

Mentorship and Increased Participation of Women in Politics: A Review

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ABSTRACT

Promoting women's equal involvement in government is crucial for the functioning of democracy and the achievement of sustainable development and more equitable societies. Although efforts to address the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles have achieved some success, progress has been slow and inconsistent since 1995. Gender inequality continues to exist in terms of women's access to leadership positions at the local, national, and executive levels of power. This persistence of gender disparity goes against various global, regional, and national laws that grant women the right to equal political participation and representation as citizens. Moreover, women encounter significant disparities within political parties, which act as the gatekeepers to women's political opportunities and competitiveness. Consequently, the relationship between political change and social change is intricate. Political transformation alone cannot be effective without a corresponding shift in societal attitudes towards women. Conversely, achieving political change might be unattainable without first achieving social change. Therefore, ensuring social change is a prerequisite for bringing about political change, including achieving equal representation of women in formal governmental institutions.

Keywords: Women, Mentorship, Political participation, Gender disparity, Change

INTRODUCTION

Ensuring women's equal participation in government is a crucial aspect of democracy and the pursuit of sustainable development. Although there has been some progress in addressing the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles, this progress has been slow and uneven. Gender disparities persist in access to political leadership positions at the local, national, and executive levels of power, despite various global, regional, and national laws designed to promote women's equal political participation. Additionally, within political parties, which act as gatekeepers to women's political opportunities, significant disparities persist. In Africa, for example, only 24 percent of national parliamentarians and 21 percent of local government leaders are women, well below the global average of 20 percent for women in national cabinet positions [1].

The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) widely agree that achieving gender equality in political leadership is essential for achieving inclusive governance and addressing the needs and interests of diverse populations, including women and girls [2]. Despite the presence of numerous intelligent and capable African women with leadership potential, various obstacles hinder their aspirations and candidacy [1].

The journey towards gender equality in politics has been a lengthy one, with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) setting a standard of 30 percent minimum representation for women in public spaces back in 1990 [3, 4]. However, even two decades later, few countries have reached this benchmark [5].

According to the World Economic Forum Global Gender Index, women's representation in politics lags behind their status in other areas such as health, education, and the economy. Currently, women make up only 25 percent of parliamentarians and 21 percent of cabinet members. Furthermore, only 20.5 percent of parliamentary houses have female leaders. Although these figures represent some improvement from the global average of 11.3 percent in 1995, challenges persist in achieving gender equality in politics, which is critical for overall societal development and peace [5]. According to the United Nations, 'women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power, are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace' [6]. Thus, various international instruments, as well as national laws, emphasize the right of women to participate in the political affairs of their States fully and actively. For instance, the Nigerian Constitution provides that 'the Federal Republic of Nigeria shall be a State based on the principles of democracy and social justice ... and the participation by the people in their government shall be ensured in accordingly' [7]. The Constitution further provides that 'every person shall be entitled to assemble freely and associate with other persons, and in particular, he may form or belong to any political party, trade union or any other association for the protection of his interest. These provisions guarantee that both men and women are entitled to join political parties in Nigeria, and to participate in the governance structures of the country. More specifically however, Nigeria has implemented a 'National Gender Policy' (NGP), which commits the government to building a nation devoid of gender discrimination and guarantees equal access to political and social opportunities for men and women [8]. Aside these domestic provisions, Nigeria is a signatory to several international instruments that address gender equality in politics.

Gender Biases against Female Politicians

Gender biases against female politicians contribute to their underrepresentation. Electoral systems can influence the likelihood of women being nominated for office, with proportional representation systems generally nominating more women than single-member district systems [9]. Women are less likely to be recruited as eligible candidates, ultimately excluding women from the political process. Young women have also been found to be less politically ambitious than young men, which means they wait longer before entering politics [10]. What happens, however, when women actually try to break the barriers and take the plunge to become officeholders? Research shows that even once they run for office, differences still persist in the experiences of male and female politicians. Besides the patriarchal set ups and norms that differentially position men and women, stereotypes can be one of the most significant obstacles for female leadership. Voters have limited time and energy to devote to political matters; therefore, they rely on stereotypes to help them evaluate political leaders. Additionally, stereotypes play a significant role in how voters perceive female politicians, often leading to gender-based assumptions about leadership abilities.

