

Women in Power: beyond access to influence in a post-2015 world



Women are estimated to account for almost two-thirds of the people globally who live in extreme poverty. Women perform two-thirds of the world's work, produce 50% of the food, but earn only 10% of the income and own only 1% of the property.¹ At the same time, all around the world, women are not participating in public and political life on equal terms or in equal measure as men.²

And evidence shows that we are still far from solving the problem.



Only one in five parliamentarians worldwide is a woman.³



Women hold only 17% of ministerial positions around the world.⁴



At the highest levels, women account for only 13 of 193 heads of government.⁵



In local government women make up only 20% of elected councillors; and they hold mayoral positions in only 10 of the world's 195 capital cities.⁶

2134

Based on current trends in representation, women will not be equally represented in parliaments until 2065, and will not make up half the world's leaders until 2134.⁷

Women from poor backgrounds, from rural and indigenous communities and from minority groups are particularly marginalised within decision-making processes and institutions.

The post-2015 process: a unique opportunity to put women's rights at the heart of the international development agenda

The global process under way to develop a new international development framework after the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) expire in 2015 provides an opportunity to address the lack of power that women have to influence decision making compared to men. To be successful the framework needs to take into account the obstacles to gender equality; how and why these are being perpetuated; and evidence of measures that have proved successful in addressing them.

1. United Nations Development Programme, 2011. Gender Equality: Fast Facts. New York: UNDP.
2. United Nations, 2013. The UN Millennium Development Goals Report 2013. New York: United Nations; compiled by an inter-agency and expert group on MDG indicators led by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat.
3. Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2013. Women in National Parliaments [online]. Available at: www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm [accessed 17 August 2013]
4. Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2012. Women in Politics: 2012 [online]. Available at: www.ipu.org/pdf/publications/wmnmmap12_en.pdf [accessed 17 August 2013]

5. UN Women, 2013. 'Facts and Figures: Leadership and Political Participation' [online]. Available at: www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation/facts-and-figures#notes [accessed 13 August 2013]
6. United Cities and Local Governments Women: Standing Committee on Gender Equality, 2013. The Equality Agenda of United Cities and Local Governments. Barcelona: UCLG. Available online at: www.uclg-cisdg.org/en/equality-agenda-united-cities-and-local-governments-uclg [accessed 17 August 2013]
7. Projected figure based on the assumption that progress continues at the current rate of change. Calculated using Inter-Parliamentary Union figures.

Why women's participation and influence matters

The effects of gender imbalance amongst decision-makers go beyond headline statistics. This deep-rooted and persistent inequality is a violation of women's rights and is undermining progress towards a world where poverty is eradicated and men and women are able to build sustainable and secure futures for themselves and their families.⁸ In a world where women make up almost two-thirds of people living in extreme poverty, it is neither just nor practical for their voices to go unheard at the highest levels of decision-making in our societies.⁹

Meanwhile evidence shows that where women are participating and influencing decision making, it is leading to more efficient, effective and responsive decisions for women, it helps progress towards gender equality and it helps transform the deep rooted social norms and attitudes that act as barriers. Research from India, for instance, found that after being introduced to the concept of reserving a number of places for women, voters updated their opinion on the effectiveness of female leaders in general and the second generation of female leaders were as popular as male leaders.¹⁰

Barriers to and enablers of women's participation and influence

A senior female politician in Cameroon told VSO that "the men will expect your seat if [they] arrive late (to political meetings)".¹¹ This experience sums up one of the biggest barriers faced by women as they seek to participate in and influence public and political life: a strong patriarchal culture and gendered social norms. This is perpetuated by the way that political systems work and the gendered division of labour that still applies in most societies. These barriers are then reinforced by factors such as the existence of violence against women and inadequate sexual and reproductive health rights for women. However, the experience of VSO and others working in this field suggests that crucial enablers for women to exert more influence in public and political life are: emphasising the work of women-focused organisations, cultivating support for women's participation and influencing amongst men and the wider community, and promoting the concept of active citizenship.

The goal, target and indicators needed to increase participation and influence

VSO acknowledges that simply incorporating the issue of women's participation and influence in public and political life in a post-2015 development framework will not transform beliefs, practices and policies immediately. However its inclusion will serve as a catalyst to fostering the political will and resources needed to achieve women's empowerment and gender equality.

