash, and political violence than men, as well as disproportionate blame for failing to turn crises around

Gender-based violence is one of the main barriers to women's leadership and participation. Women face various forms of threats, disparagement, and sexual harassment that discourage engagement and close pathways to leadership. Online violence against women - such as cyberbullying, stalking, and distribution of private content - especially in this Covid19 context where work, learning, and social life transitioned to more digital platforms, has increased, leaving more women afraid to interact and participate online.

Sexual harassment of women in corporate spaces and traditionally male-dominated fields such as STEM and Politics also perpetuate power imbalances between men and women. Practices such as 'sex for employment/promotion' limit women's chances of career growth and development.

Limited access to finance also contributes to women's low participation and leadership. For instance, political participation is capital intensive and because most women do not have access to such resources, they choose not to participate, despite having the interest and/or capacity to lead.



WOMEN FACE VARIOUS FORMS OF THREATS, DISPARAGEMENT, AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT THAT DISCOURAGE ENGAGEMENT AND CLOSE PATHWAYS TO LEADERSHIP.

OPPORTUNITIES

WOMEN TAKING LEAD

Inclusive and diverse feminist leadership is key to sustained global development as the world continues to confront urgent challenges – from the COVID-19 pandemic to climate change, deepening inequalities, conflict, and democratic backsliding. Despite having been led by southern Africa's first female president, Malawi has made little progress toward equal leadership participation by women. Although women's representation increased from 16% to 22% in the 2020 Tripartite elections; an increase that was made possible with ongoing advocacy on women's politics, the overall representation of women remains low with gradual changes each and dramatic change is not likely to occur in this system.

Women in Malawi remain less likely than men to engage in political activities, and public support for women's leadership has declined. Malawi is strategically positioned to change the narrative and substantially enhance women's participation and leadership, especially over the next 5 years. As the global co-lead on the Generation Equality Forum, Action Coalition 6 on feminist Movements and Leadership, Malawi can leverage on the government commitments made to make significant progress. Malawi also currently chairs the SADC Gender Ministers' Council, which is another strategic opportunity to accelerate progress, leveraging on the regional agenda.

EQUAL REPRESENTATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

From a legal perspective, Malawi has made substantial progress in enhancing gender equality. Malawi's Constitution states that women enjoy the same rights as men, and Malawi is a signatory to regional and international protocols promoting gender equality, such as the 2008 Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Gender and Development, CEDAW, and the Maputo Protocol. The country has enacted several laws aimed at building gender equality, most notably the Gender Equality Act (2012).

Public appointments under the new administration in Malawi fall way short of the 60:40 representation requirement as prescribed by the Gender Equality Act. Only 23% of Parliamentarians, and 12 of the 31 Cabinet members, are women. The gross underrepresentation of women leaders extends to local government where only 66 of the 450+ Councilors across the country are women, and of the 28 district councils, only 4 have women serving as Chairpersons.

In October of 2020, led by the Women's Manifesto Movement, women in Malawi staged protests against the underrepresentation of women in statutory boards. Nine out of the Sixty Seven boards are chaired by women.

All these examples highlight the legal violations of the gender equality which ought to be urgently addressed. The opportunity that exists lies to lobby for alignment with the policy and legal frameworks.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Progress in women's leadership and participation will not happen automatically. We have compiled a list of recommendations for the private sector and civil society and the government to consider as pathways to enhancing women's participation and leadership.

PRIVATE SECTOR

Establish policies and practices that encourage and promote women's leadership and participation. Policies and practices such as paid parental leave, affirmative action, closing the gender pay gap, and gender-sensitive recruitment and procurement are proven ways that promote women's participation by removing the barriers they could have normally faced. Policies that address underlying gender inequalities in the distribution of unpaid work and gender stereotypes in the workplace allow women to ascend to leadership positions. Companies that provide employer-supported childcare have improved gender diversity and retention of women employees. Changes in workplace policies not only benefit women in the organizations where they are enacted, but can influence other companies, policymakers, and the general public to promote and invest in gender equality

Monitor the development and implementation of sexual harassment policies in places of work so as to make strides to eliminate sexual harassment in the workplace, as stated in the Gender Equality Act of 2013. Sexual harassment is one of the leading factors inhibiting women from taking up leading opportunities at work. Ensuring that all companies have policies to protect women from sexual harassment and that where it occurs, proper reporting channels are present in order to protect women.

Invest in women. Companies and organizations that intentionally invest in women through training, mentorship, etc develop strong women leaders who will, in turn, provide stronger leadership at the institutional level. Provide ongoing systems to further women's personal and professional development. Programs that prioritize and support women's leadership through educational and skills-building programs for professional development help ensure that women can fully engage in the workplace and excel in leadership positions.



CIVIL SOCIETY & DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS

Promote and support women leaders as role models. Women's leadership and participation are more often than not ignored and erased. We do not have adequate documentation of the leadership women have, since time immemorial, provided across all sectors, from household to national levels. Depicting and positioning women as effective leaders and role models in society will help change the narrative around women's leadership and provide inspiration to girls to aspire to lead.

Strengthen male engagement strategies and efforts. Engaging young people and men in efforts to change harmful gender norms at all levels is proven to help with changing harmful cultural norms which depict women as followers and not leaders.

Strengthen advocacy and accountability efforts around laws and regulations. Malawi has very progressive laws and frameworks which lack implementation and monitoring. Civil society should strengthen accountability efforts to hold policy implementers accountable and accelerate progress. Examples of key policies and laws to focus on include the tracking of implementation of the Gender Equality act provisions, legal protections against gender-based violence and sexual harassment, removing tax provisions that discriminate against women and guaranteeing accessible justice systems.

Increased Funding for Women's Organizations. Women's rights organizations and movements are grossly underfunded yet are the key to strengthening women's participation. Funders and development funders need to increase support towards community-based women's groups and movements and remove the barriers which inhibit small and unregistered groups from receiving the much-needed funding they need to drive change in their communities and beyond.

GOVERNMENT

Commit to gender parity in leadership. Publicly commit to achieving gender balance in executive and decision-making positions. The Presidium has to show leadership and political will to achieve the GE Act 60:40 provisions by ensuring appointments to public boards and other executive appointments are in tandem with the provision. Reflect commitments in activities, policies, and budgets, as well as supportive governance structures to achieve gender equality goals. Tie compensation and promotion opportunities for executives to progress in gender balance commitments. Government should also have monitoring tools in place to monitor the implementation of the Gender Equality Act (2013) 60-40 quota in public appointments.

Enable and support women's organizations and movements. Provide women's organizations, including organizations working at the community level, the space and opportunity to convene and organize without fear of persecution or retribution. Commit resources to movement building, research, partnerships, and the development of leadership skills.

Have a clear plan of action and monitoring mechanism for the rollout of the commitment to the Feminist Movement and Leadership that was made at the Generation Equality Forum in Paris, 2020. This is a great way to champion and promote inclusive women's leadership since Malawi is co-chairing this particular commitment.



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