

ISLAND POSITIONS

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Women and youth: Accentuating critical voices in civic participation

Executive summary

This policy brief was written based on an extract from the Political Economy Analysis research conducted by Gorée Institut for the countries of Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali. The purpose of the research was to identify the foundational formal and informal factors which weigh in to weaken civic voices that create barriers for women and young leaders participation in political processes. Women and young people are still marginally represented in political processes across the African continent and particularly in the Sahel region. As a way of ensuring a vibrant democratic space is created to allow all stakeholders to participate in building peaceful and democratically stable societies, it is pertinent that all stakeholders are fully represented to participate in dialogue as well as local decision making on matters of policy. The study shows that existing tensions between political and civil actors based on competing interests has contributed to muffling the civic voices of women and young political leaders. This has consequentially negatively contributed to their marginalization therefore perpetuating the suppression of democratic freedoms and contributing to bad governance.

The study used a mixed method of interviews and FGD's for data collection as well as extensive literature review to analyse the data. The respondents included women and youth selected from the three case studies.

The critical findings of the study suggest that;

- there is an overwhelming consensus among respondents regarding an evidential lack of

commitment by their respective governments to fully implement international gender equality standards ratified to strengthen the civic voices of women and youth.

- Further evidence from the study shows that young people are perceived by political leaders as lacking in knowledge, inexperienced and incompetent to proffer evidence-based policy suggestions, and also lack wisdom and understanding to play leadership role within their respective constituencies.
- advocating for programs that will deconstruct the barriers and increase the opportunities for young leaders and women positively adding value in their participation in political processes.

Recommendations

- Key political institutions, including legislatures, political parties, electoral management bodies and local government bodies, can facilitate to engage and build the capacities of youth and women by nurturing their political aspirations more proactively.
- Inclusion of young people and women in adopting laws and mechanisms that can hold government accountable in issues concerning good governance is crucial to promote change and widening civic spaces.

INTRODUCTION

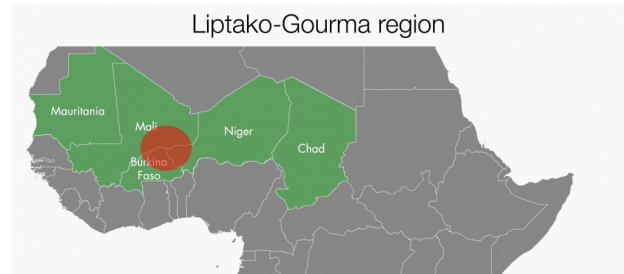
The study was conducted based on the Power of Dialogue program which was designed to contribute to peaceful democratic space and inclusive, responsive and representative political decision-making at all levels of political pyramid. The active participation of women and youth in civic spaces creates room for enabling democratic practices to replace built in patron-client networks thereby allowing civic spaces to be vibrant. This can only be achieved by tackling the myriad social, cultural and economic factors that are an impediment to the empowerment of marginalized groups. By ensuring equitable opportunities for all to contribute to political processes, young people and women can take advantage of raising their concerns by getting the support from institutions and political actors championing for good



governance.

This multi-stakeholder involvement can contribute to positively influencing aspiring women and young leaders towards inclusive and peaceful political change and transformation in Africa. Women and youth are critical in bringing about which was designed to contribute to peaceful democratic space and inclusive, responsive and representative political decision-making at all levels of political pyramid. The promotion of political stability and good governance in West Africa greatly depends on instilling the culture of creating civil spaces that are open, inclusive, and transparent. Political discourse that includes the voices of young leaders and women as agents of both social and economic development and putting them in the forefront of political ownership as a way of ensuring their participation has a direct impact on

political processes. However, this group of stakeholders is usually marginalised or underrepresented in political participation. The implications of the study reflect the need to proffer pro-youth and pro-women policy implications and formulation. It is therefore important to campaign and implement political



goodwill for the civic voices of these groups to be amplified.

Contextual analysis: The case of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso

The three West African states namely Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger have common political features with similar colonial experience at different stages in their respective political history. The countries share a common border in the geographical axis of Liptako Gourma region – a region known as an intermingling security hotspot, with porous border crossing points, organized crimes, banditry and across border community conflicts. Like many countries in the sub-region, these countries have suffered periods of social, economic and political transformation and challenges to attain the current state of their respective democratic status. The patrimonial culture inhibits enjoying the rights to Freedom of Expression as guaranteed by Article 19 of the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and Article 9 (2) of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR).

For several years, they have been confronted with multifaceted crises and security threats as well as repeated phases of abuse of the democratic system by state authorities. Throughout their respective post-independence political history, their respective political economic policies have

not been able to get them out of poverty, despite being geo-politically situated in one of the richest parts of the world according to the World Bank assessment.

It was also noted that the three countries are known to be highly patriarchal, characterized by inequalities and gender imbalances with discrimination against women and young people. They are burdened with geopolitical and developmental impediments including widespread poverty, a worsening security situation, historic power imbalances and political patronage systems that mostly drive political process with youth and women bearing the burden of these complex social, political and economic challenges. In these countries, as pointed by majority of respondents, women and youth have taken to the streets several times demanding transparency and accountability, respect for the rule of law as well as respect for pro-women and youth policies. The women and youth constituency in Africa is too large to remain on the margins of the democratic process therefore it is an opportunity to proactively advocate for better engagement with this group as democratic stakeholders. States and others policy makers failure to engage them effectively in political processes continues to result in lack of trust, collective power sharing and empowerment of marginalized groups.

