

# Pathways to scaling up women's political leadership and influence in Uganda - Adopting Feminist Approaches



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## A) Introduction

This policy brief titled '*Pathways to scaling up women's political leadership and influence in Uganda: Adopting feminist approaches*' has been developed through employing an intersectional feminist lens, to assess the current state of play of women's political rights in Uganda and proffer possible pathways to address the barriers to women's political leadership and influence. This policy brief draws from the action research that was conducted by AMWA<sup>1</sup> and also several convenings held during 2021 to inform and shape efforts to advance gender equality, women's rights, and inclusive governance in Uganda.

## B) Background

The aspiration to advance women's political participation and leadership in all decision-making processes in Uganda, regionally and globally is rooted in numerous national, regional, and international frameworks including the Constitution of Uganda; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; the 2011 UN General Assembly resolution on women's political participation (A/RES/66/130); and the African Charter on Human and People's rights as well as Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want and the recently held Generation Equality Forum.

In January 2021, Uganda held its general elections, and out of the 556 seats in the 11th parliament, only 188 (33.3%) are held by women. Only 21 women won the direct seats, which demonstrates that without affirmative action, women would be severely marginalized from the legislature. Women's representation in the Ugandan cabinet progressed to 43.3% in June 2021 from 28.7% in 2016-2020; however, there is a need to translate the number of women in parliament into substantive representation and engagement in the legislature.

Hence efforts by Akina Mama wa Afrika (AMWA), other women's rights organizations, and feminist collectives to advance women's political leadership and influence will not only move Uganda closer to achieving gender justice but is also critical for inclusive development, sustainable peace, and ending poverty. While achieving gender equality and empowering girls and women is the aspiration of SDG 5, the benefits from the inclusion of girls and women are cross-cutting, paving the way to more inclusive, responsive and resilient democracies and economic justice.<sup>2</sup>

AMWA is also cognizant of the fact that, overall systematic barriers faced by women by virtue of their sex are aggravated by intersections with other identity markers such as class, sexual orientation, education status, disability, age, and marital status, which together heighten the barriers toward women's political participation. To that end, we employed an intersectional feminist lens to ensure that the development of leadership strategies is anchored in the recognition of these diverse gendered intersections and inspires inclusive, fair, and socially just leadership practices.<sup>3</sup>



## C) **Barriers to Women's Political Leadership and Participation!**

### **What is new or manifesting differently?**

#### **i) Violence Against Women in Politics**

During the recently concluded 2021 elections in Uganda, there was marked violence against women in politics. Reports of assault and intimidation aimed at women in politics were cited as a significant barrier to women's political participation. This in itself is also a form of discrimination against women in the political realm, restricting and impeding access to rights and freedoms based on sex and seeking to maintain unequal power relations between men and women.

Furthermore, while corruption is an issue that affects citizens regardless of their gender, women are often differently targeted and disproportionately impacted by it. The widespread practice of "sextortion," wherein women in political parties, rather than being asked for money in return for political nominations, are asked for sexual favors, highlights a distinct form of violence against them.<sup>4</sup> The pervasive presence of this sexual extortion of women exposes yet another form of harassment women face in public life. In Uganda, women interviewed confirmed that sexual harassment is prevalent and many women have withdrawn due to this.<sup>5</sup>

Violence against women in politics (VAWIP) is mirrored through sexual harassment, intimidation as well as state violence. The pervasiveness of sexual harassment has been problematized as the reason for the failure of women within elective politics.<sup>6</sup> In fact, most political parties do not have policies against sexual harassment, and this leaves women at dire risk of the consequences of sexual harassment. Moreover, the burden of sexual propriety is not deployed on men whose sexual fidelity is not used to judge their fitness for political office.

During the 2021 Elections in Uganda, spousal violence was yet another pervasive form of violence against women in politics, and women were also beaten up for supporting candidates different from their spouses. State violence was heightened in the 2021 "scientific" elections; it included

interference with social media, loss of sources of income, the use of tear gas, arbitrary arrests, and the murder of opposition groups. The use of the military to intimidate women leader's supporters was also cited and "drones" (minibuses with tinted windows) were used by security agents to blindfold, abduct, interrogate, and torture civilians.<sup>7</sup>

A growing number of reports from around the world indicate that as women step forward to claim their right to participate in politics, they are met by acts that encompass psychological abuse (both in-person and online), cyberbullying, physical or sexual assault, economic violence, and threats or coercion.<sup>8</sup> This phenomenon of violence against women in politics is a global issue and has serious repercussions for inclusive democratic societies. Violence cuts across all political sectors, including civil society, political parties, electoral processes, and parliaments, and affects politically active women regardless of their roles.<sup>9</sup> While acts of violence against women in politics are directed at individual women, they carry an impact beyond their intended specific target: to frighten other women who are already politically active, to deter women who might consider engaging in politics, and to communicate to society that women should not participate in public life in any capacity<sup>10</sup>.

