1. Global context: comprehensive frameworks and commitments

All landmark international agreements and commitments acknowledge and stipulate the need to redress gender inequalities and eradicate all forms of discrimination against women of all ages in all spheres of life. This includes women's participation and representation in positions of power and decision-making at all levels. The principles of the right to equality and the prohibition of discrimination, which are the basis of gender equality and women's political participation and representation in politics and decision-making, are enshrined in the United Nations Charter. The Preamble states that there is a need 'to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women' (United Nations 1945: Preamble).

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which forms the basis of the bills of rights included in many national constitutions, also enshrines the entitlement of all persons to non-discrimination, including on the basis of sex (United Nations 1948: articles 1 and 2). Women's political participation and representation is not only a fundamental human right, but it is also an indispensable foundation for sustainable development and democracy. Women are clearly entitled to participate and represent themselves in processes and institutions where decisions that affect their lives are made.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) contains specific provisions on the right to equality between men and women in public and political life. In particular, the ICCPR (United Nations 1966: article 25) states:

Every citizen shall have the right and the opportunity, without any of the distinctions mentioned in article 2 and without reasonable restrictions:

- To take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives;

- To vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors.

The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is a comprehensive instrument to address women's human rights. By ratifying CEDAW, countries have an obligation to eradicate all forms of discrimination against women by adopting measures to respect, protect and fulfil all of the rights contained in CEDAW at the national level (United Nations 1979: articles 1 and 2). Article 7 is particularly relevant to the rights of women on political participation, including their right to be elected to public office, to fully participate in the public functions and service of their countries, and their right to vote.

As a result of this international consensus around political parties not being neglected in the pursuit of healthy democracies, the UN Resolution on Women and Political Participation (United Nations General Assembly 2011) urges states:

- To take all appropriate measures to eliminate prejudices that are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women and that constitute a barrier to women's access to and participation in the political sphere, and to adopt inclusive approaches to their political participation;

- To strongly encourage political parties to remove all barriers that directly or indirectly discriminate against the participation of women, to develop their capacity to analyse issues from a gender perspective, and to adopt policies, as appropriate, to promote the

ability of women to participate fully at all levels of decision-making within those political parties.

'Leave no one behind' (LNOB) is the central, transformative promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Hence, SDG 5—'Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls'—is an intrinsic enabler for sustainable development and representative democracy for each country and the world at large. The SDG 5 stipulates the requisite collective action for transformation and creating conducive environments towards substantive equality for all women and girls. In order to take on the challenge of translating SDG 5 into reality for women and girls across the world, it is fundamental to address the key areas of gender inequality, such as gender-based discrimination in law and in practice, violence against women and girls, the lack of and unequal access to and ownership of economic resources, and women's unequal participation and representation in both private and public decision-making positions.

The issue is not whether women are capable of performing an active role in development, democracy and peacebuilding, because they have always done so, and currently contribute at many levels in both the private and public spheres. The complexity lies in uncovering and redressing the entrenched systemic and systematic discrimination and marginalization of women and girls, in order to translate women's participation into critical influence and decision-making in development and democracy building.

Despite the existence of these comprehensive international frameworks across the world, women continue to encounter significant discrimination in fully exercising their right to participate, and still face significant barriers to access positions of power at all levels of decision-making, even though they constitute half the world's population. Even with the adoption of the 1995 Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action, which set the international target for reaching gender balance in political decision-making, women are under-represented across all levels of power (UN Women 2020).

While some notable qualitative and quantitative gains towards increasing women's participation and representation have been made over the past two decades, especially at the legislative level, this progress is slow and uneven across the regions of the world. For instance, the world global average on the participation and representation of women in parliament is at 25 per cent in 2020. As of August 2020, only 53 countries had attained at least 30 per cent women's participation and representation in the national parliaments (IPU Parline 2020).

The persistent under-representation of women is evident in the predominance of men among parliamentarians, cabinet ministers, members of the judiciary, local and regional authorities, heads of state and government, and private sector executives (International IDEA 2013). According to the World Economic Forum, it will take 95 years to close the political gender gap (Salyer and Cann 2019). For parliaments, in particular—according to the International IDEA Global State of Democracy Indices 2019—at the current rate, it will take another 48 years to reach gender parity.

