

# CALL TO ACTION

## ON YOUNG WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP

OUTCOME OF INTERACTIVE VIRTUAL EVENT, 18/11/2020



**United Nations**  
Office of the Secretary-General's  
Envoy on Youth



Inter-Parliamentary Union  
For democracy. For everyone.

# INTRODUCTION

The last two decades saw slow progress in women's political participation and leadership. According to Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) data, the share of parliamentary seats held by women increased from 11.3 per cent in 1995 to 25 per cent in 2020, still far from achieving gender parity. Only 6.6 per cent of Heads of State and only 6.2 per cent of Heads of Government are women and the proportion of women ministers stands at 21.3 per cent<sup>1</sup>.

Twenty-five years after the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995, which set the international target for reaching gender equality in political decision-making, women are still underrepresented across all levels of political leadership and gender equality in politics is still a long way out of reach.

Young women are the least represented in leadership positions. IPU data on youth participation in parliaments show that only 2.2 per cent of parliamentarians are under 30 and less than 1 per cent are young women parliamentarians. Young women have an inalienable right to be represented when laws are adopted, budgets negotiated and governments held to account. Their exclusion from these processes is a violation of this right and undermines the valuable contributions they bring for the good of all people today and for the good of future generations. Their participation in formal politics is especially important as young women are strong and powerful leaders in many related fields, including in civic and democratic engagement on issues such as climate change, racism and gender equality, among others. Young women are also powerful influencers across issues for youth in general and people of other generations.

Their participation in formal politics is especially important as young women are leading change on issues like climate change, racial justice and gender equality. And they are powerful advocates for intergenerational collaboration and accountability towards a more just, sustainable and equal world for all. It will benefit us all to have more young women, in all their diversity, represented when political decisions for the future are being made.

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<sup>1</sup> Data as of 1 January 2020 (IPU and UN Women 2020)

## SUMMARY OF THE EVENT

On 18 November 2020, the IPU and the Office of the United Nations Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth organized an interactive virtual discussion on Young Women's Political Participation and Leadership.

The event brought together young women leaders from politics and civil society and other key stakeholders. More than 80 participants included political leaders of all generations, members of parliament, government officials, representatives of international organizations and UN agencies, representatives of youth and women's movements, academics, media, and representatives of civil society organizations working on political inclusion. The event served as a space for high-level interaction, both in plenary and breakout formats, generating pertinent analyses and solutions to issues afflicting young women during mobilization of support, campaigning and elections, as well as while occupying office and endeavouring to effect change as office-holders.

The event was designed to galvanize momentum and enhance young women's political participation through understanding socio-economic, cultural and institutional barriers, sharing personal experiences, and identifying strategic solutions to common challenges. The outcomes of the discussions and concrete recommendations have informed this Call to Action.

## SITUATING THE CALL TO ACTION

25th  
Anniversary of the  
Beijing Platform for  
Action

10th  
Anniversary of the  
IPU Resolution on  
Youth Participation  
in the Democratic  
Process

Generation  
Equality Forum,  
Action Coalition  
on Feminist  
Movements and  
Leadership

Youth 2030,  
UN Youth Strategy

IPU Report  
on Youth  
Participation  
in National  
Parliament

This Call to Action addresses parliaments, governments, political parties, international organizations, civil society, and media to galvanize momentum for young women's political participation, recognize and understand specific challenges faced by young women in engaging in political leadership, share experiences and build capacity, and identify strategic solutions.

# CALL TO ACTION



# PRIORITY 1: NURTURE YOUNG WOMEN'S POLITICAL ASPIRATIONS

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action states that “Women’s empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power, are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace”. After 25 years, however, structural, socioeconomic, institutional and cultural barriers still prevent women from benefitting from equal political participation and leadership in comparison to men. In the case of young women, these barriers are reinforced by intersecting discriminations, based on sexual orientation, gender identity and age in particular.

At a time when the global community is finding new and innovative ways of tackling complex challenges – caused by the COVID-19 pandemic – the political participation of young women is not only a right that must be fulfilled, but it is also the smartest investment for our collective future.

Civic and political participation must be nurtured during the formative years in young people’s lives, starting in childhood and continuing through adolescence and into young adulthood. Political aspirations should be nurtured from early on. In the course of this period, young people build confidence in themselves and learn the value of their voices in taking up their inherent rights to actively engage in social and political life. These attributes can be attained through quality education; civic education and engagement; activism; and youth parliaments.