## ii) Limited Financial Resources

Finance is the most prevailing challenge women face in all avenues of their lives.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, politics has become commercial in Uganda. Without strong financial muscle, women, especially young ones, struggle to find their place in politics. Added to this is a large financial disparity between female and male counterparts within the political space which in turn gives leeway to manipulation, causing women to become victims of sexual harassment and extortion. Those women who reject these sexual advances are then labeled derogatively and de-campaigned. The prohibitive cost of nomination fees has been yet another deterrent for women and the use of bribery to influence women's supporters is yet another obstacle. This is because of the high prevailing levels of poverty in Uganda where voters prefer financial benefit as opposed to economic justice. Vote bribery/purchase is indeed a despicable pervasive practice, which the female politicians had to contend with during their election campaigns. The limited resources available to women to participate in elections have sadly deprived Uganda of potentially great leaders. In the 2021 General Election, the only female Presidential Aspirant almost failed to get nominated due to lack of resources.

## iii) Gender differences in political media coverage

The media is a key player in agenda setting, shaping public opinion, and bestowing power by providing platforms through which to reach critical audiences. Present-day politics is strongly mediatized and voters rely almost exclusively on the media as their source of political information. Disadvantageous reporting by the media can hurt women candidates and directly contributes to the underrepresentation of women in politics. The association of women with private life, physical beauty, nurturing, and support roles can find its reflection in coverage focusing more on personal background, physical appearance, marital status, and children (or lack therefore) of women politicians. The predominant media images of men and women politicians in the media are likely to strengthen the association people have of politics as a masculine realm. This, in turn, can depress the political



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ambitions of young women and discourage the political elites and general electorate from selecting women, leading to continued underrepresentation of women in the future.

Further, the media continues to overly sexualize women politicians, labelling and using unsavory terms, which impacts women politicians' readiness to occupy mediaspace. Coupled with this, is the timing of most political talk shows which are often running late into the night and hence creating hindrances for women politicians to participate. The media houses have contributed to the dominance of men in media platforms, through the prioritization of men as panelists, who are consulted first to discuss key national issues, which serves to make them more visible than women. Yet women have consistently proved to be the vanguards of community resilience and equitable solutions.<sup>12</sup>

#### **iv) Unpaid Care work versus Political Leadership**

A critical barrier to women's political participation and leadership is the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work. It is one of the primary reasons that women cannot enter politics.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, decision-makers who oftentimes are men undermine the contribution of unpaid care work and therefore never allocate any resources for its recognition. Additionally, studies have also indicated that social norms often create preferences for women candidates with household profiles (e.g., married and with children), which creates a double bind for women.<sup>14</sup> Most women are usually tasked with the burden of taking care of their families with little or no help from their spouses, resulting in emotional and financial strain.

#### **v) The Larger Constituency Burden on Women MPs**

The geographical spread of constituencies for women MPs disproportionately burdens them as compared to the direct seats, which have been dominated by men. Affirmative action was a great initiative that established a mandatory opportunity and parliamentary seat for women in every district set out to increase women's representation, but its implementation has faced some challenges. Affirmative action has exposed women to a bigger role as compared to their male counterparts. Every elected woman leader at the district level has two or three sub-counties. The constituency burden is aggravated for women living with disabilities, who have to face multiple dimensions of this burden. This has further exposed the different forms and intersecting oppressions that women have to face. Women sadly face various forms of intersectionality which can be explained as a prism for seeing how various forms of inequality often work to exacerbate each other.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, women have been shunned from standing in direct seats, which are referred to as "men's seats" with narratives like, "we cannot have a woman MP and then have a woman as MP within the constituency. Where will the men be?" This has excluded many women from vying for these seats, given the mentality that they belong to men.

Political parties have also failed to implement gender policy in their constitutions. Parties like FDC (Forum for Democratic Change) and NRM (National Resistance Movement) have a draft gender policy that is yet to be implemented. Section 9(1) of the FDC constitution talks about the implementation of affirmative action of at least 40% in all structures while

section 42(1) of the NRM constitution talks about reserving 40% of all elective leadership positions for women. Unfortunately, despite these provisions, there is still a failure of implementation of these provisions at all levels within party structures. Most political parties prefer to have male candidates for their open seats at all levels in general elections leaving many women out of the picture.

## vi) The Female-Marriage Gendered Script

The differential treatment of women on the campaign trail, who are expected to be with their husbands, is a pervasive gender stereotype mentality, which portrays unmarried women as incomplete, and unfit; implying that a woman must have a man to demonstrate capability.

On the whole, differential treatment of women, which is informed by the female marriage narrative, disadvantages young, single women from vying for political leadership. This is because of the societal discourses that valorise marriage for women, and as such deem single women as incomplete and/or irresponsible. Young, single women are also trivialized as potential “husband snatchers”, again disregarding their professional capabilities. Most importantly, the focus on marriage obscures the engagement with core issues, on which women would prefer to emphasize in vying for political leadership.



