



# **Women's voice and leadership in decision-making**

## **Assessing the evidence**

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# Executive summary

This report reviews the global evidence on the processes of change that enable women to have substantive voice and leadership in decision-making. It answers two core research questions:

- What are the enabling factors for women and girls' voice, leadership and access to decision-making?
- What do we know about whether and how women and girls' voice, leadership and/or presence in decision-making roles result in greater gender equality?

Voice, decision-making and leadership are understood as elements of women's empowerment. They encapsulate women having the power to express their preferences, demands, views and interests, to gain access to positions of decision-making that affect public or private power and resource allocation, and to exercise influence in leadership positions. Women's voice, leadership and decision-making power may be present at the household, community and national level, and be individual or collective.

The report is guided by a conceptual and analytical framework that draws together long-standing theories of both women's empowerment and the political economy of institutional change in developing countries. We test two common assumptions about women's voice. First, that women's voice, access to, or participation in decision-making will lead to them to have actual influence over decisions and outcomes. Second, that women with influence will champion issues of concern to women, including gender equality. To do this, we look at the processes and activities through which women exercise voice, leadership and decision-making in the political, social and economic spheres. We also look at the broader contextual conditions that inform women's political participation, social activism and economic empowerment. These include social structures and norms, political regime type, characteristics of the state, civil society, and market, and international relations.

## Key findings: What does the evidence tell us?

### **Does women's participation in political, social or economic activities strengthen women's voice, leadership, and access to decision-making processes and roles?**

Women's individual and collective action, whether in formal politics, civic society or the economy, provide opportunities for women to *voice* their needs and demands. Women often organise around their practical interests, particularly in the case of social and economic mobilisation. But women, usually from the elite, also come together to lobby for gender equality and to advance their strategic interests.

*'Women's voice' as an abstraction risks masking the socio-political and economic cleavages that separate women and underplaying their diverse interests, identities, and ideological or normative preferences.* These cleavages include class, religion, ethnicity, caste, age and sexuality. Women's choices and preferences are bounded by concrete individual and collective experiences and consciousness about gender roles and injustice. Women's voice is itself a site of contestation shaped by the dynamics of power, and some groups of women – as individuals or collectively – are better equipped to wield influence than others. At the same time, women (and also men) from different walks of life have formed alliances around shared interests, and these broader coalitions have been critical to substantive processes of political change, such as challenging autocratic regimes or gender inequality.

*Women overwhelmingly still have limited access to positions of leadership.* While there has been progress in many countries in increasing the numbers of women in elected posts, both at local and national level, women are less likely to occupy executive branch posts or key cabinet positions. Similarly, while women occupy leadership roles in social movements they mostly remain under-represented in organisations that do not focus on women and gender issues. And, in the private sector, women across the world remain woefully under-represented in business management, corporate decision-making and business associations.

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***Women's leadership is mostly seen in terms of access to formal leadership positions, but too little is known about how women become leaders.*** Effective voice and leadership is associated with an ability to navigate the web of formal and informal institutions and networks that constitute the world of political decision-making or in the market. Civic action, paid or voluntary work and/or participation in formal political life can create opportunities for political apprenticeship, through which women develop political and leadership skills at the individual and collective level. However, trajectories of women's political or economic influence and leadership are mostly still poorly documented or explained.

***Promising new research looks at the processes through which women leaders come to exercise influence or occupy decision-making roles.*** In relation to political life, this explores how women and gender advocates navigate the gendered features of formal and informal political institutions and social structures to acquire influence and decision-making roles. Key factors include how formal political or regime features interact, including how different electoral systems intersect with internal dynamics of political parties, and how informal rules, such as personalism and clientelism, and access to informal decision-making forums affect women's political careers.

### **Does women's voice, leadership and presence in decision-making roles result in greater gender equality?**

The variation in modes and levels of voice and influence means that it is not possible to track clear trajectories of change between women's voice and leadership and wider gender equality gains. In any case, the research on this relationship is limited across all three thematic areas. Nevertheless, some findings did emerge on whether women's voice and leadership has led to more gender-responsive law and policy, more gender-responsive provision of public goods and services, more inclusive political settlements, more equitable social norms and better socio-economic outcomes for women and girls.

