



REFLECTIONS

LESSONS FROM EVALUATIONS: BOOSTING WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

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INTRODUCTION

Although women's political participation has been improving worldwide - the number of women parliamentarians has more than doubled in the last 30 years - women continue to be under-represented in political life. As of 2022, only around one in four members of parliament (MPs) and 8 percent of the world's heads of State or government, are women. The proportion of women in local decision-making bodies is higher (34 percent), but still unequal. At the current pace of progress, it will take another 40 years to achieve gender parity in politics.¹

Target 5.5 of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 aims to ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making, including in national parliaments and local governments. Women's equal participation and leadership in political and public life is not only critical for democratic governance, but also essential to achieving the SDGs by 2030, promoting a world where the diversity of women's experiences is reflected in decisions that impact their lives.

Several countries have taken important steps to promote women's political participation, including through anti-discrimination legislation, affirmative action and special temporary measures.² While these initiatives have contributed to valuable results, women continue to face a number of barriers to political participation, including a lack of resources and capacity, frequent threats to their security, and entrenched social norms. According to a 2020 survey by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), beliefs and biases against women in politics continue to be very pervasive, with almost half of the global population perceiving men to be better political leaders than women.³

METHODOLOGY

These reflections provide a rapid assessment of evaluative evidence on women’s political participation, with a specific focus on the influence of social norms.⁴ The paper is designed to provide a balanced synthesis of evaluative evidence posted to the UNDP Evaluation Resource Centre and the UN Women Global Accountability and Tracking of Evaluation Use database over the past decade.⁵ Country-level and thematic evaluations conducted by the UNDP IEO and the UN Women IES were an important source, given their independence and credibility, as were high-quality decentralized evaluations commissioned by country offices. In total, the paper covers 95 evaluations from UNDP and 24 from UN Women. The paper also draws on seven external academic studies, in order to situate the lessons in broader learning about behavioural factors affecting women’s political participation.⁶

The emphasis of the rapid evidence assessment was on identifying consistent findings, conclusions and recommendations that capture relevant lessons for UNDP and UN Women. The analysis seeks to offer practical and timely insights to support effective decision-making, but it is not a comprehensive study of the general and scientific literature. The paper was quality reviewed by staff and senior management of the two evaluation offices.

CONTEXT

Guided by a history of international commitments to women’s representation in public life, UNDP and UN Women have long supported efforts to enhance the participation of women - as voters, candidates and elected officials – in political and communal decision-making processes.⁷ The strategic plans of both organizations (2022-25) acknowledge the need to simultaneously address the root causes of the inequalities underlying women’s limited political participation, by strengthening normative frameworks, policies and institutions, supporting positive social norms, and enhancing women’s voice, leadership and agency. The recently approved UNDP Gender Equality Strategy (2022) explicitly focuses on shifting discriminatory power dynamics by challenging biases around the unsuitability of the political realm for women.⁸

This paper has been written as part of the UNDP Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) 2022 Reflection series, in partnership with the Independent Evaluation Service (IES) of UN Women. It aims to contribute to knowledge around the UNDP and UN Women strategic plans, inform the implementation of the UNDP Gender Equality Strategy, and support its goal of having better data and analysis for policymaking.

AT A GLANCE – LESSONS LEARNED

1	Supporting the political participation of women empowers them to contribute to decision-making, promoting greater equity in society. Women's political participation can also help to overcome political divides.	2	Continuous exposure to women leaders in politics helps to challenge entrenched social norms, which remain the hardest barrier to women's political participation. In contexts where gender equality may be a particularly delicate issue, economic empowerment can be a catalyst.	3	Capacity development interventions need to account for women's potentially limited previous exposure and consider other roles women are expected to play in the family and society.
4	Quotas are effective in enhancing women's political participation when implementation is adequately monitored, and mechanisms for reporting non-compliance established.	5	The development of women's capacity and the inclusion of women in electoral lists are important but are insufficient conditions to enhance their participation in political decision-making and promote gender equality. Integrated approaches, aimed at gender-responsive political processes and institutions, are also required to overcome some of the challenges induced by social norms.	6	In a challenging resource climate, negotiating for thematic funding windows and leveraging grant opportunities helped to overcome some of the constraints derived from the projected nature of development work, enhancing flexibility and local outreach.
7	Partnerships with civil society organizations are important to ensure adequate outreach at community level and enlarge the civic space to sustain women's political participation.	8	Ensuring effective communication among national stakeholders, civil society and law enforcement is key to addressing the risk of violence against women engaging in politics, especially when complemented with other long-term initiatives.		

