

POLICY BRIEF

# YOUNG WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS & DECISION-MAKING IN AFRICAN UNION MEMBER STATES





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**LIAISON TO AU AND UNECA**

**UN WOMEN**

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# ACRONYMS

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| ACRONYM | MEANING  |
|---------|--|
| AGA     | African Governance Architecture  |
| AU      | African Union  |
| CEDAW   | Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women |
| GEWE    | gender equality and women's empowerment                                    |
| SDGs    | Sustainable Development Goals  |
| YWPP    | young women's political participation                                      |

## Summary

Young people – a demographic, according to African Union (AU) covers men and women under 35 years of age – comprise approximately three-quarters of Africa’s population, but although their numbers are substantial, their political power has not reflected their demographics. For young women, the intersection of sex and age has compounded this problem; young women’s representation in political institutions, policy-making and decision-making processes has remained limited, apart from small pockets of progress. The disproportionate impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on women’s social and economic lives puts the limited progress at risk and may reverse the gains made if specific attention is not given to specifically addressing the needs of women, including young women.<sup>1</sup> There are clear areas of work which can be built upon and extended however, as the continent seeks to “build back better”. Many AU Member States now have political quotas in place for women and youth in an attempt to proactively break down some of the barriers to participation that excluded these groups for many years. Capacity building programmes have also been undertaken to specifically develop the advocacy and engagement skills of young women, alongside skills to make key political institutions more gender sensitive. The AU has supported these efforts, in line with key continental policies and legal frameworks, including the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa<sup>2</sup> (Maputo Protocol). However, more can still be done, as Africa seeks to make good on the promises of Agenda 2063 and the Sustainable Development Goals. The swift response by governments around the world to the COVID-19 pandemic shows that transformative change is possible when governments prioritise gender equality, including young women’s rights as part of the post-COVID-19 effort to harness Africa’s abundant resources to build more inclusive, equitable societies. This Policy Brief provides an analysis of the progress and gaps across the continent in facilitating young women’s political participation across Africa and offers recommendations for consideration by the AU and AU Member States. It should be read alongside African Union’s own recent “AU Guidelines on Gender Responsive Responses to COVID-19”, which also provide specific guidance for ensuring a gender sensitive response to COVID-19, with specific recommendations in relation to young women’s political participation.<sup>3</sup>

## The Value of Young Women’s Political Participation to Africa

The African Union estimates that almost 75% of Africa’s population is under the age of 35 years.<sup>4</sup> In June 2019, a Mo Ibrahim Foundation report found that almost 60% of the population in Africa is under the age of 25;<sup>5</sup> approximately 50% of these young people are young women.<sup>6</sup> By 2030, it is estimated that the share of Africa’s youth in the world will increase to 42%.<sup>7</sup> Recognising the burgeoning youth population that dominates Africa’s demographics, it is clear that the continent cannot achieve the development, peace and integration vision that it has set for itself without the active participation and leadership of its young people, including young women. Young women are a critical part of the continent’s labour force; they are students, teachers, professionals, industrial workers and labourers. Yet, despite their enormous contributions to their communities and the continent, young women generally remain under-represented in the political institutions, policy processes and decision-making that determine the path of Africa’s development.

## Key Frameworks Supporting Young Women’s Right to Political Participation

Effective participation in politics and decision-making is a fundamental human right guaranteed under global, continental and national legal instruments. 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. Subsequently, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) reinforced women’s equal right to participation in political and public life, including the right to vote in elections and public referenda, eligibility for election to all publicly elected bodies and participation in the formulation and implementation of government policies. Only two AU Member States have not ratified CEDAW: Somalia and Sudan.<sup>8</sup>

AU Member States have used their membership of the UN to influence the development of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Three SDGs relate to women’s political participation, SDG-5 on gender equality, SDG-10 on reducing inequality and SDG-16

**FIGURE 1****Timeline of key international and regional legal instruments and declarations**

on peaceful and inclusive societies. SDG-5 on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls includes a specific target aimed at tracking progress to ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels. Progress implementing SDG-5, and the other complementary SDGs, will be monitored by tracking both the share of women in national legislatures and women elected to local governments.

Complementing these global frameworks, the AU, Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and AU Member States have made numerous commitments to gender equality and youth empowerment, including in the African Union Constitutive Act,<sup>9</sup> the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance<sup>10</sup>, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa<sup>11</sup> (Maputo Protocol) and the African Youth Charter. These legal and policy frameworks provide specific provisions which call on Member States to implement concrete measures to ensure that both women and young people can actively participate in politics.