Figure 1. Years to attain Gender Parity in Parliaments
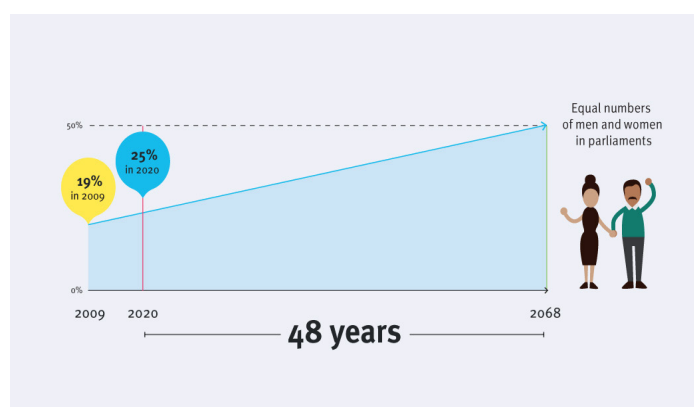
Source: Taking stock of progress on gender equality using the Global State of Democracy Indices International IDEA, 10 March 2020, <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/progress-on-gender-equality-gsod-indices.pdf>, accessed 11 October 2021.

2. Representative democracy and political parties

Political parties remain the major entities through which people can choose their representatives and are conceivably indispensable institutions for democratic politics and representation. The central functions of political parties in modern representative democracies are: to develop consistent policies and government programmes (the interest articulation function); to transmit demands from society and aggregate them (the interest aggregation function); to recruit, select and position people for positions in government and the legislature and to oversee and control government (Catón 2007).

Political parties have long been seen as playing an essential role in the functioning of modern representative democracy, as they are among the key institutions for inclusive participation and accountable representation (International IDEA 2013). Generally, people get involved in public life through political parties and

support candidates and parties that reflect their views and interests. While the debate over whether political parties make democracy more democratic continues, in most countries political parties are identified as instrumental in the recruitment, nomination and election of candidates for public office, socialization of prospective political representatives and leaders, dissemination of political information and the exposing of citizens to democratic politics (Catón 2007).

Although it is widely accepted that in most countries political parties are central to representative democracy and to the process of democratization, they are also perceived to be increasingly weak and to have numerous imperfections in performing functions essential to a healthy democracy. These imperfections include institutional, structural and ideological values and cultures that can cause parties to act in ways contrary to democracy. Specifically, political parties tend to create barriers for women and are generally underperforming on the equal participation and representation of women and men in positions of power and decision-making at all levels.

Ensuring the inclusive representation of the views, interests and needs of all citizens—both women and men—is crucial to the effective functioning of political parties and to their legitimacy and representativeness. As is widely acknowledged, the failure to include women and their perspectives in political decision-making weakens the legitimacy of democratically elected institutions and deprives women—half of the population in any given country—of their right to participate effectively in the governance of their societies (International IDEA 2016).

National constitutions and laws are essential to protect and advance gender equality and women's empowerment within the private and public spheres, including women's political participation and representation in positions of power and decision-making at all levels. Gender equality in national constitutions not only implies formal guarantees of equal rights for women, men, boys and girls, but also entails substantive equality in exercising and enjoying such fundamental rights. Guarantees on gender equality and non-discrimination in national constitutions and laws ultimately influence how men and women participate and are represented in politics and public decision-making and leadership.

While national constitutions and laws are fundamental in articulating guarantees on gender equality and women's political empowerment, political parties have a significant role to play in translating the formal rights into practical action. The demand for and implementation of party

measures for advancing women's political participation and representation is informed by the existence of national legislation on two key benchmarks: mandating a gender quota for elections to public positions (including national legislatures and local municipalities); and requiring political parties to mandate a certain gender-based target in internal party bodies and leadership positions. Equally important is the electoral system and the provision of effective sanctions for non-compliance with national laws, which are imperative for the successful and meaningful implementation of such legal targets. It is also essential that the adoption of gender quotas is accompanied and reinforced by a transformation of sociocultural, political and institutional systems, which remain male-dominated and hamper the promotion of gender equality.

3. Political parties as 'gatekeepers' on women's participation and representation

Political parties are consistently identified as responsible for women's under-representation, given their role as the main 'gatekeepers' to elective positions of power and decision-making at all levels in most countries (International IDEA 2016). This is because intra-party democracy has a significant bearing on women's opportunities and their ability to access positions and spaces of power and decision-making. This applies to positions within parties, as well as all elected political positions at the national or local government levels.

The dominant masculine model of the exercise of power in political life and within political parties builds on traditional attitudes that marginalize women. The model creates 'roadblocks' at various levels, which prevent women from entering into politics and from taking part in public decision-making in any shape. In addition, the media's portrayal of women in politics reinforces gender-based stereotypes, which makes it particularly difficult to reconcile women's active engagement in politics with their domestic roles and responsibilities.

