Briefing

The power to decide

Women, decision-making and gender equality

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Key messages

- Around the world, women now have more influence over the decisions that affect their lives. In even the most conservative societies, feminists and gender advocates have been able to forward more equitable policies and outcomes.

- Important drivers of women's political power and influence include improved access to education and material assets, more equal and inclusive politics, strong women's movements and women being effective political operators.

- Increases in women's political power are not uniform. Some women have more influence than others, both within and between countries. Men continue to dominate some sectors and the most powerful positions in society.

- Women in positions of power may not champion gender equality: women and their interests are diverse.

- The international community can better support women's political leadership by investing in women's education and economic assets, their organisations and their political apprenticeship; focusing on political systems and not just elections; and supporting locally led and problem-driven responses.

This briefing[2] is about women's decision-making power, in particular their ability to influence political decisions about the distribution of public authority, rights and resources. We look at the reasons for women's increased presence in public life around the world, and why women in some socioeconomic groups, sectors and countries have less political power than others. We also examine when and how women have power and influence in practice, and what they seek to achieve. Finally, we provide recommendations on how the international community can better support women's access to decision-making and leadership.

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Box 1: Leadership, decision-making power and influence

Leadership means the individual and collective capabilities to mobilise 'people and resources (economic, political and other) in pursuit of particular ends' (Lynne de Ver, 2009). This includes the political aspect of mobilisation – that is, the ability to navigate power relations to secure desired outcomes through contestation and negotiation, the co-option and persuasion of allies and the outmanoeuvring of opponents. Leadership therefore involves the ability to influence the ideas and behaviour of others and is effective when it translates into outcomes, whatever the content of those might be. Leadership may or may not coincide with public positions of authority.

Decision-making power is the ability to influence decisions that affect one's life – both private and public. Formal access to positions of authority and to decision-making processes is an important, if insufficient, condition for women to have decision-making power in the public domain. In fact, decision-making power is a composite of access, capabilities and actions that shape whether women have influence over the polity or decisions about their private life. Having influence with, over and through people and processes is therefore central to both leadership and decision-making power.

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Explaining gains in women's decision-making power

Women are more visible in public life now than they have been at any other point in modern history. Globally, women have more access to positions of authority than they did 30 years ago – from the judiciary to parliament, from professional associations to the boardroom (see Box 2).

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Box 2: The representation gap – an upward trend

In the past 30 years, the gender gap in several aspects of public life in low- and middle-income countries has narrowed significantly. The global proportion of women national parliamentarians – the most common measure of this – fell from 11.3% to 22% between 1995 and 2015. By 2011, women made up 40% of the formal labour force and 27% of judges worldwide. Women are even starting to make inroads into solidly male areas, such as the police force (9% by 2011) and the boardroom, with women CEOs of Fortune 500 companies going from 0 in 1995 to 26 in 2015 (Hughes, 2014; ILO, 2012; The Economist, 2015; UN Women, 2011).

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This is not a uniform global trend, however. Women's political power differs between regions and countries and, within countries, between sectors and socioeconomic groups. Three main factors enable or constrain women's decision-making power and leadership and explain which women gain political power, when and how.

Institutions
Institutions are rules and norms that shape people's behaviour and interactions in social, political and economic life. Four changes to formal (written) rules have been instrumental to the increase in women's access to decision-making. First, the extension of civil and political rights has made it more possible for women (and men) to participate in public and economic life. Second, many countries are progressively eliminating laws that discriminate against women specifically. Third, democratisation has given much greater numbers of women experience of political office – including poorer women in those countries with elected local government. Fourth, positive measures, such as electoral or party quotas, have been critical to reducing the representation gap in many countries, particularly within national legislatures.

In practice, however, it is the *combination* of different rules and incentives that structures the political opportunities of different women. For example, how quotas work with other features of the political system – such as different types of electoral systems, internal party workings and variations in presidential and parliamentary systems – defines *which* women rise through the political ranks and where their loyalties might lie.