Most recently, on 12 May 2020, African Union Ministers in charge of Gender and Women's Affairs discussed the theme of "COVID-19 Responses and Recovery – A Gendered Framework". In their final outcomes statement Ministers specifically recommended that "Executive and legislative institutions respond to the COVID-19 pandemic with gender sensitivity by ensuring the participation and inclusion of women, including women with disabilities and young women, in decision-making, adopting gender mainstreaming procedures and policies and access to resources".<sup>12</sup>

Complementing AU commitments which call for Member States' to ensure the right to political participation, including for women and youth, the AU has also

specifically adopted the Gender Parity Principle, which applies to its own internal functions and requires 50/50 gender balance in all AU structures, operational policies and practices. This principle has been replicated in similar commitments adopted by Regional Economic Communities. Statistics from the AU show that progress is being made, with gender balance achieved at the highest levels of the organisation,<sup>13</sup> although a 2018 report indicated that AU female staff across the whole organisation still only represent 35 of the 1,700 officials across of the organisation.<sup>14</sup>

## The Current State of Young Women's Political Participation across Africa

While the AU and its organs have been proactive in promoting women and youth participation within their own structures, a quick snapshot of the current situation regarding young women's political participation across Africa suggests that more still needs to be done to translate these commitments within AU Member States. There has been considerable progress in increasing women's political representation in recent years, not least, the world-leading numbers of women elected to the Rwandan national legislature.<sup>15</sup> However, progress across the continent varies considerably and statistics in relation to young women show that they are still far from being equally included in political institutions and decision-making. A snapshot of the available data shows that:

- There is currently only one female AU head of state; Hon. Sahle-Work Zewde was appointed in November 2018 as the first female President of Ethiopia (though this post is ceremonial).<sup>16</sup> There are no female heads of government across the AU, though Hon Saara Kuugongelwa is the Prime

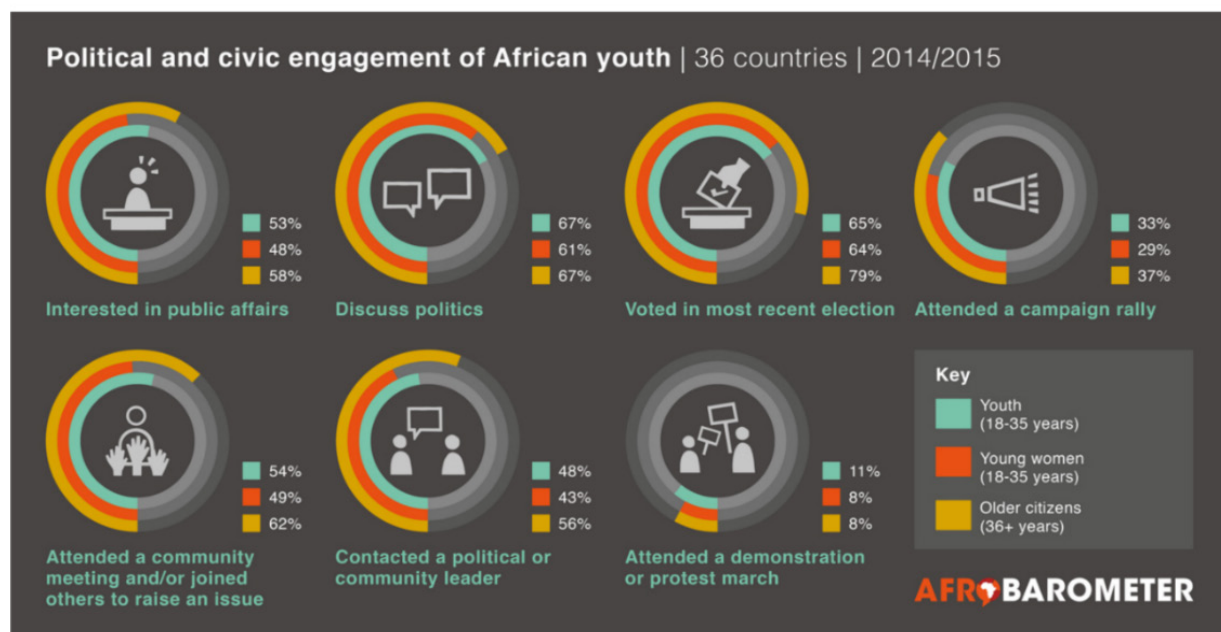
Minister of Namibia and a female Vice President, Hon. Samia Suluhu of Tanzania.<sup>17</sup> In any case, the gap between the age of African heads of government and their populations is generally sizeable. The average age of the ten oldest African leaders is 78.5, compared to 52 for the world's ten most-developed economies, while paradoxically, the continent has the youngest population in the world, with a median age of 19.5 years<sup>18</sup>.