Much has already been learnt from the experience of the existing Millennium Development Goal (MDG) framework. Through a standalone goal on gender equality and women's empowerment, the MDGs have succeeded both in drawing attention to these issues and stimulating a degree of action. However the post-2015 framework must address weaknesses identified in the current MDG approach, and go further, if it is to deliver truly transformative and sustainable shifts in the balance of power between women and men. To that end VSO is calling for the post-2015 development framework to include a standalone goal on gender equality and women's empowerment; a concrete target on women's participation and influence which goes beyond representation to address quality of involvement; and a set of indicators that use both quantitative and qualitative measurements of progress so that women's own experiences, public attitudes and norms can be captured.

To inform how this can be successfully achieved VSO, in partnership with Saferworld and Womankind, commissioned a comprehensive review of current measurement frameworks that exist in the field of political participation and influence.¹² VSO then reviewed lessons learnt from its 55 years of programme work relevant to the theme of women's participation. Thus informed, VSO suggests that the post-2015 framework can best tackle the discriminatory social norms that lie at the heart of inequality, and promote meaningful and sustainable shifts in the balance of power between women and men, if designed in the following way:



8. Gender inequalities have been attributed as a barrier to progress on all the MDG areas. See for example: UNIFEM, 2010.

9. United Nations Development Programme, 2011. Gender Equality: Fast Facts. New York: UNDP.

10. Haider, H., 2011. Helpdesk Research Report: Effects of Political Quotas for Women [online]. Available at: <http://www.gsdrc.org/docs/open/HDQ757.pdf> [accessed 17 August 2013]

11. Emilia Ngoa Kalebong, senior politician from the Social Democratic Front (SDF) of Cameroon, VSO Media Trip, Cameroon, May 2013.

12. VSO, Saferworld and Womankind commissioned a scoping study on approaches, indicators and proxies for women's participation and influence in public life. This study was delivered by consultant Sharon Smee in May 2013. Full report available on request.

What	Text	What it achieves
Goal	To empower women and girls and achieve gender equality.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides a catalyst for the political will needed. • Ensures appropriate resources are dedicated to achieving this aim. • Allows space for targets and indicators that address the unique issues facing women only.
Target	Eliminate discrimination against, and increase the participation and influence of, women at all levels of public and political life.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Puts equality in decision making and leadership at the heart of the development agenda. • Directs focus towards transformational change that goes beyond numerical representation to the quality of involvement.
Indicators	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Proportion of seats held by women in national parliament, local government and traditional governance structures compared to men; proportion of those seats held at a leadership, ministerial or cabinet level; and proportion of seats occupied by women from low income households and marginalised groups. 2. Perception amongst female politicians of the level of impact they have on decision making at the various levels of government. 3. Public attitudes towards women as leaders in public and political life. 4. Number of women's rights organisations working on gender equality and women's empowerment in a country; and these organisations' perception of progress made regarding women's ability to adopt leadership positions in public and political life. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide insights into whether representation is resulting in influence and power. • Combines both objective and subjective (or self-reported) measures to ensure that woman's experiences are captured, addressing a weakness in the current MDG structure. • Highlights areas where action is most needed. • Measures transformative changes in gender relations and attitudes. • Reflects need rather than the availability of data.

Integration and data collection

Whilst a standalone gender goal is needed, it is also important to ensure that measures of women's empowerment are mainstreamed across all the goals and targets contained in the post-2015 framework. This is in recognition of the fact that gender inequality spans all dimensions of poverty, and that the opportunities available to women to participate meaningfully in political and public life, and their capacity to do so, are affected by a wide range of issues, including in education, healthcare and livelihoods.

“Data not only measures progress, it inspires it [...]. What gets measured gets done. [...] Nobody wants to end up at the bottom of a list of rankings.”

Secretary Hilary Clinton, 2012

Last but not least, the implementation of the framework must integrate data collection in a way that is responsive to women's needs. It is not just the selection of indicators that is important,

but also who collects the data, where the data comes from, the scale at which the data are collected (for example, individual or household level), and how the data are interpreted. VSO supports the call for a 'data revolution' to address the current gap and constraints in the information available. Additionally all targets should be monitored using data disaggregated by gender, disability, age, ethnic origin, marital status and geographic location, recognising the interaction between forms of discrimination. This in itself requires resource, political commitment, and recognition that the individual or body collecting information, and the means of collection, has the potential to perpetuate or modify power structures within our societies.