***Women's collective voice, when strategically oriented and perceived to be broad-based, is instrumental to their ability to negotiate transformative change.*** There is no automatic link between women's presence and voice in public life and transformative change. Women may not be heard when they voice their demands and articulate feminist interests. The viability and sustainability of collective feminist voice depends on women's mobilisational capabilities and resources for strategic action and coalition building. It also depends on there being institutional structures and political opportunities, including the political space for associational life, to enable voice to become influence.

***There is substantial evidence of how women's political voice has resulted in gender-responsive legal and policy reform.*** These gains include, but go beyond, women's presence in formal political positions and are often connected to women's social mobilisation and their collective organisation around gender justice. But the presence of gender advocates and sectoral experts that are well placed in, and able to strategically navigate, political and institutional opportunity structures is often also critical to women's influence. Prominent formal legal gains through women's political actions include the recognition of gender equality in new constitutions, provisions for temporary measures (e.g. quotas) to redress historical discrimination, legal recognition of women's inheritance and property rights, and their right to be free from sexual and gender-based violence. Through collective bargaining women's unions have also secured improvements in women's labour rights (e.g. wages, work environment, access to social security).

***Women's social and economic activism can improve their access to public goods and services.*** The social mobilisation literature provides substantial evidence on women successfully advocating for improved local environments, e.g. sanitation, social housing, transportation, anti-pollution. Under enabling conditions, women's participation in social accountability processes has also led to increased transparency in government decision-making, increased budget allocations for services that benefit women, more accessible or responsive services for women, particularly local health services but also personal safety and social protection, and, in some instances, to legal or administrative redress for women, including for gender-based violations. There are some documented instances of women worker's organisations successfully lobbying for new rights and services, such as increased minimum wage, access to credit and savings, subsidised food, healthcare and childcare. Whether and how women holding formal political power improve access to services for women more broadly is an under-developed area of research.

***The links between women's participation and voice and more inclusive political settlements are under-researched.*** Post-conflict and political transition processes can provide opportunities for women to renegotiate political

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settlements, but retrenchment on gender equality commitments and gains during peace is common. Latin America, for instance, saw an effective ‘beheading’ of women’s movements following the democratic transitions as women sought to take advantage of supposedly inclusive political settlements. Overall, there has been widespread disappointment in the *de facto* reshaping political settlements from a gender equality perspective, as well as more widely. At the same time, there is emerging evidence on the symbolic and socialisation effect of increased levels of women’s presence in public life and in leadership roles, in terms of changing social norms and attitudes on gender roles.

***Under enabling conditions, women’s political participation, social activism and/or economic empowerment can progressively shift social norms.*** The economic literature signals how economic empowerment can result in changes in decision-making power dynamics around household decisions, including *in some cases* in ways that lower the risk of domestic violence and increase the acceptance of women controlling assets. Some studies also show that women’s participation in local politics or associational life can improve their status within communities, particularly when they are seen to deliver concrete group benefits, and that women’s access to employment outside the home can shift social norms that restrict women’s mobility and participation in public life. Research on women’s voice and leadership rarely presents data on changes in socio-economic outcomes for women and girls, or attempts to attribute these to women having more influence over decision-making. Overall, and whether in politics, business or associational life, the symbolic and substantive effects of women holding power, and causal pathways for these, is an under-explored area.

### **What are the factors that enable or constrain women’s voice, leadership and influence?**

There are recurrent themes about the factors that enable women and gender advocates to develop voice, influence and leadership capacities across the political, economic and social spheres – and in the factors that signal active modes of resistance.

***Context matters.*** There are multiple pathways to women’s activism. Women’s experience of changes in gender relations and empowerment, at the individual/household level and collectively, are also diverse. What works in one context to support women’s substantive voice and leadership may be irrelevant in others. This means that common enabling and constraining factors can guide policy and programming but do not provide a blueprint.

