

What interventions are required to achieve gender balance in political representation at the local government level?

Executive Statement

Women remain underrepresented in local government politics which offers men an unfair advantage, ultimately overshadowing women in decision-making. It also implies that issues that uniquely affect women may not be prioritised during planning and budgeting. To attain gender parity in political representation at the local government level, Government should design and implement a mentorship program, create a special fund for female political contenders, and launch campaigns to shift the harmful social norms.

Introduction

Equal participation of women in local decision-making processes is critical for prioritising women's needs in local governments (LGs) agendas and attainment of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) (UN WOMEN, 2018). In Uganda, LG councils have powers enshrined in the LG Act, 1997 to make and implement development plans based on locally determined priorities; make, approve and execute LG budgets; raise and utilise resources according to their priorities; and make ordinances and bye-laws, among other roles (GoU, 1997). Therefore, women's participation and representation in LG councils open up avenues to enter arenas of political decision-making and advance women's interests (Asiyati, 2016).

Uganda adopted the Sustainable Development Goals and was one of the first countries to integrate them in its National Development Plan. Under Goal 5, countries commit to promoting and guaranteeing women equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making. Specifically, indicator 5.5.1(b) recognises the need for gender balance in political decision making in LGs. However, women constitute 46 percent of the total elected representatives in Uganda's LGs. They are grossly underrepresented in the top most position (district Chairperson), whose influence on decision making in LGs is weighty (UBOS, 2017). Such under-representation of women at different governance levels amounts to a severe democratic deficit (UN WOMEN, 2018).

The Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) in 2017 conducted a baseline study in which SDG indicator 5.5.1(b) was tracked for the first time. However, the baseline study presents remarkable scope limitations. First, UBOS analysed the 2016 election data for the district (LCV), municipality (LCIV) and the sub-county LG levels and did not measure the change between 2011 and 2016. Second, the most recent elections data—for 2019—for the parish level (LCIIs) and village level (LCI) were not available

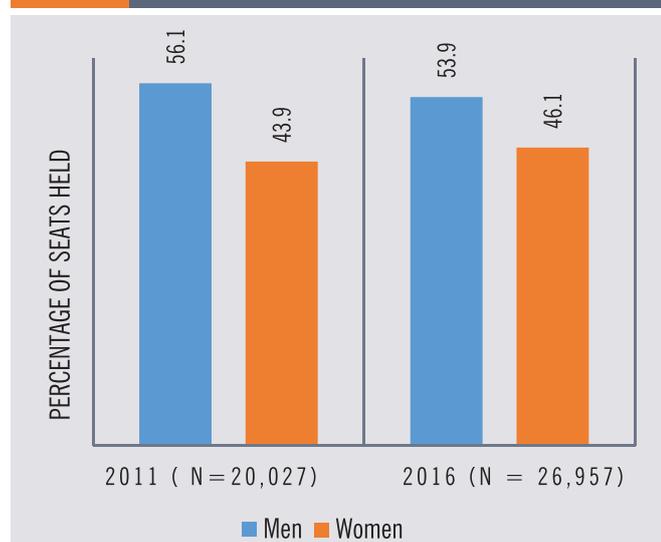
at the study time. Third, the baseline survey was conducted in only two districts (Kamuli and Wakiso)—these are too few to form a representative sample of LGs in Uganda. As such, a follow-up study was conducted in 2020 with the view to address the gaps in the baseline study. The follow-up study's specific objective was to update and track progress towards attaining gender parity in political representation at the LG level. This policy brief identifies interventions required to achieve gender balance in elective politics in the country.

Methods

The policy brief is an extract from a study on "**Women's Participation in Politics at the Local Government Level in Uganda**" (EPRC Occasional Paper No 53), which was undertaken using sex-disaggregated secondary election data obtained from the Electoral Commission for the following election cycles: Local Government (2011); Local Government (2016); and LCII and LCI elections (2019). This was complemented by primary survey data collected through key informant interviews with political leaders at the LG levels and focus group discussions with community people. The survey was conducted in September 2020 in Gulu, Nwoya, and Pader in the North; Napak and Moroto in Karamoja sub-region; Pallisa and Bugiri in the East; and Kiryandongo in the West. The key findings, conclusion and priority actions for policy consideration are presented in the sequent sections.

Uganda is yet to achieve gender parity in access to political decision making in LG.

Progress towards attaining gender parity in political representation at the LG level (SDG indicator 5.5.1(b)) is tracked based on the percentage of total elected positions in LGs held by women (UN Women, 2017). Findings indicate that men predominantly occupy political positions in LGs, but with some notable progress towards gender parity. The percentage of seats held by women in LG increased by two (2) percentage points to 46% in 2016

Figure 1 Percentage of elective political positions held by women in local Government

Source: Electoral Commission; 2011 & 2016 Local Government Elections

from about 44% in 2011 (Figure 1).

