



Socialist International Women

SOCIALIST INTERNATIONAL WOMEN

Regional Meeting
Niamey, Niger, 29 – 30 October 2019

Women's Participation in Decision-Making Processes - the challenges for a 50/50 World

DECLARATION

The power and influence of women on a par with men within decision making processes is vital to the achievement of meaningful gender equality and the creation of sustainable, peaceful and prosperous communities and nations across the African continent. Remarkable progress has been made in some regions with women at the forefront of local and national governance. However, there are also deeply worrying incidents of regression back to gender oppressive practices and much more needs to be done to ensure women's voices are not just heard but acted upon. Increasing women's participation in decision-making is urgent to guarantee that priority issues including women's human rights and safety, land rights, education and healthcare provision reflect the social democratic principles of just and fair societies which support and nurture all citizens.

The continuous challenges for women in a significant number of regions are perpetuated by disempowering cultural and legal restrictions which keep women marginalised or excluded entirely from decision making. This is despite the fact that women form a large percentage of the agricultural workforce and are the main contributors to the fundamental informal support systems which contribute to peaceful and socially nourished communities.

The collective voice of women offers perspectives that men may be unaware of and rural women often have unique knowledge on subjects such as the impact of climate change on agriculture and the availability of clean water sources. Fully engaging women in decision making regarding the environment and climate change could literally help save lives and protect our planet. Far too often women's opinions, needs and rights are absent from cultural norms, legal frameworks and government funding decisions. The impact of this disenfranchisement directly affects the sustainability of local and national economies and significantly contributes to the fragility of peace.

Women are absolutely capable of achieving parity democracy and gender equal power-sharing as evidenced by countries such as Rwanda, which attained the highest percentage of female parliamentary members in the world¹. It is time that women demanded their rightful place in decision making, pushing towards gender equal local and national political participation and engagement. Creating concrete measurable goals such as increased numbers of women signatories to peace-making treaties and more women holding key government posts are two ways in which gender inequalities can be challenged and measured. Initiatives which encourage women to participate in political decisions, such as child-care provision during decision making sessions are also essential in helping women become more politically proactive in their communities. With the support of locally based NGOs helping to increase the confidence of women within political life women can and do make gender equality a reality remarkably quickly and sustainably.

Another invaluable approach is engaging men and boys in dialogues which challenge outdated views on the roles and value of women, such as Women for Women International's Men's Engagement² programmes. It is critical that men are involved in the gender equality debate to help create the cultural will to promote and sustain the gender equality agenda for the benefit of all.

Africa Agenda 2063 gives hope! Its “aspirations reflect the desire for shared prosperity and well-being, for unity and integration, for a continent of free citizens and expanded horizons, where the full potential of women and youth, boys and girls are realized, and with freedom from fear, disease and want. No one will be left behind or excluded, on the basis of gender, political affiliation, religion, ethnic affiliation, locality, age or other factors. The African woman will be fully empowered in all spheres, with equal social, political and economic rights, including the rights to own and inherit property, sign contracts, register and manage businesses. Rural women will have access to productive assets: land, credit, inputs and financial services. Africa of 2063 will have full gender parity, with women occupying at least 50% of elected public offices at all levels and half of managerial positions in the public and the private sectors”.³

The Socialist International Women (SIW) works with the Socialist international members, to reach political parity by 2021.

Women, Conflict Management and Peace and Security Processes

The incidence of conflicts worldwide has increased dramatically, including across the African continent, making the need for skilled, sensitive and committed conflict management and peace negotiation processes essential for the sustainable peace of all citizens worldwide. It is now nineteen years since the presentation of the landmark UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) which emphasised the urgent need for gender sensitive approaches to peace-keeping and security processes and the importance of the participation of women within peace negotiations. However, in the last two decades women have been severely under represented and mostly entirely absent in peace processes, making up just 2 per cent of mediators, 8 percent of negotiators and 5 per cent of witnesses and signatories in peace deals⁴. Although there are notable exceptions, the vast majority of peace negotiations across Africa take place exclusively between men and the vast majority do not include any gender sensitive language or provisions within these agreements⁵.

Women’s input is urgently needed as research strongly suggests that including women in peace negotiations vastly improves both the durability and quality of peace⁵. Longer periods of peace allow communities to heal and re-build contributing to community sustainability. Peace deals held in place by brutal oppression will never be sustainable, but higher quality deals which build on mutual co-operation and inclusiveness have a far greater probability of sustained success.

It is vital to mention here that many women who participate in peace-keeping processes can face discrimination and those working on the ground/field can face physical violence and sexual violence. Better measures need to be in place to protect women when actively participating in peace-keeping processes.

The damage suffered by communities afflicted by conflict is heartbreaking with women and children bearing the biggest burden of suffering, violence and abuse, both during and after conflicts. There is an urgent need for peace processes to automatically include women to harness the unique skills and diversity of perspectives and solutions that they can offer. It is vital that women are present and influential to insist that the unique needs of women and girls are specifically addressed.