**“ As a young girl in Sri Lanka, I grew up thinking that it was impossible for a woman to be elected to office unless her husband, father or brother was a prominent politician. I want all girls to know that they have right to run for office. That it’s not only for the privileged.**

**Jayathma Wickramanayake**  
United Nations Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth



Ensuring accessible, quality education for girls and young women, including in the fields of STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), and supporting youth employment, vocational training, entrepreneurship and financial services, such as youth empowerment banks and micro financing initiatives, all contribute to empowering young women broadly and to informing and supporting their interest and engagement in politics. An increase in young women’s political participation can be achieved through measures such as gender legislation, budget allocation and parliamentary oversight of the design and implementation of gender-responsive youth policies and programmes.



While quality education equips future aspirants with the necessary knowledge and capacities, civic education opens up their perspectives as future leaders. It helps them to gain the necessary skills and competencies, enabling them to acknowledge their roles as citizens and exercise their rights and obligations, and paving the way for their civic engagement. The opportunities for participation that girls and young women experience in their communities may influence their development and the choices they make in their transition to adulthood.

Girls and young women should have early exposure to political and decision-making spaces. For example, one form of such engagement can be facilitated by Youth Parliaments. They prepare youth for the decision-making process, build their capacities in debating, communication and leadership, and familiarize them with electoral systems, the significance of parliament as an institution, the democratic processes and political leadership from a young age.

Social movements, civil society organizations and networks, for example those focused on climate action, peacebuilding, democratic transition and gender equality are often led by young women and could pave the way for their access to formal politics. These movements can and should be steppingstones for engagement in formal political processes and leadership. They form a pool of talents, experiences and engagement into which senior political leaders need to tap to recruit more young women as aspirants to elected office.

But all too often, this participation is manifested only in the streets – or on social media – and not in formal political bodies as well. The reasons are multifaceted, but differing understandings of power and societal change, intergenerational mistrust and lack of transparency have often been attributed part of the blame. Political structures and institutions are not successful in sufficiently including young women in the political system and harnessing the wealth of expertise and drive for positive change inherent in civil society movements. This inaction not only leads to the marginalization of young people's perspectives and representation in formal politics, and their loss of confidence and trust in democratic institutions, but is also a missed opportunity for society to benefit from the precious resources young women bring: the ideas, talents, expertise, knowledge and energy.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

- Invest in the empowerment of girls: fund and implement quality education (including in the field of STEM and civic education) and training opportunities that reflect the needs of young women, and ensure the transparency, accessibility, fairness and inclusiveness of this process.
- Ensure financial accessibility to quality education by means of grant schemes, scholarships and financial services, such as youth empowerment banks and micro financing initiatives.
- Strengthen gender-responsive youth policies and programs through legislation, budget allocation and parliamentary oversight.
- Create an enabling environment for young women's public engagement, via civic education and supporting youth initiatives.
- Create an environment conducive to ensuring political leadership's buy-in to providing robust support to young women politicians.
- Support the establishment of gender-balanced youth parliaments to develop an insight into the democratic process and the work of parliament.
- Support and value social movements and civil society organizations as stepping stones for young women's engagement in formal politics, including by providing flexible and accessible funding to young women's movements and organizations.
- Implement strategies to facilitate young women's equal representation in social movements and to link their participation in social movements with participation in formal political debates.





# PRIORITY 2: SUPPORT YOUNG WOMEN CANDIDATES FOR POLITICAL OFFICE

Young women running for office face several unique barriers, one specifically relating to funding. Campaigning can be expensive and the lack of predictable and sustainable funding for young women often creates insurmountable barriers in competing for elected seats. Limits placed on campaign spending would level the playing field for young newcomers facing older, better-funded incumbents. Such an approach can also improve the situation for other underrepresented groups, including women of all ages. Alternatively, parties could allocate more targeted funds to young women candidates and thus encourage them to run.

Women and men have different levels and types of political support networks. On average, female politicians receive fewer private donations than their male counterparts and rely more heavily on party sponsorship. Widespread societal gender-bias, portrayal in the media and voter perceptions of 'a woman's place' cast a long shadow over young women's decision to run for office and their opportunities for pursuing higher positions.