Men disproportionately occupy more seats for all categories of openly contested positions at higher LG administrative levels. The highest political office in the district is that of the District Chairperson; the percentage of district chairpersons accounted for by women has remained miserably low (> 1%). District Chairpersons are critical in decision making since they preside at meetings of the executive committee; thus, the gender inequality in occupancy of high-level offices means that women may not significantly contribute to decision making in LGs. It is further noted that women account for just one percent (1%) of the total seats openly contested, a sign that women are not yet able to compete favourably with men (Table 1).

Table 1 Distribution of elective positions held by men and women in local Government

Elective position (openly contested seats - Available for both males & females)		2011			2016		
		Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total
District Chairpersons	Count	111	1	112	110	1	111
	Percent	99.1	0.9	100.0	99.1	0.9	100.0
District/City Directly Elected Councillors	Count	1,312	24	1,336	1,366	23	1,389
	Percent	98.2	1.8	100.0	98.3	1.7	100.0
Municipality/City Division Chairpersons	Count	25	2	27	35	4	39
	Percent	92.6	7.4	100.0	89.7	10.3	100.0
Municipality Directly Elected Councillors	Count	367	11	378	565	13	578
	Percent	97.1	2.9	100.0	97.8	2.2	100.0

Subcounty/Town/Municipal Division Chairpersons	Count	1,263	23	1,286	1,933	31	1,964
	Percent	98.2	1.8	100.0	98.4	1.6	100.0
Subcounty/Town/Municipal Division Directly Elected Councillors	Count	7,082	79	7,161	6,666	51	6,717
	Percent	98.9	1.1	100.0	99.2	0.8	100.0

Source: Electoral Commission; 2011 & 2016 Local Government Elections

Similarly, at lower LG levels (parish and LC/village), there is no gender balance in political representation. Women account for about 30 percent of the total membership of parish councils (Table 2) which is below the mandatory one-third of the membership of each LG council as provided for in the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda. With the advent of the Parish Development Model (PDM), parishes are the lowest unit of planning for service delivery and poverty alleviation in LGs. Therefore, positioning women in parish councils becomes vital in ensuring that gender empowerment and equity concerns are adequately mainstreamed in development projects. One particular elective position dominated by women (73.5%) is Secretary for Finance, suggesting that women are generally trusted as handlers of public finances.

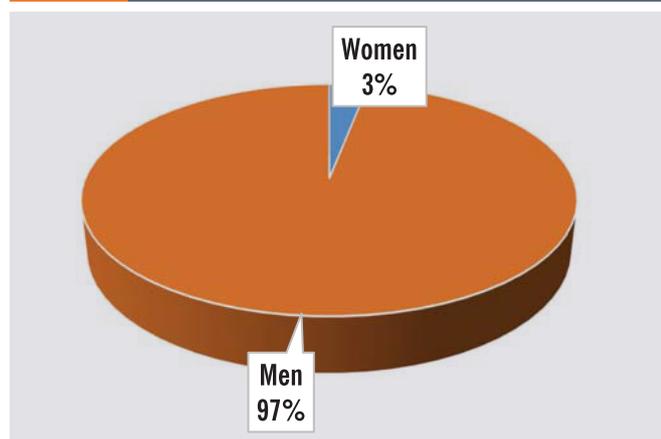
Table 2 2019 parish councils composition by sex

Elective position (openly contested seats - Available for both males & females)	Men		Women		Total valid observations
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	
LCII Chairperson	5,175	93.5	361	6.5	5,536
General Secretary	4,714	83.7	921	16.3	5,635
Secretary for Finance	1,477	26.5	4,092	73.5	5,569
Secretary for Information, Education and Mobilisation	3,979	71.4	1,597	28.6	5,576
Secretary for Older Persons	3,902	91.6	359	8.4	4,261
Secretary for Production and Environmental Protection	3,329	61.0	2,130	39.0	5,459
Secretary for PWDS	3,508	82.3	753	17.7	4,261
Secretary for Security	5,234	96.0	217	4.0	5,451
Secretary for Women Affairs	239	4.7	4,803	95.3	5,042
Secretary for Youth	4,202	91.5	391	8.5	4,593
Vice Chairperson/ Secretary for Children Welfare	4,275	74.9	1,433	25.1	5,708
<i>All positions (including reserved seats for women only)</i>	40,034	70.1	17,056	29.9	57,090

Source: Electoral Commission; 2019 parish council elections

Compared to parish councils, results from the LCI/village Chairpersons elections indicate an even more pronounced gender imbalance; about three percent (3%) of the elected LCI Chairpersons are women (Figure 2). This means more intervention is desirable to increase the participation of women in politics right from the lowest to the highest LG levels.

Figure 2 2019 LCI/village Chairpersons by sex



Source: Electoral Commission; 2019 LCI/Village Chairpersons elections

The gender imbalance in political representation in LGs is explained by both internal and external factors, particularly the lack of or limited control over resources and fear of failure.

The most frequently cited reasons by political leaders for the low participation of women in politics are; women have a tendency of underrating themselves and hence shy away from participating in politics (reported by 42% of the individual respondents), some husbands refuse their wives to participate in politics (reported by approximately 40% of the respondents). Women fear competing with men for directly elected positions (reported by about 27% of the respondents).

