Empowering young women to become leaders and agents of peace and political decision-making in the Sahel

Executive summary

Despite many promising initiatives, civil society organizations' efforts are hindered by a number of weaknesses, such as excessive competition, politicization, and poor internal governance and transparency. As such, the exclusion of most women and youth from politics continues.

The Beijing Platform for Action includes a strong statement calling for governments to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making. It also calls for government to increase women's capacity to participate in leadership. The pragmatic, efficiency-based argument for women's participation in decision-making and leadership also starts from the recognition that women and men have different needs, interests and priorities arising from their specific roles and situations. Thus, it gives great optimism to efforts towards empowering women to leadership and decision-making positions to have existing legal instruments that recognize the need to advance the meaningful participation of women. It has been proven that women drive education, economic growth, and self-reliance in their communities. They help build societies based on social connections, trust, and inclusion, and participate in peacebuilding at all levels.

Recommandations

- Create a gender balance in government and administration so that all stakeholders are heard and represented,

- place more women in decision-making and leadership positions and, at the same time, provide them with the necessary catch-up training and experience in order to be effective,

- Supporting Legislative action which can contribute to bringing women to decision-making positions.

- Improve effective governance which can contribute to selecting women for political representation.

- Encourage families to keep girls in school for as long as possible to allow them to acquire skills and delay marriage therefore consequently delaying childbearing by advocacy activities

- Promote advocacy and sensitization activities that allow women to participate in civil society for the purpose of empowering them to contribute to political decisions

- Develop and circulate rosters of women qualified for appointed positions to facilitate the identification and promotion of women leaders

- Consider the enactment of quotas and/or temporary special measures with enforcement mechanisms to increase women's representation in politics at the local and national levels.

INTRODUCTION

The political sphere in the Sahel is predominantly male-dominated due to the patriarchal nature of the political spectrum. This has excluded women and young people from political participation and security decision making therefore hindering their capacity to contribute to civic spaces. Socio-economically marginalized and discriminated against based on gendered stereotypes and social norms as well as traditional power structures, women and young people find it difficult to find their place in political decision-making. How can we help shift this situation and engage them as change agents to promote constructive dialogue, and enhance civil peace and greater stability across the region?

In 2000, the Security Council passed UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. This resolution was a milestone because it acknowledged the disproportionate and unique impact of armed conflict on women and girls, as well as the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, humanitarian response and peacebuilding. More than just victims of conflict, the resolution recognized women as actors of change and as peacebuilders, as well as acknowledged the importance of including women in all stages of conflict prevention and peace negotiations.

In Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Cote d'Ivoire to advocate for responsible citizen-state relationships and increased participation in governance systems at the local and national levels, Sahelian women are forming groups and informal networks at local and national levels to increase their voice in national debates and create space for political participation.

In 2015, the UN Security Council adopted resolution 2250 on youth, peace and security (YPS), which recognizes the contributions of young people to peacebuilding efforts and broadens the call for the inclusion of youth in planning, programme design, policy development, and decision-making processes for conflict prevention, resolution, and recovery. Gender equality is a building block and key to sustainable democracy. The inclusion of young women's meaningful participation is embodied in the women's peace and security agenda aspiring to ensure youth, including young women's voices are amplified especially in political decision-making processes which will shape their future. The empowerment of women implies that they take power and control their destinies to bring the necessary change they want to see. To be able to attain leadership positions and participate in decision making they need to be supported to raise awareness, build confidence, access resources and transform structures and institutions that promote inequalities, maintain biases and discriminate against women.

Understanding the problem

Existing factors that contribute to the low level of participation of women in political decision-making include lack of access to higher education, cultural obstacles and expectations such as the traditional role of women as caregivers, lack of financial resources and higher unemployment compared to men. The theory of critical feminist leadership is being adopted in this policy, which symbolizes the challenges women face in breaking the barriers of leadership. According to Watson (2016), winning women's equal access to jobs was a major accomplishment of the women's movement of the 1970s; it has changed the role of women in public spheres profoundly.