Critically, how formal rules work also depends on their interaction with informal (unwritten) rules, social norms and practices. These include customary and religious law and informal political norms, such as patronage-based or 'big man' politics. They also include norms that are so 'hidden' people may not even recognise their effect on their behaviour, such as patriarchy, sexism or racism (Chappell and Waylen, 2013).

Structures

Structures are the deeper social, economic and political endowments, groupings and patterns that shape a society. They tend to be persistent over time: for example, socially constructed categories and identities, such as class, gender, ethnicity or sexuality, endure for centuries. But structural changes that reduce inequalities are ultimately what are required to close the representation gap.

Urbanisation, economic diversification and changes in the gendered division of labour are slowly shifting social beliefs and expectations in developing countries. For example, women moving into traditionally masculine jobs in larger numbers in Zambia is 'disrupting' gender stereotypes about women's capabilities *vis-à-vis* men and the associated cultural expectations about the roles women and men should perform (Evans, forthcoming). Women's participation in the formal labour market has challenged restrictions on women's mobility in Bangladesh.

Social ruptures and shocks can also produce rapid structural change. In particular, large-scale conflict has catalysed shifts in gender relations. The disruption of traditional gender roles and stereotypes during war is one reason for this. For instance, in El Salvador, Peru, Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka, not all women returned to their pre-war roles at the end of the conflict; some women continue in newfound leadership roles, for instance in new civil society organisations (Wood, 2008).

But peace processes and constitutional reform during and after conflict have also provided opportunities for women to renegotiate their share of rights and resources, on paper at least, as part of larger political reforms. While women still rarely have an actual seat at the negotiating table, they have been effective in influencing outcomes, including through strategic networking and lobbying with key decision-makers (Nazneen and Mahmud, 2012; Waylen, 2014b).

After conflicts or regime change, male elites often backslide on formal commitments to women's rights, as was seen in Latin America in the 1980s and after the more recent Arab Uprisings. But constitutional gains – such as equality and non-discrimination provisions, quotas, primacy of statutory over customary law or the criminalisation of gender-based violence – are still significant because they increase the likelihood of women's future presence in political life. For example, of the 44 African countries that have rewritten their constitutions since the 1990s, 75% of those that did so after conflict have quota provisions, compared with only 25% of those

that did not experience conflict – and, on average, the post-conflict African countries have double the number of women members of parliament (MPs) (Tripp, 2014).

Capabilities

Women must draw on a range of capabilities to take advantage of the opportunities institutional and structural changes present. Female politicians tend to be educated, middle-class, often professional – particularly those who engage in politics outside their immediate communities. A girl's future political power is therefore often directly related to her family's socioeconomic status and her parents' attitude to education for girls – and, in particular, to *higher* education.

Families can also be a critical training ground for women leaders. Living in a politically active household can equip women with the nous and connections necessary to be effective political operators – as when parents or spouses are involved in community activism, trade unionism or national office, for instance. Student politics, volunteering and professional life are other key opportunities for women to build their political skills, their reputation and a constituency – what Cornwall and Goetz (2005) call 'political apprenticeship' – more so even than political parties or formal training programmes in political skills.

The private sphere also informs women's power in the public sphere into their adulthood. Women have less time and fewer resources than men because of the gendered division of domestic and reproductive labour: financial and moral support of husbands and other close family members is therefore often instrumental to a woman's political career (Tadros, 2014). And women who have economic capital, in the form of ownership of *and* control over resources, income and assets, are more likely to have decision-making power in the home – particularly when this economic capital is combined with cultural and social capital, such as education (Klugman et al., 2014).

Women's political power also depends on their collective capabilities. Women organising with other women is critical to their questioning of men's dominance and to the solidarity needed to challenge it. Strong, independent women's organisations are also instrumental to achieve changes in gender laws and practices, especially in areas that are likely to generate strong resistance, such as with violence against women or family law (Htun and Weldon, 2011). Much less is known about women's role within political parties and faith-based organisations, and the implications of this for women's political power.