LESSONS LEARNED

1 Supporting the political participation of women empowers them to contribute to decision-making, promoting greater equity in society. Women's political participation can also help to overcome political divides.

Evaluations recognized that, if adequately planned, women's political participation projects play an important role in bolstering the agency of women, providing them with know-how and motivation, and laying the foundations for social change from a gender equality perspective.⁹ In transitional and post-conflict settings, women's participation in peace summits has been important to strengthen their voices, both as survivors, and contributors to solutions.¹⁰ Even though the number of female representatives has often remained small, hard-to-achieve gains can bring a strong message, contributing to changes in the beliefs and attitudes of individuals and communities.¹¹

Evaluations of both UNDP and UN Women programmes (e.g. in Georgia, Madagascar and Somalia) highlighted that stronger women's engagement in politics and decision-making, whether through formal or informal structures, resulted in a substantial increase in the approval of initiatives that promote education, health and community safety.¹² Evaluation findings reflect the results of some academic studies (including Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Beaman et al., 2010) which

proved that men and women differ in terms of policy priorities, and that, once elected, women leaders tend to invest more resources in securing policies that more closely pertain to women's well-being.¹³

In order to foster inclusion and ensure that elected women bring to bear a diversity of experiences, evaluations have highlighted the importance of working with candidates from different backgrounds, including ethnic or religious minorities, indigenous women and youth, given the often-noted need for renewal of the political class.¹⁴ Evaluations of projects working with female members of minority groups, however, acknowledged additional challenges in both advocating for their inclusion in political party lists (as occurred with Roma women),¹⁵ and overcoming the resistance and fear of candidates from different backgrounds to joining mainstream political processes (as occurred with Afro-Colombian women in the political stabilization process).¹⁶

Support to female councillors or MPs has contributed to bridging political divides. In several countries, including Nicaragua and Pakistan, women's caucuses became platforms to build consensus on priority issues for women, and to ensure that gender concerns were addressed through legislation, policies and programmes.¹⁷ In Moldova, female MPs united their efforts for special temporary measures to be adopted, including a gender quota on party lists, provisions for paternity leave, and a rule against sexist advertising.¹⁸

2 Continuous exposure to women leaders in politics helps to challenge entrenched social norms, which remain the biggest barrier to women's political participation. In contexts where gender equality may be a particularly delicate issue, economic empowerment can be a catalyst.

Evaluations provided evidence of several factors that continue to affect the ability of women to participate in political life. These include:

- **Knowledge barriers**, due to lower literacy and education levels, lack of skills or credentials, limited experience in public leadership roles;
- **Resource constraints**, including the availability of identity documents, income, transportation, time;
- **Psychosocial factors**, such as lack of confidence, inadequate support by family and other networks; and
- **Limited motivation** to engage in "political games", especially when other livelihood concerns appear paramount, and the participation of women in politics has often led to harassment. The perceived degree of toxicity can lead women to pass over opportunities or quitting their pursuit of them.¹⁹

Politics is still often seen as a "male arena", with entrenched social norms and expectations about the role of women as caretakers significantly challenging their participation. While public perception surveys mentioned in evaluations noted a reduction in *taste discrimination* (with more respondents stating their willingness to vote for a qualified female candidate),²⁰ *statistical discrimination* and *unconscious favouritism* have continued to influence judgements on what constitutes a "qualified candidate". Behind many of the aforementioned barriers lies what Eagly and Karau (2002) described in their pioneer research as "role incongruity", i.e., belief in prescriptive gender norms which do not associate the traits generally associated with leadership (such as strength and assertiveness) to be typically female characteristics.²¹ Women's political empowerment thus assumes great importance, as it has the potential to change people's attitudes towards female leaders. As inconsistencies between the female gender stereotype and the qualities associated with leadership diminish, so will prejudice toward women leaders.