- The average percentage of women ministers across Africa is 21.45<sup>19</sup>, but representation varies considerably across the region. Ethiopia, Rwanda, South Africa and Guinea Bissau have all made history by inaugurating gender-balanced Cabinets,<sup>20</sup> and the Seychelles is almost at parity. Four countries (Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, and South Sudan) have mandatory quotas for executive branch positions.<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, in April 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic started affecting countries across the continent, it was reported that Africa had 13 female Ministers of health, of which nine health ministers were actually qualified medical doctors.<sup>22</sup>
  - The average percentage of women in national legislatures across the AU is 22.5<sup>23</sup>. Within the
- AU, women's representation in legislatures varies considerably. Twelve AU legislatures have 30 or more women MPs in their lower house.<sup>24</sup> At the other end of the scale, five AU legislatures have 10 or less women MPs in their lower house.<sup>25</sup>
  - 24 countries in Africa provide data on the ages of their MPs.<sup>26</sup> Of these, only 4 of 24 AU legislatures have more than 5% of their MPs under 30 years old (The Gambia at 10.43%, Djibouti at 9.23%, Tunisia at 6.91% and Ethiopia at 6.1%). Twelve AU countries had less than 5% MPs under 30 years old and another 8 AU countries reported zero MPs under 30 years old.
  - 40 countries in Africa provide data on the age and sex of their youngest MP.<sup>27</sup> Of these, only 15 of 40 AU countries have at least one MP 25 years or younger. Interestingly, one-third of the youngest members in these legislatures were women.
  - 50 countries in Africa provided data on their eligibility requirements for running for office.<sup>28</sup> Of these, 14 of 50 AU countries only allow people over 25 years of age to stand in elections for the national legislature.

**FIGURE 2**

**Afrobarometer results 2015/16 on youth participation in politics**

## PP34: Does less engaged mean less empowered? Political participation lags among African youth, especially women



- Young women are less likely to participate in politics, even where opportunities exist to engage. The 2015/16 Afrobarometer survey data of across 36 countries African countries, found that “young women’s political engagement lags behind that of their male peers across all the indicators under consideration, although these differences are smaller for voting levels and attendance at demonstrations or protest marches”.<sup>29</sup>

## Challenges and Gaps

The factors contributing to young women’s under-representation in politics, policy-processes and decision-making are many. Some are a result of the specific challenges faced when engaging in the political arena in Africa, while others stem from more fundamental barriers to women’s rights across the continent. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these challenges. Early research has already shown that the pandemic has disproportionately impacted women. Domestic violence has been on the increase, the informal and casual labour sectors where African women predominantly work have suffered the most from economic contractions and particularly vulnerable groups (such as women with disabilities, refugees, rural women, women who are trafficked and in forced labour) are even more at risk. In this context, it is even more important that women are able to access and contribute to decision-making that affect their lives.

In the political context, however, there remain numerous social and institutional barriers to young women engaging in politics. Elections are now generally the norm across the continent and peaceful transfers of power are becoming more common, but politics remains male-dominated, with a history of African male leaders staying in power for extended periods.<sup>30</sup> This historic tendency has been coupled with violence; one report found that “[b]etween 2011 and 2017, almost all of the 100 elections held in 44 African countries were plagued by some degree of prolonged violence. The reality is that a run for government can place young people in the crosshairs of violent nonstate actors, contributing to a life of heightening insecurity for them and their families”.<sup>31</sup> Violence against women in politics has increasingly been recognised as a critical problem inhibiting women’s entry into politics as candidates, but also their engagement as voters and ordinary citizens.<sup>32</sup>

Coupled with this are generally weak political institutions. Electoral management bodies responsible for ensuring peaceful and inclusive elections are often under-resourced and have varying capacities. Political parties, which are generally seen as the vehicle for engaging in politics, tend to be male dominated, with a few exceptions.<sup>33</sup> Centralised power systems still generally favour patronage over merit, which has impacted on the numbers and type of women engaging with political parties.<sup>34</sup> Even where youth wings exist, these are also often male-dominated, with young men learning at an early age how to leverage their societal power into political influence.<sup>35</sup> Where political party women’s wings exist, these are often not well-integrated into the main party or decision-making structures.<sup>36</sup> National legislatures and sub-national institutions are also still not consistently gender-friendly. It is positive that 47 of 55 AU member states have women’s parliamentary caucuses,<sup>37</sup> but these are often poorly resourced. The prevalence of youth caucuses is much lower, though of the small global cohort of parliamentary youth causes that exist, many are located in Africa.<sup>38</sup> These too, however, are often still vying for scarce resources and political space.

