



iKNOW POLITICS

international Knowledge
Network of **Women** in Politics

Consolidated reply of the e-Discussion on

Women's Political Participation in Local Government

April 2018



Empowered lives.
Resilient nations.

LAUNCHING MESSAGE

The under-representation of women at any level of governance and decision-making results in a democratic deficit. It has been proven time and again that diverse groups make better decisions. This is particularly true when it comes to a task as challenging as representing the interests of citizens at the local level. Often influencing policies in housing, security, transport, and the economy, local government makes important decisions that affect the lives of women and men. Women's equal participation and representation in local decision-making processes is critical for prioritizing women's practical needs and issues in local governments' agendas and for localizing [the Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs). Gender-balanced local councils may be an important step in helping to attain gender balance at the national levels.

Although some countries have information on how many women and men are local councilors and mayors, a standardized system to provide comparable statistical evidence across all countries and regions has been missing until recently. Some reasons for this are the vast number of local governments and the diversity of their structures worldwide. The methodology of the new SDGs indicator on the 'proportion of seats held by women in local governments' (5.5.1b) developed by [UN Women](#) provides a model on how to generate comparable data across countries. The harmonized measurement and reporting of data for the SDG indicator 5.5.1b will enable to build the first global measurement of the proportion of women in local governments. This will generate strong statistical evidence that will help to raise awareness and accelerate progress on a range of aspects of women's political participation.

In addition to measuring numbers, further information is needed on strategies to elect more women at the local level. With the focus of the 2018 [CSW](#) revolving around achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls, iKNOW Politics and its partners are convening this e-Discussion from February 2 to March 8, 2018 to seek input from politicians, experts, practitioners, and researchers on the challenges and opportunities for women's representation in local government and its role in helping achieve gender equality and empower women at the local level.

Questions:

1. What are the challenges that hinder women's political participation and representation at the local governance and decision-making level? Are they any different from the challenges women face at the national level?
2. What are the good practices that help advance women's political participation and representation at the local level? What is the role of political parties in supporting women's engagement in local politics?
3. Do you know of any programmes or structures that support women elected at the local level to become leaders at the national level? Please share examples.
4. What can local government do to achieve gender equality and empower rural women and girls?

CONTRIBUTIONS

The e-Discussion on [women's political representation and participation at the local level](#) was launched on 2 February 2018 in Arabic, English, French and Spanish and ended on 8 March 2018. Twenty-four participants from Sub-Saharan Africa, the Arab region, Asia, the Americas and Europe engaged in the

online debate and submitted contributions. The e-Discussion gathered twenty contributions in English, three in French and one in Spanish by:

1. [Dr. Santosh Kumar Mishra](#), Technical Assistant, Population Education Resource Centre (PERC), Department of Continuing and Adult Education and Extension Work, S. N. D. T. Women's University, Mumbai, **India**
2. [Dr. Malliga Och](#), Assistant Professor in the Global Studies and Languages Department at Idaho State University focused on women in conservative parties, **USA**
3. [Agridinner Nandhego](#), Programme Specialist Political Participation and Leadership, UN Women Uganda, **Uganda**
4. [Abosedede George-Ogan](#), Chief Facilitator at WomeninPoliticsNG, **Nigeria**
5. [Ionica Berevoescu](#), Policy Specialist on women's participation in local government, UN Women, **USA/International**
6. [Kadidia Doumbia](#), Specialist in Gender and Education, DC Human Rights Liaison and former Grassroots Coordinating Committee co-chair for the Democratic Party in the Washington DC area, **USA**
7. [Sifisosami Dube](#), Head of Programmes, Gender Links, **South Africa**
8. [Lynda Umeh](#), Entrepreneur in the ICT Sector, **Nigeria**
9. [Racheal Namono](#), woman councilor in Makindye Division, **Uganda**
10. [Alejandra Fleischer](#), Retired Teacher, **Argentina**
11. [Dewi Yuliani](#), online user, **Indonesia**
12. [Dr. Indra Biseswar](#), Coach and Gender Consultant, **Netherlands**
13. [Margarita Alonzo](#), Deputy Chairwoman, TODOS Political Party, **Guatemala**
14. [Betty Ethel Naluyima](#), Vice Chairperson of Wakiso District, **Uganda**
15. [Hon Mary Patricia Ouma](#), Homabay county, **Kenya**
16. [Karma Dema](#), Project Coordinator at International IDEA, **Bhutan**
17. [Phinah Patience Chima](#), **South Africa**
18. [Iruza Kakava](#), City Councilor in the Municipality of Zugdidi, **Georgia**
19. [Richard E. Banda](#), **Malawi**
20. [Maria E. Auma](#), **Uganda**
21. [Samia Zaouali](#), political and civil society activist, first Tunisian woman to be campaign president, **Tunisia**
22. [Keita Domani Doré](#), Local Councilor, President of the political movement " la Guinée Audacieuse", and former minister, **Guinee**
23. [Moufida Oueslati](#), Policy Advisor, Tunisian Active Network for Social Accountability, **Tunisia**
24. [Kunzang Lhamu](#), National Commission for Women and Children, **Bhutan**.