The challenge of designing a single, universal post-2015 framework that is ambitious and transformative enough to produce real change for the poorest and most disadvantaged people is significant, but it must be tackled head on. As part of this VSO calls for an urgent step change in efforts by the international community to tackle the fundamental injustice and break on development that women's unequal influence in public and political life represents. The post-2015 process presents an opportunity for this that cannot afford to be missed.



© VSO Ben Landon

Kenya

VSO volunteer Wendy Henry and Sauti Ya Wanawake (Voice of Women)

Sauti Ya Wanawake, Voice of Women, is a platform aimed at increasing the influence of marginalised women and enabling women's communities to participate in political life. Since 2001, an initial group of 50 women has grown into a sizeable movement, with more than 6,500 members active in 42 satellite chapters in all six counties of Kenya's Coast region. VSO volunteer, Wendy Henry, is now supporting the organisation to expand and "bring the concerns of the membership to a wider audience."¹³

The society and cultures of the Coast region remain deeply patriarchal. Women and girls at grassroots level face complex and multiple inequalities with regards to the inheritance of property and land, access to schooling, and reproductive health rights. Few women of the Coast have any knowledge of their legal rights, mainly due to illiteracy. Traditionally women in the region are not expected to take decision-making roles at home or in local politics. Communities are, thus, noticeably divided and governed by strict gender demarcations.

The safe spaces created by Sauti through their **kongomanos** (gatherings) have allowed for the empowerment of grassroots women as decision-makers, leaders and facilitators of change. Women are beginning to penetrate oppressive male-dominated societal structures; some have become chiefs and village elders, others have joined schools committees and boards of trustees, and some are now sitting on peace and land committees. Ensuring this representation of grassroots women within local decision-making bodies is crucial in addressing the root causes of gender inequality and injustices in the Coast region.

With the power balance in Kenyan politics undergoing a shift via devolution to county level, Sauti is playing a key role in

ensuring women understand what this means for them. In June 2013, a four-day training course was facilitated for Chapter and community members, activists and Sauti's social auditors on behalf of Pact Kenya and USAID. The people who attended are now working out how best to maximise the participation and influence of previously marginalised women and give grassroots communities an increased role in governance.

Awareness-raising at community level has led to behavioural and social change. Forums and locally based educational activities are vital opportunities for women to learn about their rights under the law and to sensitise the wider community to Sauti's message. Men are encouraged to see that the issues raised are a shared responsibility that will benefit the family, the community and the nation. Chiefs, village elders, religious leaders and police are welcomed to Sauti's activities, and also represent government commitment – viewed as official power – to the women's work. In a deeply religious country with strongly rooted traditions, involving men and religious leaders is key to slowly changing perceptions and stereotypes about women.

These forums, like much of Sauti's work, allow both men and women to understand the effects of gender inequality and its implications on development, starting in their homes and communities. Men also witness first-hand the very real skills of the women who facilitate Sauti's forums and see the positive benefits brought about by women's increased participation. Bringing about cultural changes is a sensitive process, but using a bottom-up approach to raise awareness, and involving the whole community, addresses the root causes in a non-accusatory and democratic way.¹⁴

13. Muthiga, V., 2013. 'Kenya's election must give women the space to vote and stand as candidates for a true celebration on International Women's Day,' Huffington Post, February 2013 [online]. Available at: www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/violet-muthiga/kenyan-election-women-voting_b_2781993.html [accessed 13 August 2013]

14. Wendy Henry, VSO Volunteer, Case Study, 2 July 2013

VSO at a glance

VSO is different to most organisations that fight poverty. We fight poverty through the lasting power of volunteering. We send doctors, midwives, teachers and other skilled professionals to work with communities worldwide, sharing knowledge and expertise to save lives and create positive change. Most importantly, this change continues long after the volunteers have returned home, and local people are empowered to lift themselves out of poverty. At VSO, we believe in finding lasting, sustainable solutions to fight poverty. We can only do this by working together.

VSO works with and supports partner organisations at every level of society, from government organisations at a national level to health and education facilities at a local level. In 2012/13 we supported 725 partners across our six development goal areas of education, health, HIV and AIDS, secure livelihoods, participation and governance, and disability. This was achieved through a range of interventions including international volunteers, national volunteers, youth volunteers, small grants and international study tours.