Explaining variations (and deviations) in women's decision-making power

Too often, strategies to support women's decision-making focus on institutions, structures or capabilities in isolation, with limited appreciation of the linkages between them. This is problematic because how particular capabilities,

institutions and social structures *combine and interact* shapes women's *actual* influence in decision-making processes. These relationships are the political economy of women's decision-making. They help explain variations in women's political power and leadership, such as:

Inequalities between women

Adverse gender norms affect all women – but how they affect them depends on other structural factors. Gendered barriers to political power are compounded for women who are disadvantaged by their class, ethnicity, religion, age or sexuality. Women from marginalised social groups are less likely than those from dominant social groups to have the social and economic assets to enable them to take advantage of new opportunities for political power.

Variations between countries

Countries also have different social, economic and political conditions that combine in different ways to enable or constrain women's agency and leadership. Multiple pathways to women's political power have emerged from these differences. For example, in Western social democracies, left-of-centre and socially progressive parties have driven large increases in women's representation in national parliaments, even in the absence of quotas. In sub-Saharan Africa, by contrast, women's activism around quotas in post-conflict political negotiations has been critical (Krook, 2010).

Deviation between formal and actual power

The political economy of decision-making also explains why formal authority or positions of power do not always give women substantive influence over private and public decisions that affect their lives. Informal norms and practices influence how formal laws and regulations works. Gender and other social norms are 'sticky' (Mackay, 2014), and typically mean women are unable to exercise power on the same terms as men even after reforms to discriminatory laws. For example, women activists may be unable to attend political meetings in the evening because of domestic responsibilities, or male MPs may use sexual harassment to dominate female MPs.

In addition, behind-the-scenes deliberations can be as important determinants of what public officials decide and why as public deliberations. For example, party positions may be decided on in private social spaces that (formally or informally) exclude women, such as bars or sports clubs, and/or a parliament or board may simply rubber-stamp decisions already taken in private discussion between the most powerful players.

Undercover feminism: how women negotiate and influence the rules of the game

Women in the most senior positions are more likely to have actual decision-making power, and there has been some progress here too. In 2015, 10 heads of state and 14 heads of government were women, and the number of women in cabinet between 1999 and 2010 had increased from 9% to 17% (Hughes, 2014). However, it also the case that women are more likely to lead 'soft' ministries, such as health, education or women/children's welfare, and still only rarely get finance, home, security or foreign affairs portfolios (Krook and O'Brien, 2012).

In any case, when opportunities for political influence present themselves, it is not just capabilities that matter but also what women do and how. This is a fourth factor that explains women's decision-making power in practice: *how women negotiate gendered institutions and decision-making processes* and fora across politics, economics and society. And, in particular, whether they are able to make the strategic decisions and build the relationships necessary to work with and around political realities (see Box 3).

Holding official power and positions is also only part of the story: women with clout in business, professional, religious and other civic associations can have significant *indirect* influence over politicians and other public officials.[3] While women's movements have been central to advancing gender equality agendas, campaigning and advocacy are just the most visible face of women's political struggles. Whether they are business, civic or political leaders, influential women (just like influential men) are those able to leverage informal relationships, build alliances and convince others. This is true of all societies, because personal relationships and the ability to bestow favours is the engine of politics the world over. But the need for politicians and activists to be effective 'off-stage' as well as 'on-stage' is particularly acute in countries where the rule of law is weak, politics is patronage-based and trust derives from who you are and who you know.

Successful women's coalitions in Egypt and Jordan, for example, are those whose leaders have leveraged their informal relationships with key decision-makers to lobby for controversial legislation, for instance on family issues or domestic violence. Behind-the-scenes networking, combined with accepted credibility of these women

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3   Data on who these women are and their assets and organisational roles are less readily available, yet case studies suggest these informal powers and roles can be effective mechanisms for women to exercise power.