Exposure to women in politics may initially have the opposite effect, however, where challenges to existing beliefs end up strengthening them because of *confirmation bias*. The experiment by Banerjee et al. (2013) shows that, unlike campaigns that explicitly confront gender stereotypes and tell people to overcome them, the actual, lived experience of having a female leader can more effectively change attitudes towards them (and willingness to vote for one).²² Evaluations showed the valuable results of working with the media to promote women's positive achievements in their news stories, which contributed to challenging public perceptions around social norms and overcoming stereotypes.²³

In contexts where gender equality is a particularly delicate issue, politics may be a disadvantageous entry point, as noted in an evaluation of UN Women work in Asia and the Pacific (2017) which suggested that expanding the programme scope to women's empowerment and leadership (beyond politics) would allow for higher acceptance and effectiveness.²⁴ Other evaluations showed the value of focusing on women's economic empowerment interventions as a catalyst and driver of participation, as this allowed women to become self-sufficient and raise their profile and status. Interventions promoting women's self-sufficiency through income-generation skills and financial support for economic activities were found to result in greater confidence, and facilitate women's increased involvement in local decision-making bodies.²⁵

Some evaluations noted that projects have not systematically engaged men to promote women's political participation, considered an effective strategy to influence beliefs.²⁶ The development of the HeForShe campaign by UN Women, support to parliamentary groups on women's rights which included male MPs, and/or outreach to (overwhelmingly male) traditional leaders, have all shown signs of being effective means to invite reflection on gender stereotypes and gendered power relations and, in some cases, reducing male resistance to women's advancements.²⁷ At times, however, evaluations noted the limited interest of men in participating in project activities, and commented on the insufficient attention of projects to challenging negative traditional attitudes, particularly when working with older populations.²⁸

3 Capacity development interventions need to account for women's potentially limited previous exposure and consider other roles women are expected to play in the family and society.

A high number of UNDP and UN Women interventions have focused on removing women's knowledge barriers to political participation, including through training and the provision of information materials in local languages, to ease the learning curve of candidates and newly-elected councillors and MPs. As remarked by the Corporate Evaluation of the UN Women Contribution to Women's Political Participation and Leadership (2018), communication materials need to be audience-appropriate for greater effectiveness, including the use of visuals and radio spots, and portray model female leaders to contribute to challenging public perceptions around the role of women in society.

Evaluations consistently acknowledged the need to conduct capacity needs assessments ahead of project implementation, which may reveal fewer knowledge differences between men and women than assumed.²⁹ Across contexts, evaluations of UNDP and UN Women support to women's political participation highlighted the following tools as effective for a more sustainable development of capacities:

- Training of trainers, including on women's leadership, knowledge of the electoral code and other laws;
- Opportunities for women candidates to observe the work of parliaments or local councils;
- Mentoring of newly elected female MPs, including through the development of informative brochures, weekly legislative alerts, and/or resource centres; and
- Meetings to celebrate elected women, which helped to maintain their engagement.³⁰

Evaluations show that a thorough understanding of context, including women’s time availability, is a key driver of effectiveness for capacity-building activities. The planning of training interventions needs to adequately account for the specific needs of women with children, setting activities at times compatible with childcare responsibilities and/or providing financial support to engage alternative caretakers. When this occurred, development interventions allowed all participants, including women without children, to better concentrate, for higher learning results.³¹ Evaluations also commented on the need for training to be delivered early in an election process, to allow for sufficient time to work with potential candidates.³²

4 Quotas are effective in enhancing women’s political participation when implementation is adequately monitored, and mechanisms for reporting non-compliance are established.

The adoption of special temporary measures, including gender quota legislation, has proved effective in improving women’s participation in national and local decision-making. Evaluations of United Nations programmes and academic studies cited by Bertrand and Duflo (2017) showed the overall positive effects of quotas and reserved seats for women, resulting in more women running and being elected.³³ While often deemed necessary to break through entrenched social norms, particularly in countries where women are de facto barred from official appointments, quotas may be met with resistance and create a backlash, with beneficiaries facing additional stigma and security threats, for which mitigation plans need to be defined.³⁴