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights enshrines the principles of non-discrimination and equal enjoyment of political rights, including the right of women and men to take part in the government of their country. Effective participation in politics and decision-making is a fundamental human right guaranteed under global, continental and national legal instruments. “Data collected for the study suggests that social norms such as patriarchy and socio-cultural practices against women are important predictors which hinder youth and women’s participation.” Poor governance is a driving factor of instability and insecurity and the participation of youth and women remain very limited.

“there was an overwhelming consensus among respondents regarding an evidential lack of commitment by their respective governments to fully implement their respective international gender equality standards

ratified to strengthen the civic voices of aspiring women and young people”.

Overview of the research

The main objective of the study was to assess why the civic voices of women and young leaders is weak in political participation and how this impacts on good governance and democratic stability. It is to the advantage of states that their actual and equal involvement in the governance of the communities they belong to whether via elective, appointive or merited positions is encouraged. The research aimed to investigate how their exclusion from decision-making processes has been influenced by a range of foundational, formal and informal factors, thereby resulting in intermittent social and political tensions within civic space. The methodology used to conduct the research was primarily a mixed method of both qualitative and quantitative analysis with diverse range of community members involved as respondents from the three countries. The need to engage women and youth proactively in political processes is necessitated by the fact that there is a significant disparity between those deciding policy and those who must bear its effects. This is mainly attributed to senior leadership and institutions on the continent.

| Mali context

The situation in Mali vis a vis democratic and civic spaces as reported by the world bank is considered as an epicentre of instability based on the recent unconstitutional transfer of power by the military as well as the occupation in the northern part of the country by armed groups. A transition government is in place pending organizing for democratic elections. This situation has impacted on efforts to integrate young leaders and women into the democratic space.

| Niger context

Based on existing reports Niger too has experienced political transformations with various non-state actors challenging the existing democratic space since the return of multi-party democracy. However, during the covid-19

pandemic the government used the opportunity to ban assemblies which inadvertently affected how young leaders and women could reach out to their respective constituents.

Burkina Faso context

Burkina Faso is experiencing several terrorist attacks especially in the northern part which borders Mali therefore highlighting community tensions forcing security forces to declare a restriction of movement and assembly. A coup d'état took place as recently as January 2022 consequently, groups such as youth and women are directly affected as the civic spaces, they seek to be created for them are further reduced.

“Civic space is the foundation for civil society to make its contribution to society, provoking discussion and debate, advocating for a more inclusive society, providing services, building community spirit and challenging those in authority on the decisions they make.”

Presentation of Research findings

- The political economic analysis shows that young people are perceived by political leaders as lacking in knowledge, are inexperienced and generally incompetent to proffer evidence-based policy suggestions. Further stereotypes perpetuating this situation on lack of wisdom and understanding to engage in leadership role within their respective constituencies additionally disadvantages young people and women.
- It also emerged that a multitude number of women and young people have dedicated significant degree of time, energy and human resources to represent the voices of other women and young people in the public decision-making platforms through various mainstream and social media platforms. However, the result shows that their voices are hardly valued, their concerns mostly not taken into consideration and their policy suggestions are mostly ignored.
- Despite government attempts to curtail

freedom of movement, freedom of association and freedom of speech as enshrined in international human right instruments, the research found that civic groups continue to remain strong driving force towards strengthening civic voices of women and youth.

- Due to social norms that are predominantly patriarchal women and youth face significant obstacles that hinder their political participation.

One of the findings of the study is that women and young people expressed the ultimate willingness to speak out loud against generational marginalization, and their desire to be actively involved in policy formulation, implementation and compliance monitoring processes.

The second key finding recognized that civic culture of the three countries remained significantly weak, characterized by deliberate neglect by political actors to uphold their constitutional and human rights obligations to include women and youth in political decision-making processes in the respective countries.

Conclusion and Implications

The outcome of the political economy analysis conducted by Gorée Institut postulates that the implications on policy and practice for women and young people on their limited participation in political processes can result in long term deterioration of critical democratic principles. This implies that women and young leaders will not have a legitimate platform to express their concerns nor contribute their ideas. This can consequently trigger political instability.

If political institutions such as political parties put in place mechanisms which can empower young leaders and women to access platforms of participation such as public fora where they can have a space to contribute political dialogue, then this will enhance their civic voices thereby creating open spaces for democratic freedom.

If young leaders and women are empowered with the capacity to contribute their own experiences in political leadership, then this can enhance

intergenerational accountability and collaboration for transparent political processes, thus creating a democratic space for future generations.

Policy recommendations

In terms of specific policy interventions

- Key political institutions, including legislatures, political parties, electoral management bodies and local government bodies, can facilitate to engage and build the capacities of youth and women by nurturing their political aspirations more proactively.
- Inclusion of young people and women in adopting laws and mechanisms that can hold government accountable in issues concerning good governance is crucial to promote change and widening civic spaces.

End Notes

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