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# D) Key Recommendations for Action

## 1. End Violence Against Women in Politics

- a) All actors must work to put an end to violence against women in politics (VAWIP) in all its forms including state-instigated violence, sexual harassment, and cyber-bullying through political will, law reform, and civic engagement. Women will only be able to fully and equally participate in political leadership if the political climate is free of violence, threats, and negative attitudes.
- b) The belief that violence is “the cost of politics” also requires dismantling masculine stereotypes of power, discriminatory party practices, and threats and acts of violence against women in electoral processes. It includes engaging men’s responsibility to end all forms of violence against women in politics; legislators must speak out against VAWIP in the media and other public platforms, and actors who obstruct women’s free and fair participation in political must be held accountable.<sup>16</sup>
- c) Political Parties should be required by law to adopt and adhere to sexual harassment policies and the national gender-responsive and equality policies and laws.



## 2. Scale Up Efforts Toward Gender Parity - 50:50 Representation

- a) Having pioneered the affirmative action (reserved-seat policy) in Africa in 1989 Uganda must continue to take bold and gender transformative action. Government must scale up measures to ensure gender parity – 50:50 representation in all elected positions and decision-making processes and structures.
- b) Political parties must be required to nominate equal numbers of women and men as candidates, develop and fund gender action plans and policies at the party level and eliminate all forms of violence against women in politics.<sup>17</sup>
- c) Women political leaders must advocate for a meaningful and progressive action plan with specific targets and timelines to achieve gender balance at all levels of the political and governance structures of Uganda.

## 3. Reconsider the Affirmative Action Policy in Politics

- a) The affirmative action policy should be backed with political will and commitment to gender equality. The Executive and Parliament should review the current electoral system and adopt proportional representation which will guarantee an increment of women in political leadership and their influence.
- b) Women should be encouraged to position themselves in all the seats available for contestation for leadership to break the attitude that the Woman MP seat is adequate.
- c) There should be an equitable re-organization of the large constituencies to divide the constituencies equally between the direct seats and the Woman MP seats.

## 4. Positive Media Portrayal of Women in Politics

- a) The media are crucial to the positive portrayal of women political leaders. They must highlight the positive contributions of women in politics and not perpetuate negative gender-based stereotypes which adversely influence public opinion about the role of women in public life.
- b) A legal desk must be established to handle matters of negative media representation of women and safeguard women's engagement with media. Political and civic actors must also engage with media houses to ensure that media propaganda against female aspirants and leaders is addressed.
- c) Political and civic actors must take initiative to educate citizens about the civil and political rights of women and the importance of women's participation in politics and decision-making.<sup>18</sup>

## 5. Transform Negative Gender Norms and Socio-Cultural Barriers

- a) Political will and collective action remains key to shifting socio-cultural barriers which limit women's political participation, influence and impact. Notably, evidence shows that countries with higher engagement of women in public life experience lower levels of inequality.<sup>19</sup> Women's engagement in leadership positions has also been shown to have positive correlations to a higher quality of education, health, and infrastructure projects, as well as a boost to women's empowerment and standards of living.<sup>20</sup>
- b) Political and Civic actors must use public platforms to demand nonviolence in both private and public spheres, as well as equitable distribution of domestic and caregiving responsibilities.<sup>21</sup>

## 6. Address Financial Constraints and Regulate Electoral Finances

- a) Parliament must undertake legal reform to regulate campaign financing, electoral costs, and the commercialization of elections in Uganda to help alleviate the challenges that women and other marginalized persons face due to limited financial resources. A special fund should be set up to support women with limited financial resources and women leagues should be strengthened through funding and technical support.

## 7. Foster Intersectional Feminist Approaches and Young Women's Political Leadership

- a) Political parties and government must create an enabling environment for young women's participation in political and decision-making processes rather than undermine their capacity, expertise, and agency to make valuable contributions. Young women's participation in formal politics is especially important, as they are already leading change on various fronts of the Sustainable Development Goals including issues like climate action and gender equality.<sup>22</sup>
- b) Political and civic actors must adopt and implement intersectional feminist approaches to strengthen women's political leadership and broaden their influence in Uganda. The recognition of the intersecting systems of oppression that undergird the barriers to women's leadership is key to addressing the systematic barriers against women's full participation in political and decision-making processes.
- c) Women Political Leaders must develop and strengthen cross-party solidarity and collaboration by participating in relevant commissions, committees, or caucuses that build continuity in legislative work to support women's political participation. In solidarity, they must advocate for financing, capacity building, and professional development opportunities for women.<sup>23</sup>



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# Conclusion

Everyone in society especially the government has a vital role to play in the adjacent need to achieve gender parity and enable women's full participation in the political and governance structures of Uganda. Women's equal participation in politics is a crucial step towards achieving gender equality, the SDGs, and progress for all. Moreover, it is not only empowering for the women engaged, but benefits their communities, countries, and the world as a whole. Therefore, to ensure progress for all, many different constituents must work together i.e. governments, civil society, academia, media, affected populations, the United Nations, and the private sector to dismantle the barriers and negative attitudes toward women's right to political participation and leadership. Uganda can close the gender gap, and strengthen women's political leadership and influence, through cross-cutting, intersectional and gender-responsive legal reform and action.



## Endnotes

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- 2 SDG 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls · Target 5.5.1 Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life · Target 5.c Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels.
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