Often in areas of conflict traditional governmental structures are severely fractured making the cohesion of potentially isolated groups acutely important. In situations where men are absent from their communities women are the only ones left who can broker peace, but are disempowered to do so at immense loss to all involved. Formally recognising the value of female local community leaders is an essential first step in building the credibility and respect needed to ensure that women are active and influential participants in conflict management and peace negotiation processes. Only by

insisting that women are automatic decision-making partners with men, whether in peace-time or in conflict, can the positive influence of women be fully realised.

Historically across the world the beginning of creating gender equality in political decision making has been through informal alliances of women which grow in confidence and influence until they become powerful forces which can no longer be ignored. For this reason continuing to work together in solidarity, with support from partners including Socialist International Women, is an essential foundation to end the gender bias towards only men making decisions which acutely affect women's security and wellbeing.

Women and Land Management

Women's land rights are an essential element in creating gender equality because they directly affect a woman's human rights and economic empowerment. In some regions of Africa up to 60 per cent of women are employed in agriculture, so they depend on the land for their livelihoods, but nearly 80 per cent of tenure and ownership rights discriminate against women⁶ leaving them extremely vulnerable to poverty and suffering. Even where legal ownership may rightfully pass to women patriarchal cultural traditions mean that women may still be obliged in practice to hand over their land to a male spouse or relative. These gender oppressive practices undermine the human rights of women and reinforce the repressive ideology within communities and nations that women are less valuable and capable than men.

There are certainly signs of positive change, with campaigns including Stand For Her Land⁶ and the African Union Land Policy initiative pushing for increased women's land ownership and standing up for the land rights of women. These are vitally important and can provide frameworks for change which local women and NGOs can build upon to encourage changes in their own regions which will vastly improve their daily lives and future prospects.

One of the most urgent issues is amending legislation regarding land inheritance rights, ownership and tenure to allow women to inherit, own and work on land independently in their own names. Without this first step, changes in cultural attitudes towards women owning and managing land are far more difficult to challenge and change. The Socialist International Women asserts that increasing the number of women in political decision making positions of power will help ensure that women's rights in general remain at the top of governmental agendas and have proven repeatedly to create a powerful momentum for gender equality change.

In addition to gender equal land rights, women also urgently need good quality training and education to ensure that they know exactly what their rights are and how to enforce them. Women must also be fully equipped with the skills and knowledge to manage their lands effectively and to profitably market and sell their produce independently on a par with men. Initiatives such as providing training in farming techniques, financial and marketing training so that they can manage their businesses effectively and resources such as seeds and funding to kick-start businesses are essential in helping women to fulfil their potential as successful providers for their families and businesswomen in their own right.

Building solidarity between local women, creating networks and partnerships to share knowledge and resources are essential foundations to build the confidence and capabilities of women and increase their influence within their communities. Pooling resources, such as creating co-operatives of smaller farmers can also help in ways such as sharing transportation to markets, or access to mobile phone and internet facilities.

Working in solidarity pushing past outdated and unjust practices women can transform their lives and create a future that fully embraces meaningful gender equality for the benefit of themselves, their families and communities.

The Socialist International Women (SIW) calls on all leaders, Governments, Member Parties of the Socialist International, and NGOs with similar core values to the SIW, to urgently take action to address gender oppressive practices and legislation across the African continent with particular focus on creating gender parity in the recognition and active participation of female leaders in all political processes and decision making, including in peace-keeping and peace negotiation dialogues and treaties.

The SIW calls on governments to amend land ownership and tenure legislation and practices to allow women equal inheritance, ownership and tenure rights to men.

The SIW calls for urgent action to:

Incorporate gender quotas in local and national leadership candidate nomination rules and practices and promote gender equality in all political activities and campaigns.

Amend constitutional and procedural wording to include and promote the inclusion of women within decision making processes at local and national levels on all issues affecting their communities and livelihoods, with particular emphasis on conflict management, peace-keeping and security initiatives.

Implement measurable goals which encourage accountability for change to promote increased gender equality across all decision making processes, such as local and national tables detailing numbers and percentages of women decision makers.

Encourage solidarity between local women and women's NGOs to increase participation of women in local and national decision making with the aim of achieving 'parity democracy' both locally and nationally by 2030.

Revise land inheritance, ownership and tenure legislation and practices to support cultural changes which encourage and allow women to take ownership of their land both in name and in practice.

Support and provide funding for partnerships, alliances and co-operatives to share resources and encourage training and education initiatives which help women understand their land rights and equip women to effectively manage their land and profitably sell their produce.

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1. Women in national parliaments - <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>
 2. Women for Women International - Men's Engagement Programmes <https://www.womenforwomen.org.uk/what-we-do/issues/mens-engagement>
 3. Agenda 2063, The Africa we want - <https://www.un.org/en/africa/osaa/pdf/au/agenda2063.pdf>
 4. UN Women <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/peace-and-security/facts-and-figures> and The African Centre for Democracy and Human Rights Studies - Women's Participation in Promoting Peace & Security in Africa (Table 1) - <https://www.acdhrs.org/2018/07/women-participation/>
 5. Women's Participation in Peace Processes - <https://www.cfr.org/interactive/womens-participation-in-peace-processes>
 6. Stand For Her Land – Women's Land Rights in Africa - <https://stand4herland.org/resource/wlr-in-africa-infographic/>