Evaluations commented that, whilst changes to constitutions and laws are critical in removing discriminatory norms, implementation is frequently inhibited by the political “rules of engagement”, changes in power, and a lack of accountability of political parties.³⁵ An evaluation from Zambia showed that, without further elaboration of policies within political parties, it is difficult for ministries to hold them accountable, as any changes will be dependent on good will, and women’s fight to claim their rights.³⁶ For example, an evaluation of UN Women work in Egypt (2017) found that, despite all political parties being required to field female candidates, only eight of 376 women candidates made it to parliament, as most female candidates were put at the bottom of their party lists and many came from independent parties which fared poorly.³⁷ Experience in other countries showed that political parties were even willing to pay the fines rather than applying the quota system in the election lists. To mitigate this risk, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Election Law stipulated a certain sequence of placing candidates from the less represented sex on each list, and that lists not complying with these gender requirements had to be returned to the Election Commission. This led to an increase in women’s political participation, with 42 percent of candidates in 2020 being women.³⁸ Evaluations showed that support to the subnational implementation of constitutional reforms at all levels, for example through dialogue with media and civil society or judicial challenges to non-compliance, was an important area of work where United Nations agencies could play a larger role, working with national authorities on the oversight of existing norms.³⁹

When laws do not regulate placement on party lists, much work is required to ensure voluntary commitments to promote women in politics, for example through advocates with political influence within parties. These informal approaches focusing on the party level do not guarantee parity, but have been shown to be sometimes effective in moving towards it.⁴⁰

5 The development of women’s capacity and the inclusion of women in electoral lists are important, but not sufficient conditions to enhance their participation in political decision-making and promote gender equality. Integrated approaches, aimed at gender-responsive political processes and institutions, are also required to overcome some of the challenges induced by social norms.

Lesson 1 shows that an increase in elected women is an important pre-condition for more inclusive decision-making. However, equally important than the number of women elected is the opportunity for women to actually contribute to decision-making.⁴¹ Increasing the true participation of women in politics requires sustained support, beyond discrete periods in the lead-up to elections,⁴² as well as significant investments in institutional capacity to ensure that structures, mechanisms and processes are gender-responsive.⁴³ For that to occur, evaluations recommended that projects strengthen their focus on institutional processes and procedures, protecting the space for women to contribute, and making gender-inclusive considerations a default aspect of the approval process for laws, policies and budgets.⁴⁴ At local level, the creation of community scorecards (as devised by UN Women in Albania) was valuable to ensure gender-sensitive municipal decision-making, including an adequate and balanced prioritization of women's needs.⁴⁵

UNDP work in Kyrgyzstan provides a good example of a portfolio/ integrated approach, working on multiple drivers of participation. Greatly benefitting from strong women MPs in key leadership roles within the Parliament, the project was able to support the Forum of Women MPs to develop a Gender Equality Roadmap, and worked with the Parliament to establish the Speaker's High-Level Council on Gender Equality. These milestones were achieved in parallel to specific activities by the project and civil society organization (CSO) grantees, to ensure the engagement of women in the work of the Parliament, resulting in changes to laws to the benefit of women and girls.⁴⁶

6 In a challenging resource climate, negotiating for thematic funding windows and leveraging grant opportunities helped to overcome some of the constraints derived from the projectized nature of development work, enhancing flexibility and local outreach.

Women's empowerment and political participation are long-term issues which cannot be solved in a few months, and require more resources than generally available to United Nations country offices through single projects (often accorded at times of elections). Many evaluations indicated that the length of a typical project (about three years) was insufficient to bring about the desired change, including at legal and policy level, because of deeply rooted barriers to gender equality.⁴⁷ Evaluations also noted that the localized impact of leadership development work could be significantly increased, should opportunities for deepening and scaling up this type of support be routinely available between elections.