Even though women are courted as voters and are often active supporters of political party mobilization and campaigning, their participation does not generally translate into inclusion and is never matched with their participation and representation in politics and decision-making at all levels. The challenge is to find the political will to accelerate the access and substantive presence of women in politics, in ways which ensure that their voices are genuinely heard and that their membership in political parties is matched with their involvement in the leadership and decision-making processes in politics at all levels.

Political party systems are often defined as 'democratic', but given that the female half of the population is substantially under-represented, this is an obvious contradiction: in almost all countries of the world, women continue to be under-represented at all levels of decision-making, including within political parties. Political party constitutions and policy statutes broadly set out the principles, values, rules and procedures for institutional decision-making and practices, and articulate how, when, by whom and using what mechanisms the party will achieve its goals (International IDEA 2019). These include the identification, selection and nomination of candidates for internal leadership and public decision-making positions.

There are several critical factors that influence women's political participation and representation. Supply-side factors reveal the gender-based differences, such as women having fewer financial and capital resources to invest in political careers, less time due to reproductive and domestic roles, a general lack of motivation to engage in contested political processes, and smaller resourced political networks in comparison with men. The demand-side factors indicate that, while women may have political ambitions, party gatekeepers and voters assess their abilities, qualifications and experiences differently from those of their male counterparts during candidate identification, nomination and selection processes and elections. This underscores the inherent biases of the political parties themselves, which favour male over female candidates, as well as political parties' conviction that voters prefer men as candidates (Norris and Lovenduski 1995).

All these factors are crucial for developing implementable measures and strategies to address women's low participation and representation, and to close gender gaps in politics. A supply-side perspective involves political parties focusing on creating and promoting conditions and opportunities that lead women to aspire for political office. A demand-side perspective requires political parties to change their candidates' identification, nomination and selection processes and practices, to evaluate their criteria for suitable candidates and reassess how female candidates are presented to the electorate. Prioritizing both these perspectives, with the commitment to provide meaningful opportunities and incentives for women aspirants and candidates, is essential if parties are to strive for substantive gender equality in politics.

4. Political parties as transformative agencies for women's participation and representation

Given the growing recognition that the equal access of women and men within political and electoral processes is greatly influenced by intra-party democracy processes, strategies on women's political empowerment must be institutionalized and put into practice within political parties. While some political parties in different countries have developed targeted measures to level the internal playing field for women, many parties are still reluctant to undertake the internal reform needed to promote substantive gender equality between women and men.

Implementing mechanisms to eradicate gender inequalities and the barriers against women's participation and representation is not an easy endeavour. This is due to a combination of complex factors, such as the legal frameworks in relation to electoral systems and political parties, sociocultural and economic factors, party ideologies and political systems, and the contexts in which political parties operate. These factors directly affect women's opportunities and their ability to access positions of power and influence within and outside parties, as well as the parties' political will to promote gender equality in politics (International IDEA 2016).

4.1. *Political party constitutions and policy documents*

The institutionalization of gender equality objectives and strategies in politics and political parties is a vital step towards attaining equality between women and men in public life and decision-making—by establishing the enabling environments needed for meaningful and influential participation and representation of women. As one of the many factors influencing levels of women's participation and representation in politics and public leadership, are political parties' constitutions and policy documents that formalize and articulate the political parties' positions with regards to gender equality in political leadership and decision-making.

The inclusion of gender equality and women's empowerment in political parties' constitutions and policy documents also tends to be influenced by the existence of national legislation requiring political parties to have positive action measures. While the explicit commitments in political parties' policy documents are considered an essential first step in acknowledging the existence of gender inequalities, the need for pragmatic, gender-responsive strategies to address these inequalities

within the political parties is equally important. For instance, ensuring that women participate and are represented in the top leadership structures of political parties, such as becoming secretaries general of political parties and in national executive committees.

An analysis of political parties' commitments on gender equality in 33 African countries revealed a significant lack of political will and disconnect between the parties' written commitments and the existence of measures to implement these commitments (International IDEA 2013). The analysis in 18 Latin American countries also revealed that there is a lack of political will from parties to transcend the gender equality rhetoric and work for substantive equality within the parties and politics in general (Llanos and Roza 2019). On the other hand, based on the political parties' analysis, it can be argued that, despite the lack of effective implementation and enforcement mechanisms, political parties that include texts on gender equality in their policy documents at least demonstrate some awareness of gender issues (International IDEA 2013).