***Women’s capabilities and resources, at both an individual and collective level, are important.*** There are five key findings on capabilities and resources.

- Women’s capabilities and interests are shaped by their life experiences – and these must be understood as embedded in wider socio-political, economic and cultural histories.
- The combination of economic capital (e.g. women’s ownership of productive assets and control over income) with other types of resources associated with social and cultural capital (e.g. education, skills training, awareness raising with men, and logistical support to engage in collective action) increases the likelihood of women gaining more power at the household level, and the potential for change at the community and national level.
- Formal sector principles in the labour market, such as minimum wages or social security benefits, can enhance the transformative potential of employment for women’s agency.
- Legal and technical knowledge, and education more generally, can enhance women’s voice and credibility and, therefore, capacity for influence. Political skills, networks and experience are also key to women’s leadership and influence – and women often develop these through informal activities and welfare-oriented work, rather than more conventional formal party politics or political training programmes.
- Women organising with other women around shared interests builds their capabilities for voice and influence. The experience of group cohesion and solidarity can contribute to self-affirmation at the individual and collective level, give support and legitimacy to gender equality agendas and enable women to exert the collective power needed to shift gender norms.

***Political processes and institutions are key to women’s access to decision-making.*** There are four key findings on political institutions.

- Both formal and informal institutions matter. Formal institutions matter in how they shape incentives and opportunities for different actors in trajectories of voice and influence (such as the particularities of different electoral or party systems). Informal institutions co-exist alongside and, in many cases, trump formal institutions; so women must also navigate and engage with informal institutions to have influence and access to decision-making.
- Advancing gender equality agendas involves contesting and redefining the political settlement. Here, the features of regime type are important. This includes whether there is sufficient openness in the political system for political participation: for example whether citizens are able to associate and influence political decisions through elections, the media and accountability processes. The receptiveness of key veto players to women's demands is also important.
- Large-scale institutional change – such as revolutions, conflict or democratic transitions – can be a catalyst for progressive change in gender equality (but can also result in regression in gender norms).
- Coalition-building, networking and lobbying strategies developed at different levels (local, national and transnational) and with different categories of actors (supporters and potential resisters, within and outside the state) are vital to women's ability to capitalise on the opportunities that critical junctures present. This is doubly so for women to turn legal gains won during political transitions into actual policy and *de facto* changes in the allocation of power and resources in ways that benefit women.

*Discriminatory social structures and norms are a primary barrier to women's voice, influence and access to decision-making roles.* There are two main findings on social norms.

- Social norms are another dimension of the world of informal institutions that either enable or constrain political voice and influence. Patriarchy and gender hierarchies (manifest in public attitudes, biases and behaviour) are a primary constraint on women's voice, leadership and influence in private and public life, and across the social, political and economic spheres.
- Women's diversity is a reflection of wider social, political and economic cleavages. Women's groups can be incentivised to overcome these differences in the pursuit of a common agenda. However, the normalisation of politics often results in the exclusion of women, and particularly poor women, from platforms for voice and influence, such as political office, professional organisations and associations, and the formal labour market.

## Policy implications and the role of international actors

The findings from across the report point to key areas where international actors may best be able to support and strengthen women's voice and leadership in decision-making.

*Ensuring that the design of interventions and external support is context-specific is a priority.* While there are similarities within and across countries, the political and institutional foundations of both gender relations and the broader political settlement vary across time and place. Technical approaches that are not grounded in an understanding of how these play out in particularly localities *and* for particular groups of women (and men) will be ineffective. Investing in international actors' understanding of the context must be an integral and sustained feature of engagement across the political, social and economic spheres.