**“ Redressing young women's under-representation in political life calls for political will and commitment, strong policy measures and multi-stakeholder partnerships. We should not let 2020 be the year of a global pandemic only but make it the year of substantial progress towards full implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action with and for young women. ”**



**Martin Chungong**  
Secretary General of Inter-Parliamentary Union

Political parties are the principal gatekeepers for candidates to participate in elections, so their proactive support in establishing and maintaining effective youth wings is vital. Political parties can do more for promoting young women's political aspirations, such as allocating central party resources to the support of young women, establishing rules regarding young women's participation in party leadership bodies, and using youth wings more actively as a resource in recruiting young women candidates.

Governments, parliaments and political parties seeking to enhance the participation and the role of young women in politics should make it a priority to address the discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity and age that young women face.





Quotas have proven to be powerful measures to curb under-representation, especially when they are ambitious, well designed and include stringent sanctions in case of non-compliance<sup>2</sup>. Quota provisions to enhance youth participation and gender electoral quotas should offer greater benefit to young women. A way to ensure this is to introduce age provisions in gender electoral quotas and gender provisions in youth electoral quotas.

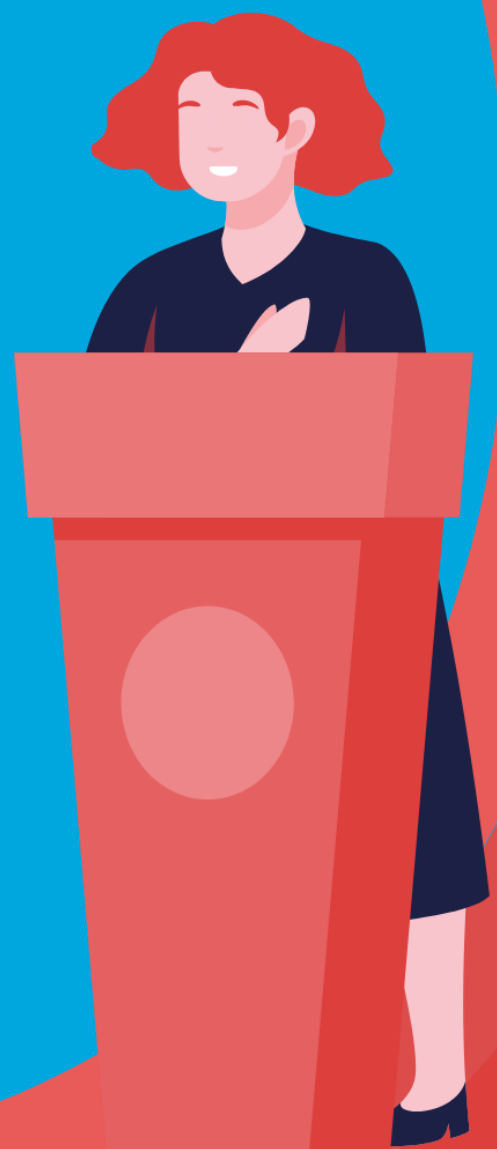
Violence, sexual harassment and bullying are major challenges faced disproportionately by women in politics and young women aspiring to elected office. Above all, parliaments and other institutions have to exercise zero tolerance of sexism, harassment and violence against women by adopting and implementing adequate policies and evaluation mechanisms, establishing an independent, confidential and fair complaints handling mechanism, and raising awareness of politicians and other stakeholders.

Sexism and gender stereotypes, as well as a common focus by male counterparts and the media on a young woman's appearance, her marital status and other personal matters rather than on her ideas, experiences and political views, are fundamentally damaging. In addition, during election campaigns, women – and young women in particular – are under-represented in news coverage or on political talk shows. Traditionally, media portrays the image of women as having less political agency and fail to treat their candidacy objectively. These challenges are often exacerbated by social media. Cyberbullying remains a source of fear and political disengagement for many young women. Negative advertising and the risk of loss of privacy can discourage young women and keep them out of active politics.

Capacity building for young women candidates is crucial before and during the election process. Targeted training should be designed to develop young women's skills for campaigning, campaign management, communication, public speaking and advocacy, but also for curbing attacks and reacting to discrimination, sexism and harassment. This training can be complemented by mentorship activities involving experienced women leaders and party leaders.

Political will is key to advancing and supporting young women's access to elected office and their participation in politics.

Strong commitments from decision-makers can provide more opportunities, pathways and power for young women's participation, and ensure more young women rise to political leadership.





## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Advocate for and oversee the implementation of support systems during election campaigns that would assist young women during turbulent political processes.
- Cap spending in electoral campaigns to level the playing field.
- Oversee the allocation of robust financial resources in support of young women politicians, as well as fair access to and use of campaign resources.
- Provide resource mobilization training to young women political aspirants to support their campaigning
- Encourage political parties to establish measures to support young women's participation in party leadership bodies and the recruitment of more young women candidates.
- Promote parity as one of the key measures guaranteeing women safe, fair, inclusive and supportive access to political office.
- Ensure that youth quotas and gender quotas can work together and succeed to influence positively the representation of different age and gender groups.
- Adopt and implement protective measures to eliminate sexism and gender-based harassment and violence in politics, including online.
- Review and adopt comprehensive legislation and policies on eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls.
- Hold perpetrators of gender discrimination, harassment and violence against young women activists and politicians to account
- Provide training for young women candidates in engaging with the media, in particular in relation to elections.
- Push the media to unveil objective stories featuring and profiling young women in politics.
- Align the minimum age of eligibility for political office with the voting age.

# PRIORITY 3: EMPOWER YOUNG WOMEN IN OFFICE, INVEST IN THEIR LEADERSHIP

The IPU's Resolution on Youth Participation in the Democratic Process encourages parliamentarians and political officials at all levels to give maximum support to young parliamentarians and young politicians, thereby helping create a youth-friendly and accessible environment.

Parliaments and political institutions, including political parties, should be gender-sensitive and gender-responsive, including towards the specific needs and interests of young women. They should invest in facilities that promote work-life balance and in internal policies that ensure that young women have access to leadership positions.

They should be family-friendly environments, where men and women find that their needs to live as well as work are taken into account. Gender-sensitive parliaments are more modern, dynamic institutions that fully reflect the populations they serve; the culture of the parliament with respect to gender equality should take into account gender-sensitive language, customs, dress codes and working hours.

Experienced parliamentarians have a responsibility towards young women candidates and MPs, to role-model and mentor them in their quest for their rightful place in politics. Young women particularly need female mentors. At the same time, mentorship promotes intra and inter-generational communication and cooperation between women. If young women perceive they have a place and a path to success, they will be more likely to continue proactively to participate in political life. As a mutual learning process, investing in the success of others contributes to the personal growth and development of mentors as well.

Parliaments and their members – younger or older – should be encouraged to proactively reach out to, consult and engage girls and young women, particularly the most disadvantaged, in their work. Proactive outreach should seek to engage young women in their own spaces, for example on social media, in schools, universities and public spaces. Collaboration with social movements at the grassroots level is an invaluable opportunity to ensure diverse representation of young women in democratic institutions.



It is equally important to ensure that young women's engagement with political institutions is meaningful, and not tokenistic. This includes their access to decision-making and leadership positions. In parliament, young women should be trusted to chair parliamentary committees, initiate or co-sponsor legislation; have equal opportunities to men for professional development, training and networking; and be part of international delegations and deliberations.

The establishment of women and youth caucuses and forums in parliaments can serve as important mechanisms for young women to ensure that they benefit from this nexus and that it serves their ideals, policy agendas and aspirations. Encouraging young women MPs to work together can strengthen their political impact to achieve greater equality and help change laws and policies.

**“** *Around the world, young women are leading with courage, resilience, innovation and creativity – exactly the skills we need to institutionalize through their greater political participation in order to emerge from the present crisis and sustainably build a more equal world.*

**Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka**  
Executive Director of UN Women



# RECOMMENDATIONS

- Legislate for gender equality and eliminate discrimination in the law
- Oversee the implementation of youth policies from a gender perspective
- Implement the Plan of Action for Gender-sensitive Parliaments
- Ensure that all political institutions are gender-sensitive and gender-responsive, providing family-friendly facilities to all their members, allowing work-life balance, using gender-sensitive language and behaviours.
- Encourage structured inter-generational mentorship within political institutions.
- Provide space for the meaningful participation of young women by ensuring their access to leadership positions and decision-making processes.
- Create networks of young parliamentarians (parliamentary caucuses and forums).
- Open up political institutions to reach out to young women, in particular women and girls from remote areas, with different social and economic backgrounds, and with different experiences.
- Launch structured dialogue with civil society as inclusive, transparent and effective channels for ensuring that political institutions and their mandates are responsive to social needs and for promoting reforms that are sensitive to the aspirations and abilities of young women to effect change.
- Ensure the meaningful inclusion of young women in politics for the effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda as a result of joint action by relevant stakeholders addressed by this Call to Action.