DISCUSSION SUMMARY

iKNOW Politics and its partners thank their followers for taking the time to participate in this e-Discussion and share experiences, practices and recommendations. The contributions are summarized below.

1. **What are the challenges that hinder women's political participation and representation at the local governance and decision-making level? Are they any different from the challenges women face at the national level?**

Women's representation in local government is measured by one of the new indicators set to monitor the achievement of the SDGs, namely SDG indicator 5.5.1b on the proportion of seats held by women in local government. The development of the indicator, led by UN Women, is a key step in measuring, understanding and improving women's political participation at the local level. Although some data on women's representation in local government have already been produced by many countries, the indicators used for data dissemination varied and, occasionally, included data of limited quality. While this past work played an important role in making the underrepresentation of women in local government visible, it is important that from now on, the new indicator is consistently used. Consistency in collecting and reporting data will enable sound comparisons across countries and computations of global and regional averages of women's representation in local government.

SDG indicator 5.5.1b was designed to measure the proportion of elected positions held by women in local councils or equivalent deliberative bodies of local government in a simple, clear and cost-effective way. The primary source of information is administrative data based on electoral records produced and upheld by Electoral Management Bodies or equivalent bodies tasked with organizing elections at the local level. However, it is also important that the SDG indicator 5.5.1b is complemented by additional data on women's political participation. For instance, countries are also recommended to collect and disseminate data on women's representation among voters and candidates in local elections, members of local executive bodies, and leadership positions in local government (such as mayors and council heads). This additional statistical information can contribute to understanding the challenges women face in politics at the local level and supporting better-informed national policies and practices.

All contributors agree that women face a myriad of challenges that prevent them from full and equal political participation and representation at the local level. The most common are:

1. Negative cultural perceptions and attitudes about women in leadership
2. Violence against women in politics
3. Lack of education and training
4. Lack of access to knowledge and support networks
5. Discriminatory election systems and processes
6. Lack of financial resources

After the first local government elections in **Bhutan**, for example, the National Commission for Women and Children (NCWC) conducted a national study in 2012 to identify the challenges and barriers to women's political participation and concluded that they are mainly linked to low levels of female literacy and training, traditional gender roles and stereotypes, gender-neutral electoral processes, low self-esteem and functional literacy requirements among women to qualify as candidates.

Contributors point out that women are subject to strong discrimination coming from deeply rooted patriarchal attitudes and practices. In patriarchal societies, there is a widespread belief that the public space is not meant for women and that by nature they cannot be good leaders. These perceptions are stronger in local level politics, making it hard for women to contest and take up leadership positions. The lack of support from mostly men family members for women aspiring to political positions demotivates, and in some cases forbids, women from running for office. In many societies, men have the power to refuse their wives' involvement in politics because it is perceived as challenging traditional power relations inside and outside the home and a threat to conservative norms the status quo. In **Uganda** for example, this practice is common and is often backed with claims that women might become "promiscuous" once

they are given liberty to be active in the public space. In **Kenya**, political participation and representation at the local level is particularly difficult for women in some areas because unlike men, women of certain tribes usually marry outside of their clan and consequently live their adult lives away from the clan into which they were born. Given that locally elected officials typically only get support from the community chiefs if they are native to the community, most married women are disadvantaged.