*Achieving change requires activists and donors to 'think and work politically'.* Increasing women's voice and leadership involves redistribution of power and resources, and thus is often met with resistance. Advances in gender equality are therefore mostly the outcome of political work, and donor approaches need to help and not hinder this. This includes facilitating strategic dialogue, trust and alliance building, including among unlikely partners, alongside support for women's collective action and oppositional (social and political) mobilisation. The challenge lies in achieving a balance between taking the strategic and pragmatic decisions likely to advance women's political interests, while maintaining the transformative goal in sight and not accepting trade-offs that unwittingly jeopardise or delay progress towards gender justice. For donors, working politically means investing in locally driven change processes and using international resources to leverage change and facilitate strategic coalitions in-country. Research indicates, for instance, that successful women's coalitions are those that employ 'soft advocacy' by harnessing existing networks, both informal relationships with male power-holders and established ties between elite women, and who strategically frame issues so as to circumvent conservative opposition (Tadros, 2011; Hodes et al., 2011).

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***Supporting women's collective action is strategic.*** Women's socio-political and economic mobilisation have been consistently found to be important to change the formal and informal rules important for their voice, access to decision-making and influence. Assisting collective action means recognising women's diversity and supporting them to define and organise around their priorities and interests. Women often focus on practical concerns initially, but their attention can shift over time to more strategic objectives that seek to change the underlying causes of women's marginalisation. External funders and implementers may also need to alter their own thinking and allow for multiple women's movements rather than just 'a' women's movement. Funders should also adopt a twin-track approach of supporting women's autonomous organisations, known to be important for more transformative agenda setting, while also helping women to exert greater influence in mainstream (i.e. male-dominated) organisations and policy forums where key decisions are made.

***Work with multiple stakeholders and invest in long-term relationships with partners.*** Doing so will help donors to select credible intermediaries, support substantive change processes, and build on organic rather than induced participation. Fostering both professional and grassroots women's organisations, and long-term relationships between them, is needed to ensure poor women's everyday needs and concerns inform national advocacy by elite women and to connect community action to broader socio-political movements. Women (and their funders) need also to build coalitions and networks with decision-makers and other stakeholders in a strong position to advance women's empowerment, such as core government ministries, universities, and the private sector.

***Women need to work both within and from outside the state to achieve change.*** Overall, the evidence suggests that engaging with state actors (and working within the state) is nearly universally required in order to protect and promote women's well-being, but that more transformational agenda-setting is often best accomplished in more independent arenas. On the basis of the particular country and issue, activists and donors will need to assess whether women's goals are best supported by working with public officials and building coalitions that encourage reforms from within and/or from autonomous women's movements exerting influence from the outside. It has been strategic, for example, for international agencies to support early efforts at women's social mobilisation in conflict-affected setting. Logistical and networking support has helped to get women to the negotiating table or in a strong position to influence peace processes through oppositional voice, and this has put them in a better position to influence subsequent constitutional reform processes and to have an ongoing political presence.

***Better understand and support women's political apprenticeships.*** Women need leadership and negotiation skills to navigate the particular formal and informal modes and forums of political engagement and decision-making in political and social space. Women can develop political capabilities and networks through a range of experiences, including civic associations and oppositional voice, having family members who are politicians or activists, student politics, and voluntary and professional work, as well as formal political careers in party or legislative politics, and through increased presence in cabinet and executive posts. Donors must recognise the different ways that women may enter politics, and that what women need to be better political leaders will also vary as a result. There is a need to invest in a better understanding and learning about what it takes to support women's political and leadership roles more effectively, given context-specific political economy conditions.

***Develop and support multidimensional approaches that address both the practical and structural constraints to women's voice, decision-making and leadership.*** Siloed and overly technical approaches, such as to microfinance, social accountability or women's leadership development, can achieve short-term, localised and more instrumental gains (e.g. increase women's access to assets, services, formal political positions). However, supporting women's empowerment and sustained change requires joined-up programming and complementary activities that explicitly seek to raise women's (and men's) consciousness, develop social capital and capabilities and change de facto norms. For example, access to assets, such as microfinance, is more likely to empower women when provision encourages group interaction between women and is combined with technical, vocational and/or legal training. Similarly, social accountability processes or political engagement by women can only be vehicles to advance women's interests if they are designed to address barriers to their meaningful participation, and will only lead to sustained change if processes are either linked to broader social movements or become institutionalised.



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