The reasons mentioned by FGD participants are similar to those cited by the key informants. The top four are: lack of or no control over the money needed to facilitate the campaigns, fear that they (women) are not good enough to convince the voters, unsupportive husbands who believe that politics will make their wives disrespectful to them, and the general public belief that men are better leaders than women. The latter view (social norm) discourages some women from contesting for political leadership positions where men are contenders.

Table 3 Top ten reasons (community views) that limit women's participation in LG politics

Reasons that limit women's participation in politics	% FGDs reporting (n=65)
Lack of money to facilitate the campaigns - politics is highly monetized, yet men usually control resources	69.2
Fear, low self-esteem & shyness – some women lack skills in public speech & fear that they may not be able to convince voters	56.9

Reasons that limit women's participation in politics	% FGDs reporting (n=65)
Unsupportive husbands - men discourage or stop their wives from contesting for fear that when they win, they will become disrespectful	56.9
Culture & the belief that men are better leaders discourage women	50.8
Low levels of education attainment	47.7
Overburdened by care work and have no time to engage in politics	33.9
Beliefs that women cannot handle challenging issues and make key decisions independently	18.5
Fear of domestic violence that is likely to ensue from husbands	15.4
Fear of failure - women are afraid that if they contest, they might lose, or if they win, they may fail to serve the people satisfactorily	13.9
For so long, politics has been dominated by men, so women fear to race against already established male opponents	12.3

Source: 2020 Women in Local Governments Survey – Key informant interviews

The finding regarding the lack of money to facilitate campaigns is in line with Kakumba (2010) conclusion that poverty had reinforced the widespread 'monetisation' of local elections - those with money buy their way into power using material things like sugar, soap and salt. This could partly explain why leaders may not feel obliged to represent their communities effectively after bribing their way into office.

Conclusion

Although Uganda is yet to attain gender parity in political representation at the local government level, the two percentage points increase in the proportion of total seats held by women between 2011 and 2016 is a clear sign that soon there will be equal representation.

Priority actions for policy consideration

- Design and support implementation of a mentorship program:** State and non-state actors should design a mentorship program to build women's confidence and interest in the contest for political positions. The mentees would aspire to become politicians, while the mentors must be women with successful political careers. Men should be encouraged to participate in the mentorship program. The program should help women understand that holding a political post is a call to community service that should never compromise domestic relations.
- Create a special fund for women who wish to join politics:** Given that lack of or no control over resources (especially finances) is one of the critical limitations to participation in politics, the Government should create a special fund where women who wish to join politics can access credit at a subsidised interest rate. Better

Recent Policy Briefs

Uganda needs to increase domestic resources to finance gender equality and women's empowerment interventions
Issue No. 126 November, 2020

Uganda's performance towards tracking budget allocations for gender equality and women's empowerment
No. 125 November, 2020

"The burden of physical gender based violence in Uganda"
No. 121 May 2020

still, to level ground for both men and women, Governments should demonetise politics – Political contestants found guilty of "buying votes" should face the law.

- c) **Launch campaigns using persuasive storytelling to shift social norms:** Campaigns through storytelling to change attitudes and beliefs about women's political participation has been tested and proven effective in some countries (Burundi, Rwanda, Somalia and Sudan). Mass media campaigns using radio, social media, and events should allow successful women leaders to share experiences (success stories).

References

- Asiyati, L. C. (2016, August). Women in Local Government: A Potential Arena for Women's Substantive Representation. *15*(13). Retrieved from <https://www.cmi.no/publications/file/5930-women-in-local-government-potential-malawi.pdf>
- GoU. (1997). *Local Governments Act 1997*. Kampala: Government of Uganda.
- Kakumba, U. (2010). Local government citizen participation and rural development: Reflections on Uganda's decentralisation system. *Internal Review of Administrative Sciences*, *76*(1), 171-186.
- UBOS. (2017). *Women in Local Government: Baseline Statistics for Local Council Levels III-V in Uganda*. Uganda Bureau of Statistics.
- UN Women. (2017). *SDG 5 Meta Data*. UN Women.
- UN WOMEN. (2018). *Women's Political Participation in Local Government*. international Knowledge Network of Women in Politics (iKNOW POLITICS).

The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Economic Policy Research Centre (EPRC) or its management.

Copyright © 2021

Economic Policy Research Centre

EPRC developed this policy brief with technical support from UN Women and with financial support from the EU- UN Spotlight to eliminate violence against women and girls and harmful practices, Embassy of Sweden, and the Austrian Development Cooperation in Uganda

The Economic Policy Research Centre (EPRC) is an autonomous not-for-profit organization established in 1993 with a mission to foster sustainable growth and development in Uganda through advancement of research –based knowledge and policy analysis.

Learn more at:



www.eprcug.org



TWITTER: @EPRC_official



www.facebook.com/EPRCUGanda



eprcug.org/blog

Address:

Economic Policy Research Centre
51, Pool Road, Makerere University Campus,
P. O. Box 7841 Kampala, Uganda
Tel: +256414541023/4 Fax: +256414541022
Email: eprc@eprcug.org, Website: www.eprc.or.ug