Box 3: Negotiating gendered institutions: Michele Bachelet and executive power in Chile

In an analysis of the presidency of Bachelet in Chile, Staab and Waylen (2015) underline the importance of the politically strategic ways in which 'critical gender actors (male and female)' in government navigated the opportunities and constraints that defined the scope of what was politically possible in terms of gender equality policy. The Bachelet government's capacity to advance this agenda has been constrained by both formal and informal institutional structures and by a range of entrenched interests and power structures, notably related to the Catholic Church, business interests and conservative elements among elite groups.

Nevertheless, progress has been possible across a range of social reform areas (health, pensions and child care). Each of these areas has seen very different sets of challenges and opportunities. Reforms have been possible thanks to the creative strategies of gender actors, who have resorted to a wide range of formal and informal rules and relationships to achieve change within the different policy fields. And these strategies have varied significantly – including in terms of accepting trade-offs – which reflects the specific constraints, interests and incentive structures within each policy area.

Staab and Waylen underline the importance of examining and understanding 'not only the key actors, both supporter and opponents of positive gender change, but also the formal and informal institutional rules, norms and practices that influence their relative leverage'.

activists, including because of their in-depth knowledge of law, has enabled them to frame socially sensitive issues in ways that have outmanoeuvred (religious) opposition. But key to effective gains has been the ability to spot and use political opportunities *within* the corridors of power, and through deep political sensitivities regarding social norms around family life and gender relations (Tadros, 2011).

In all patriarchal societies, but particularly in extremely conservative societies, women who wish to advance gender equality also need to convince potential male allies, make deals and compromises and frame issues in ways that minimise hard opposition. In constitutional negotiations in Uganda in 1995, for example, the women's caucus was able to convince male allies of the need for progressive gender provisions, such as affirmative action, but had to compromise on the wording of the abortion provision (Tamale, 1999). Technical knowledge, such as legal or scientific skills, as well as political instinct, has been

important to women's effectiveness in such negotiations. Feminist lawyers have played a key role in developing gender-sensitive legal and policy reform. In Colombia, the activism of experienced feminist lawyers has been important to shape law on transitional justice and violence against women legislation (Diaz and Marin, 2013).

What women with political power do with it

By working politically, women have driven progressive changes in women's rights and gender relations in countries around the world – ones that would once have been unthinkable let alone achievable. In most countries, urban, educated women working inside and outside the state, through a combination of long-term campaigning and seizing opportunities, have won constitutional recognition of women's equal status with men and legal and policy reform across a range of issues, including property and inheritance, reproductive health and violence against women. The struggles of grassroots activists, which mostly focus on more localised and practical issues that affect the day-to-day life of their families, have led to improved health and sanitation, safer environments for women and girls, the exposure of corruption and better outcomes for women in local dispute resolution.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume women with influence, whether at national or grassroots levels, will always use it to advance women's interests. While there is a common assumption that women are more likely than men to pursue policies beneficial for women and children – and sometimes even that they are, on the whole, more socially progressive and peaceful – we actually know relatively little about the preferences, actions and achievements of women leaders. This is especially so outside the most senior women (e.g. positions beneath president) and politics (e.g. business leaders).

Some studies do suggest women leaders are more likely to prioritise public goods,[4] and there are plenty of case studies of women who individually or collectively seek to reduce gender inequality. But the evidence does not substantiate the premise that having more women in power – even a critical mass – will automatically improve outcomes for women more generally. There are two main reasons why descriptive representation (how many women?) does not equal substantive representation (what women do and who they act for?)

First, women are not a homogenous group with a discernible set of 'women's interests'. They may have more in common with men from their own social group than with women from a different class, ethnic group, religion, location or ideological persuasion. For example, women elected through quotas in Burundi are widely seen as

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4   For example, Beaman et al. (2006) use the natural experiment produced by the random assignment of women's leaders in Gram Panchayats in India to look at their impact on outcomes, finding women leaders are more likely to promote public good provision.