4.2. Political party rules and procedures

To a certain extent, some political parties acknowledge the marginalization and under-representation of women in political leadership and decision-making positions. However, the challenge is for political parties to move beyond mere acknowledgement, and to implement pragmatic actions on promoting women's participation and representation within political parties and at all levels of public decision-making.

One of the practical strategies for political parties to adopt is to establish and systematically apply clear gender-responsive rules and procedures for internal democracy. The need for explicit internal rules and procedures on the identification, nomination and selection of candidates for positions of power and decision-making within political parties and for elective public roles at all levels cannot be over-emphasized. It is therefore imperative to ensure that women participate equally and are represented in the party structures and processes such as executive and elections committees which have the mandate to enforce the party rules and procedures on overall internal democracy, including on leadership and candidates' selection. When a party has clear rules and procedures on candidate selection processes, and these rules are respected, potential candidates as well as party supporters can better understand the internal democracy processes and hold party leaders accountable to the set rules.

In some countries with legislated gender quotas, the political parties' primaries for candidate and party leadership selection is inter-related and governed by the national legislation on gender quotas for candidate selection. For instance, Rwanda has legislation that requires the composition of leadership structures at all levels of political parties to include a minimum of 30 per cent women. For example, in some Latin American and Caribbean countries, there has been a substantial increase in the participation and representation of women on parties' national executive committees: Bolivia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Honduras and Nicaragua have shown good practices and performance.

In these countries, parity measures have been legislated for the nomination (Bolivia, Costa Rica and Honduras) and/or composition of these bodies (Costa Rica and Ecuador). These results are consistent with previous analyses of the factors that influence the greater or lesser presence of women in these bodies, which have concluded that the existence of a quota or parity law has a significant impact on a more balanced composition by sex (Llanos and Roza 2019).

The existence of legislated gender quotas for candidate selection does have an impact on the representation of women in political parties' decision-making bodies and the proportion of women candidates fielded by parties for elections to both lower and upper houses. Such legislative measures are crucial for fostering gender equality in intra-party leadership selection. Even though gender biases still persist, since the participation and representation of women continues to be lower in the positions with greater power or influence in the political parties, there have in fact been gradual increases in women's presence in the structures of higher political leadership positions.

4.3. Political party gender equality policy

If a gender equality policy is effectively implemented, it enhances a political party's capacity to constantly identify and address gender-based inequalities in all areas of a party's internal and external organization and operations, and the related barriers to equal political participation and representation. Importantly, men must be part of drafting and ownership of the party's gender equality policy, and it should not be relegated to the women's unit if it is to be implemented on a sustained long-term basis. The women-specific strategies should be reinforced by initiatives that systematically engage men and boys on women's empowerment and gender equality promotion—thus making men equally responsible for the achievement of women's empowerment—and by engaging the media to provide balanced coverage of women and men and equality issues. The gender equality policy enables a political party to:

- institutionalize a clear and coherent direction and policy measures for promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in politics;

- integrate gender equality into the party's vision and the strategic missions and plans;

- identify specific objectives in line with key areas of internal and external organization and operations;

- establish measurable targets/indicators and implementation mechanisms; and

- develop internal accountability mechanisms to ensure compliance with the gender equality objectives (International IDEA 2016).

4.4. *Women's units/councils/commissions in political parties*

Many political parties in all regions across the world have had institutionalized structures for women since their establishment. The women's entities are expected to be responsible for promoting gender equality and women's empowerment within and beyond the political parties. However, placing the responsibility for gender equality and women's empowerment solely under women's units has resulted in removing gender issues from the mainstream political agenda and priorities of most political parties.

Furthermore, it is widely argued that the women's structures do not generally participate in or influence party decisions and their role is often limited to symbolic functions and ensuring that women adhere to the party line as required by the predominately male leadership. Hence, redefining and strengthening the positioning and role of women's units within political parties could enhance women's participation and voice to influence strategic political processes and decisions within political parties and at different levels. Such efforts would be complementary and mutually reinforcing with the interventions of the overall political party gender policy implementation.

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About International IDEA

Founded in 1995, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization that supports sustainable democracy worldwide. The Institute is the only intergovernmental organization with a global mandate solely focused on democracy and elections, and is committed to be a global agenda-setter in the democracy-building field. With 33 Member States from all continents, International IDEA supports the development of stronger democratic institutions and processes; and fosters sustainable, effective and legitimate democracy through the provision of comparative knowledge resources, dialogues and partnerships at the global, regional and country levels.

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