Another challenge that participants mention is violence against women in politics (VAWP). UN Women and UNDP report that almost universally, the increase in women's political representation has been in correlation with the rise in acts of VAWP. There is widespread harassment, intimidation and sexual and physical violence against women in public life. In some extreme cases, women politicians were assassinated for exercising their political rights.¹ A contributor from the **United States** shares that the regular attacks that target women politicians and their reputations by spreading rumors, usually based on false assertions, often lead to withdrawal from political life. In **Guatemala**, women in politics are frequently subject to unusual public scrutiny and analysis of their appearance and personal life traits, rather than their qualifications and political initiatives. In **Nigeria**, women are typically advised against standing for election and told they cannot withstand the pressure of local politics, as it usually entails violent attitudes and aggressions. Women are often intimidated, threatened and even in some cases attacked by men who feel challenged by their presence and engagement. A contributor from Nigeria recalls encountering a woman who was asked to provide sexual favors if she wished to progress within a political party and run for a local government office.

The lack of adequate education and professional training is another powerful factor preventing women from actively participating in local politics. In **Bhutan** for instance, all local government candidates must qualify and pass the Basic Functional Literacy Test (FLT) established by the Election Commission specifically for local government elections. Considering that literacy rates for women are 60% in urban areas and 29% in rural areas compared to 80% in urban areas and 57% in rural areas for men, women clearly face a barrier accessing the electoral process. Today, only 8.3% of parliamentarians and 11.6% of local councilors in Bhutan are women. With 23 spoken languages in **Guatemala**, the lack of formal education in rural areas creates an insurmountable barrier for women who do not speak the national language, which is necessary in politics. A political party leader from Guatemala who has spent the last five years traveling across the country to build her party's base shares that, in her experience, access to information and supportive networks are the most critical prerequisites for women's political participation and that the lack thereof is harmful not only to women but to the whole society. She adds that economic independence and access to campaign finance is another big challenge for women in politics in Guatemala.

Women are disproportionately subject to discrimination, exploitation, and poverty. They often take on insecure and low-paid jobs, and rarely occupy senior and leadership positions. With less access to property and capital, and because women typically take on most household work, they have much less time and resources to pursue a political career than men. Therefore, women generally have less access than men to the necessary funds for seeking party nominations and competing in elections. In the **United States** for example, running a local election campaign is excessively expensive. In California, a contributor reports that a state legislature race can cost up to one million dollars. The same is true for mayoral races in cities and can go even higher in major ones. This is even more exacerbated at the national level; to successfully

¹ Preventing violence against women in elections: A programming guide. UN Women and UNDP, 2017. Available [here](#).

run for Congress, candidates spend an average of \$1.3 million USD for a seat in the House and \$10.4 million USD for a seat in the Senate.²

Although participants agree that the challenges women face entering politics are the same at the local and national levels, they argue that they tend to be inflated at local level because factors like lack of education and financial resources and patriarchal attitudes tend to be stronger in rural areas than in urban ones. Furthermore, it is agreed that women's participation and representation at the local level, or the lack of thereof, has a direct effect on participation and representation at the national level because political parties tend to turn to their locally elected members to identify and recruit candidates for national elections.

2. What are the good practices that help advance women's political participation and representation at the local level? What is the role of political parties in supporting women's engagement in local politics?

Between 2013 and 2017, several national consultations and conferences on women in politics were held in **Bhutan** to take stock of the opportunities and challenges women face and identify practices to enhance women's participation. As a result, a Draft National Plan of Action to Promote Gender Equality in Elected Office (NPAPGEEEO) was developed. It includes reviewing and revising existing legislation, policies and practices that deter women's participation. It recommends the drafting of a Gender Equality Policy which would address gender equality gaps through methods such as temporary special measures (TSMs), as well as raising awareness and supporting the creation of a level playing field by addressing gender differences. Support systems and services include child care creches in elected offices, workshops and media programs that portray women leaders as role models, identifying and training aspiring and potential women candidates, and training and capacity building programs for elected women.