It can be acknowledged that presently, despite more women are accessing leadership opportunities globally the challenges remain enormous, especially in societies where there is a predominantly patriarchal culture and women are still relegated to dealing with domestic chores and raising children. Confronting these sociocultural biases that lead to gender inequality is necessary to allow for changes in perceived stereotypes about the capabilities that women must have to manage leadership positions. The question of gender parity should not be underestimated as it

has been a contributory factor to existing discriminatory practices that have disadvantaged women over time. Pikramenou and Mahajan (2019) provide growing evidence suggesting that women's participation in decision-making improves governance as well as political processes.

Scope and contextual analysis on the Impact of women leadership at the community level

Personal competence and adaptation are essential in leadership. Women are generally good at mobilizing the community as they work with the members and often their involvement ends there despite being responsible for community stability. Generally, in communities that are already engaged in peace-building processes, it is common to find women who possess skills that can be further cultivated to build social cohesion and promote peace that meets daily needs. In addition, women organizing with other women around shared interests build their capabilities for voice and influence. The experience of group cohesion and solidarity can contribute to self-affirmation at the individual and collective level, give support and legitimacy to gender equality agendas and enable women to exert the collective power needed to shift gender norms. This is important in nurturing the potential for women to participate in politics for change because the community engagement experience that they carry can influence their potential leadership roles. *The likelihood of accelerating an impact be it social or economic on the community by women can contribute to changing perceptions of gender bias thus creating an equitable environment for leadership.*

What measures to improve women's position regarding leadership and decision-making?

- Investing in women's organizations and movements or associations is a practical way of empowering them to participate in decision-making at the political level. Because they are usually and often informally involved in political actions from the grassroots level thereby acquire skills that allow them to understand the dynamics of political participation. What they need is to reinforce their capacity through leadership

- Political apprenticeship is a steppingstone for women who aspire for political office to be mentored by women with more experience because this platform can inspire them to become leaders in their own right. This may be achieved by creating a culture of conscious inclusion that can contribute to building their desire, insight and capacity to make decisions

- Through the acquisition of education, women would not only be able to upgrade their academic skills and abilities but would also be able to generate awareness and be informative in terms of various aspects and bring about improvements within their overall quality of life. Therefore, keeping girls in school can fundamentally have a positive impact on the society generally as the skills and knowledge acquired can contribute to understanding the decisions they have to take and the responsibilities that come thereafter

- Regulating limitations to Financial capital is one area that presents challenges to young aspiring female politicians because they lack the capacity to access resources that they can use to mobilize themselves to advance politically

- Political goodwill from politicians is very crucial for the empowerment of young women as this can be a catalyst for effective

participation in balancing gender equality and good governance

- Promote multi-sectoral approaches and engage the media: Beyond political rights, innovative strategies need to address women's economic and social status and seek to advance broader community development. As part of a multipronged approach, the media can play an important role in shifting attitudes around gender equality and the political participation of women and youth.

Policy recommendations

Policy recommendations to states;

- create a gender balance in government and administration so that all stakeholders are heard and represented,

- place more women in decision-making and leadership positions and, at the same time, provide them with the necessary catch-up training and experience in order to be effective,

- Supporting Legislative action which can contribute to bringing women to decision-making positions.

- Improve effective governance which can contribute to selecting women for political representation.

Recommendations to civil society

- Encourage families to keep girls in school for as long as possible to allow them to acquire skills and delay marriage therefore consequently delaying childbearing by advocacy activities

- Promote advocacy and sensitization activities that allow women to participate in civil society for the purpose of empowering them to contribute to political decisions

Policy recommendations to political parties:

- Develop and circulate rosters of women qualified for appointed positions to facilitate the identification and promotion of women leaders

- Consider the enactment of quotas and/or temporary special measures with enforcement mechanisms to increase women's representation in politics at the local and national levels.

End Notes

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