'token' women rather than representatives of poor women or gender interests.

Second, even powerful women can find their options for advancing women's rights to be limited. They may face resistance and backlash, such as when women who transgress gender stereotypes are subject to violence, and gender discrimination, such as when women are prevented from reaching senior positions. The wider political environment may also limit the power of women leaders, such as when the executive marginalises parliament in practice, or when loyalty to patrons weakens the ability of women to organise with other women.

Nevertheless, whether women in formal positions identify as feminist, in public or private – what Childs and Krook (2008) call 'critical actors' – and the quality of their relations with women's organisations and activists does appears to be more important to gender equality gains than the number of women in power.

Towards better support to women's political power and leadership

There is international momentum around improving the lives of women and girls. Reducing gender inequalities has high-level political support in several bilateral and multilateral agencies. The newly agreed 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development includes a specific target on women's full and effective participation in leadership at all levels of decision-making. The anniversaries of the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995) and UN Security Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (2000) provide political opportunities to push the agenda on women's political power and leadership. Our assessment of the evidence suggests five ways international agencies might do this.

Be clear about the objective: Increasing women's presence in public life is a valid political project and indicator of gender equality in itself, and a necessary condition for women to have influence. Increasing the chances of women being politically influential is a different, if related, objective, requiring different types of interventions. Increasing the likelihood that powerful women will use their influence to increase women's rights and gender equality is a third objective, which involves a different set of considerations again, for instance about who the women in power are, which interests they prioritise, and whether they are likely to support feminist causes. Conflating these distinct objectives makes it less likely that programmes will be well designed, makes it more difficult to communicate progress and reinforces erroneous assumptions.

Invest in women's organisations and movements: Support to women's organisations should always be a priority.

While short-term benefits might be difficult to predict or report, the importance of strong, independent women's movements to gender gains over time cannot be overstated. Women's organisations need to arise from domestic processes of contestation, however; attempts by foreign actors and funders to drive agendas can undermine domestic capacity and voluntarism and create backlash.

Focus on political systems, not just elections: There is clear value in supporting mechanisms to increase women's representation, through quotas, women's caucuses and whole-of-electoral-cycle support to women candidates and politicians. But whether and how these mechanisms work to increase the decision-making power of different women will depend on the wider political system. To be effective, support to women's political power must pay attention to how different features of the system work together, including electoral rules, party system, regime type and political culture.

Invest in political apprenticeship: Women develop political skills and experience in a range of ways and through different modes of political action. Political parties are essential to women's influence once elected, but may not be the most important training grounds for women politicians. Supporting schools and civic associations can be effective ways to extend opportunities for political apprenticeship to greater numbers and groups of women. Donors therefore need also to invest in a range of potential pathways to women's leadership, with a country's political economy shaping decisions.

Invest in women's education and economic assets: It will be an opportunity missed if increased spending for women's leadership goes only to bigger gender programmes that focus directly on women's political participation. Economic and social capabilities provide a building block for political capabilities. There is a clear opportunity to indirectly support women's decision-making power through education, but also economic programmes that increase women's access to property, land, livelihoods, other capital and business opportunities. Existing initiatives can be adapted so they not only help achieve women's economic empowerment but also enhance women's role in decision-making in business and economic policy.

Be locally led and problem driven: Support to women's decision-making needs to be driven by actual opportunities for reform in specific contexts. Identifying specific problems also helps move away from generic gender interventions. Instead, it is important to focus on the obstacles to women's capacity for influence and decision-making in different political, social and economic roles and the opportunities to achieve concrete outcomes in gender

equality gains. The presence and willingness of local reform champions is therefore critical, as are adaptive programmes that allow them to work politically and flexibly.

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