TSMs in the form of quotas for women have proven time and again to be effective tools in increasing women's participation and representation. For example, a contributor from **Tunisia** shares that the upcoming municipal and regional elections in May, the country's first since the beginning of the Arab Spring, will ensure groundbreaking parity in local government bodies due to legislated "vertical and horizontal" parity on candidate lists. In comparison, the strictly vertical parity requirement for candidate lists in the parliamentary election only resulted in about 31% female representation in the Tunisian parliament, despite expectations that parity would result in at least 50% women's representation. This was mainly due to the tendency of political parties to nominate only men as heads of lists, usually the most winnable position, across numerous competing political parties. Another example of a legislated quota appears in the Local Government Act of **Uganda**, which establishes a one-third minimum representation of women at the local level. This has contributed to the increased representation of women at the local level by 45.7%. In contrast, for positions where there is no affirmative action policy in Uganda, women's participation remains low. The position of District Chairperson is a good example as women only occupy 1% of the seats in the absence of a quota. On the impact of legislated quotas, a contributor from **Nigeria** points to many inconsistencies between laws and reality, stressing the

² Center for Responsive Politics, 9 November 2016: [opensecrets.org/news/2016/11/the-price-of-winning-just-got-higher-especially-in-the-senate/](https://www.opensecrets.org/news/2016/11/the-price-of-winning-just-got-higher-especially-in-the-senate/) (accessed on 4 April 2018).

importance of government and electoral management body involvement to ensure quotas are respected and properly implemented.

All contributors agree that candidate trainings are essential to increasing the number of women running for local government positions and their chances of being elected, as well as for enhancing their contributions once in office. In **Uganda**, UN Women supports partners to identify aspiring women candidates one to two years before local elections and train them in campaign management, public speaking and media engagement. These trainings enable women to build self-confidence to overcome campaign challenges. Many women who have gone through these trainings have successfully run and won elections against established male contenders. Citing the example of the recently launched incubator for women in politics in **Belgium** launched by the local counselor Assita Kanko, called *Polin*, communal councilor and former minister Keta Domani Doré announces a similar initiative to establish an incubator to train women for political office in **Guinea**, named POGUI, in collaboration with the National Democratic Institute (NDI). In the same spirit, active mentoring and grooming can go a long way in advancing women's political participation and representation. Exposing aspiring women candidates, especially young women, to successful role models from their community gives them direct access to real-life experiences and valuable advice and lessons applicable to their contexts. Proper coaching and orientation would progressively lead to the role model effect of attitudinal changes towards women in leadership positions, while also preparing young women to be more active in politics.

Such good practices can only reach their full potential if political parties are genuinely on board with promoting women's political participation. In most countries, the success rates of independent candidacies is still a mirage, and aspiring candidates can only seriously contest in elections under the banner of a political party. Political party leaders are key to determining who represents the party in elections. A contributor shares that in **Suriname** for instance, a young chairperson of an opposition party was advocating to integrate a gender policy in the party program, but the party elders were not convinced and blocked the initiative. It is essential that political parties standing for elections are challenged with questions on how they aim to tackle gender inequality in their constituencies and be pushed to commit to take up a gender policy as part of their program. There are many political parties that have active women members, but who fail to put forward women candidates during election times. There are also political parties that place women on the candidate list for election but do not have a gender policy in their party program, limiting their actions to tokenistic gestures. Political parties can support women's representation by allocating a minimum of elective seats to women, or having less demanding financial requirements for women candidates. This will encourage more women to run, and enable their election.