Provided that funding is made available continuously, single projects can be used to catalyse further investment. In Egypt, for example, a first regional workshop on affirmative action for women's political participation, supported by UNDP and the then UNIFEM in 2005, prompted a national discussion on quotas for women in elected office. This, in turn, led to the creation of the Centre for the Political Empowerment of Women and, in subsequent phases, the establishment of the Forum for Women Parliamentarians.⁴⁸

Despite the engagement of a few highly-committed donors, evaluations consistently commented on the scarce availability of resources, which often needed to be complemented by core funding.⁴⁹ Some evaluations of UN Women support to women's political participation recommended that they adopt a more comprehensive fundraising strategy for this area, with some country offices expressing concern that the dynamic nature of this work did not always lend itself to restrictive donor requirements.⁵⁰ Global thematic programmes that include direct funding for country programming windows (such as the UN Women/ SIDA Strategic Partnership Framework) were mentioned as positive examples of earmarked yet flexible funding that allowed for timely responses to emerging political opportunities. Grant-making modalities, such as those offered through the then Fund for Gender Equality, were also considered a suitable mechanism

to mobilize necessary efforts at the local level and reach marginalized groups through downstream work to address social norms.⁵¹

7 Partnerships with CSOs are important to ensure adequate outreach at community level and enlarge the civic space to sustain women's political participation.

In a context of resource scarcity and competing demands, evaluations emphasized the importance for UNDP and UN Women to work in partnership with other organizations, building on existing programmes and focusing on scale and sustainability.⁵² Evaluations clearly show the value of engaging with CSO networks to conduct awareness programmes and empower communities, through face-to-face meetings and national radio programmes.⁵³ CSOs with local presence and experience working with different groups drove better results and geographical coverage including peripheral and rural areas. Bottom-up, community-driven approaches also helped to garner community and family support for women's enhanced participation in politics and decision-making processes.⁵⁴

Evaluations also noted that programme partnerships with CSOs contributed to strengthening the engagement of the women's movement with national normative processes, including through an innovative communications for development project that linked the voices of marginalized persons with upstream policy dialogue through an interactive app.⁵⁵ By working with qualified CSOs to build long-term, trusted relationships with MPs and committees, the space created for such dialogue resulted in numerous opportunities for issues to be raised, and reforms proposed.⁵⁶ While the combination of grassroots empowerment and national-level advocacy is considered necessary to bring about change, some evaluations noted the (time and personnel) resource constraints that country offices face when maintaining direct relationships with smaller community-based organizations.⁵⁷

8 Ensuring effective communication among national stakeholders, civil society and law enforcement is key to address the risk of violence against women engaging in politics, especially when complemented with other long-term initiatives.

In numerous countries, the threat of violence to women leaders and candidates has significantly affected the scale and quality of women's participation in national and local decision-making. To address the issue of violence against women and threats to women leaders and human rights defenders, evaluations commented on the importance of risk analysis to anticipate, and plan for, potential backlash and resistance.⁵⁸ Since 2011 and until recently, UN Women worked with national stakeholders, including police forces and CSOs, to prevent and monitor violence through women's situation rooms. This helped to bring additional attention to this issue, although reports of physical assaults and threats against women voters and candidates did not disappear.⁵⁹ In Nigeria, the inclusion of police and Independent Electoral Commission desks within the women's situation rooms facilitated real-time incident reporting, with complaints received by phone directly dispatched to these officials.⁶⁰ In Egypt, UN Women secured women-only polling stations to encourage their safe participation.⁶¹

A UN Women learning exercise (2017) indicated that women's situation rooms could be too narrowly focused and costly, compared with other, longer-term initiatives. Advocating for legislative and policy reforms to instate electoral and/ or criminal penalties for violence against women in politics has proved challenging, however, with few examples of success (e.g., Bolivia and Mexico). Alternatively, the development of protocols and codes of conduct for political parties covering harassment, defamatory language and violence was deemed a valuable prevention measure.⁶²

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- ³ UNDP (2020). Tackling social norms: a game changer for gender inequalities. 2020 Human Development Perspectives.
- ⁴ Rapid evidence assessments (REAs) bring together information and knowledge from a range of sources to inform debates and urgent policy decisions on specific issues. Like the better-known systematic reviews, REAs synthesize the findings of single studies following a standard protocol, but do not analyse the full literature on a topic. REAs make concessions in relation to the breadth, depth and comprehensiveness of the search to produce a quicker result.
- ⁵ The UNDP Evaluation Resource Centre is available at <https://erc.undp.org/>; the UN Women Global Accountability and Tracking of Evaluation Use database can be found at <https://gate.unwomen.org/>.
- ⁶ External literature was sourced through a review of academic journal articles that apply a behavioural science lens to studies of diversity and inclusion, including women's political participation.
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