Stereotypes can lead to a catch-22 situation for female political leaders, where they must navigate a fine line between exhibiting traditionally masculine traits to gain acceptance and avoiding being seen as overly aggressive or cold [11]. These stereotypes also affect how voters perceive their capabilities in representing various issues, further complicating their path to political leadership. However, if women do not exert masculinity, they are seen as too feminine to be competent leaders. In other words, female political leaders are always in a catch-22 situation. When female politicians face this double-bind, how should they act? In addition to personality traits, gender also plays a role in voters' evaluations of politicians' ideologies and capabilities in representing their interests. Voters consider women to be more liberal than men, leaving women less popular among right-wing voters than men are [12]. Similarly, gendered biases mean that female political leaders are also expected to be more capable of dealing with 'feminine' issues – such as welfare, healthcare, education and family – whereas men are expected to be better equipped to handle the economy, defence, military and foreign policy.

The Role of Mentorship in Increased Participation of Women in Politics

Mentorship programs can play a vital role in increasing women's participation in politics. These programs facilitate interactions between young women (mentees) and experienced women (mentors) in the public and political sphere. They include physical meetings, email exchanges, skill development through training series, and participation in political activities [13]. These initiatives aim to empower women to enter politics and address the challenges they face. Similarly, a planned mentorship programme should comprise a training series for developing

skills. This should be composed of several weekend trainings and other complementary activities across the duration of the mentorship. The weekend trainings should be centered on specific themes (such as: a preamble to gender equality, nationality and intercultural components, activism and intervention projects, democracy, equality and politics, as well as communication and mass media); and the activities developed should centre on the principles of non-formal education. The corresponding activities should comprise visiting of national structures, the national parliaments, taking part in political campaigns of indigenous female candidates, participation in debates, among others.

Similarly, the intervention projects aimed at enabling the experience of developing and implementing a project that promotes gender equality must integrate a gender attribute in all phases of the project cycle. The projects are expected to have a multiplying effect; hence, subsequent programmes that are developed under successive versions of the mentorship should be targeted at boys and men in order to involve them in the promotion of equal opportunities between women and men. These projects will be the result of the skills developed during the training and mentorship programmes [13]. In the same vein, there should be forums aimed at presenting the mentorship aims and purposes, in order to enable the women understand the objectives behind such mentorship. In line with this, successive forums will be held to present the outcome of the project, and also give room for further evaluation. This way, the participation of (young) women in the public and political spheres, as well as the challenges and obstacles to their active participation, will be discussed and addressed such forums. Mentors and mentees who are invited will be given the platform to speak in during the events. Finally, an online discussion forum should be created with the key motive of encouraging the communication between mentees living across different geographical spreads. The medium should be used for sharing information and inspiring the discussion around numerous topics relevant for the mentorship programme, publishing events and complementary activities, and consolidating the access to documents connected to the mentorship administration.

CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATION

The restructuring of formal political institutions must begin with constitutional changes, legislative changes, and specific affirmative action initiatives, such as but not limited to sex quotas, reservations, and party mandates when accompanied with proper safeguards. Political parties need to undergo significant change because they are essential to women's political participation and competitiveness. Women's access to appointed and elected posts in government is directly impacted by their creation or absence of a level playing field. Second, women leaders are given the knowledge and skills necessary for success through capacity-building initiatives inside established women's parliamentary caucuses. Meaningful (substantive) presence of women in leadership positions, or the perception of such representation, strengthens the impacts of role modeling and satisfies voters' need for performance responsibility, which raises public optimism and support for women's political leadership. Training should focus on key actors—mentors, gatekeepers and influencers, leadership models and networks, and understanding strategic influence and effective forms of social action for change. Thirdly, encouraging social mobilization and collective efforts plays a role in altering the character of the government and expanding opportunities for women's involvement. Although these transformations can be forward-looking, they also have the potential to advance conservative agendas, such as movements rooted in religion or ethnicity. Therefore, those responsible for policymaking and implementation should remain vigilant to ensure that these coalitions and movements, once activated, aren't co-opted for various agendas that conceal underlying anti-gender stances. This includes upholding traditional notions of women's roles, which limit their chances of attaining political leadership. Finally, establishing a society that is conducive to gender equality is a crucial factor in addressing the tension between increasing women's participation in leadership roles and persisting sexist attitudes. Gender norms and behaviors have a significant impact on women's experiences when running for and holding political positions. Even after election, these norms continue to shape their leadership experiences, affecting how they are perceived and treated by the public and fellow political figures. Inequalities stemming from social biases are reflected in informal regulations, necessitating more profound structural adjustments. Initiatives like mentorship programs, designed to address these norms, can act as agents of change.

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