As mentioned above, one of the main challenges hindering women's political participation at the local level is the widespread negative cultural perceptions and attitudes about women in leadership. To change this, awareness raising and sensitization campaigns are essential. In **Uganda**, UN Women supported civil society organizations (CSOs) in conducting community awareness sessions to sensitize people about the importance of women's participation in politics. This helped change some of the negative perceptions slowing down women's access to leadership roles. Prior to the 2016 elections in Uganda, UN Women supported a media campaign called "minibus" that involved dialogue on women's leadership in public transportation. The follow-up assessment of this program revealed that it reached many people and positively impacted on their perception of women's leadership. CSOs are essential partners in promoting such efforts. In **Bhutan**, DANIDA and the [Bhutan Network for Empowering Women](#) (BNEW) were instrumental in reaching out to women at the local level and sensitizing them about their rights, and the

roles they could play in political and public life. They offered training and mentoring programs to build women's confidence and skills to compete in elections. CSOs have also provided platforms for elected women to network and receive guidance on communication skills and public exposure. Women's networks can play an important role in supporting and inspiring women's engagement in local politics. For example, the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF) launched a network for Commonwealth Women in Local Government in November 2017 in **Malta**, with the aim of supporting more women to get involved in local government as politicians and practitioners, and to increase the influence of women in the decisions made about local issues. In the **United States**, CSOs such as [Emerge](#), [She Should Run](#), [Vote Run Lead](#) and [Ready To Run](#) are focusing on preparing women to run and providing support to their campaigns. Many of them offer online trainings to maximize the number of women who can take advantage of the trainings and guidance. In **South Africa**, [Gender Links](#) took on the task of mainstreaming gender in service delivery at the local level through partnerships with more than 400 local councils. Using the Centres of Excellence programme, a 10-stage process involving council buy-in for action planning and best practice sharing on gender mainstreaming in service delivery, Gender Links focuses on identifying gender champions within councils to lead on gender equality at local level.

3. Do you know of any programmes or structures that support women elected at the local level to become leaders at the national level? Please share examples.

As mentioned above, there are many explanations for the lack of women in leadership roles, including gender discrimination, lack of female role models, family constraints and social norms. These challenges can be diminished through structural changes to political frameworks and social changes in how men and women co-exist in the society. Trainings and capacity building in democratic decision-making for women and men are also key. Numerous organizations and programmes support women elected at the local level to become leaders at the national level. We have already seen examples in previous sections of initiatives that support women to access and thrive in elected political roles at the local level, thereby enabling them to be more equipped for national level political roles. Generally, political parties recruit from among their successful, locally elected members for national elections, so programs focused on women's political participation at the local level indirectly helps women's political participation at the national level.

4. What can local government do to achieve gender equality and empower rural women and girls?

Grassroots political engagement and mobilization is one of the foundational principles of a democratic society. Local government authorities have a central role in safeguarding democratic practices as they are the closest to the grassroots. They must ensure the formulation and implementation of their policies, plans and budgets in all areas affecting their constituencies are gender-sensitive.

Local governments must improve female representation in elected, administrative and appointed office across institutions. As we have seen, this can be achieved through a combination of anti-discrimination and positive action measures, and additional support through mentoring schemes, flexible working hours, and affordable childcare provision. As major employers and service providers, local governments can significantly facilitate improvements to women's lives and include more women by using fair employment practices and ensuring non-discriminatory service provision to citizens. Local governments are also on the frontline of tackling violence and harmful practices against women in both the public and private spheres. Local policing and urban planning, particularly the creation and maintenance of public spaces, are essential tools in tackling violence against women. Local authorities have an important role to play in identifying women and girls affected by violence and providing them with appropriate support and

services. Local governments also have a duty to ensure women's equal access to land and economic and natural resources. They can establish mechanisms to make it easier for women to obtain legal documents such as birth certificates, provide legal aid services that support women in exercising their rights, and guarantee women's participation in land governance institutions and policy-making processes. Local governments should fully mainstream a gender perspective into local legislation, urban planning and policy-making to tackle multiple barriers to women and girls' empowerment. Only in this way will women and girls be able to play an equal role in the political, economic, social and cultural life of our communities.