Underpinning the political barriers to young women’s more active participation in political and public life are discriminatory social norms. Discriminatory societal norms and gender-based stereotypes shape social attitudes and practices that deny young women political opportunities.<sup>39</sup> The combination of familial and marital power dynamics, the burden of domestic chores and care for a young family can effectively deny young women opportunities to associate with others, and to get involved in civic and political activities. Many qualified (young) women are pressured to give up political ambition in favour of men. Unequal access to education and subsequently to economic opportunities exacerbate the impact of these negative social norms. The 2015 *African Development Report on growth, poverty and inequality* showed that in most African countries, across all age groups, women experience higher unemployment and lower labour force participation than men.<sup>40</sup> High youth unemployment across Africa has specific implications for young women.<sup>41</sup> Lack of financial resources act as a very practical barrier to their entry into politics. Vying for political office can be expensive, and political parties are often unable to financially support their candidates.<sup>42</sup> Young women, without financial means of their own, are at



a definite disadvantage when it comes to competing successfully in elections.

## Opportunities for Action

Despite the various obstacles to achieving gender equality across Africa in political life and decision-making, research suggests that opportunities for young women to be more active in politics and decision-making are growing. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the “AU Guidelines on Gender Responsive Responses to COVID-19” provide specific guidance to policymakers in recognition of the reality that “COVID-19 will disproportionately affect women including young women and girls, particularly the vulnerable and those living in crises and conflict affected countries”, such that AU Member States need to “ensure a gendered perspective in the analysis and responses to the pandemic. This will enable the designing and implementation of programmes and strategies, as well as the establishment of monitoring and reporting systems that are appropriate on differential preventive measures...A gendered lens to COVID-19 responses will improve outcomes for not only women, but all people affected by the virus and contribute to saving lives in Africa”.<sup>43</sup> In this context, there are a number of entry-points for strengthening young women’s political participation (YWPP) that can be leveraged by the AU and its Member States:

- **Utilising key AU mechanisms and platforms:** The AU has established a number of monitoring and dialogue platforms which can be leveraged for support and advocacy to promote gender equality and women’s empowerment (GEWE) including young women’s political participation. Some of these include:

- a. The African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights, which receives treaty monitoring reports from Member States. These reports could include more sex and age disaggregated data and report specifically on YWPP;
- b. The AU’s Women, Gender and Development Directorate and Human Resource Science and Technology department implement initiatives on YWPP to some extent. The AU Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Strategy (2018-28) identifies key entry-points for promoting YWPP in Africa;

- c. The African Plan of Action for Youth Empowerment (2019-23) included support for seven youth flagship programs as one of its three core pillars.<sup>44</sup> One of those flagship programmes specifically focuses on leadership. Activities prioritising young women’s political participation should be specifically supported through this program;

- d. The African Governance Architecture’s (AGA) Youth Engagement Strategy (2016-20)<sup>45</sup> provides a strong blueprint for promoting youth engagement regionally and nationally. Already, the AGA leads the coordination of gender and youth pre-forums ahead of the regular annual High-Level Dialogues on Democracy, Human Rights and Governance, which can be harnessed to make young women’s voices and issues more visible;

- e. The AU Special Envoy for Youth was appointed in November 2018 and has a roving mandate to promote young women’s issues across the continent. The Special Envoy, a young African woman herself, could be encouraged to make the issue YWPP a core part of her platform.

- **Law reforms in AU Member States:** Thirty countries in Africa have already implemented some form of quota to promote women’s political participation in the national parliament.<sup>46</sup> Sixteen countries have implemented a legislated political party quota<sup>47</sup> and 14 countries have implemented reserved seats.<sup>48</sup> Even where nothing has been legislated, another seven countries have political parties which are implementing their own voluntary quotas.<sup>49</sup> AU Member States need to identify whether and what kind of law reform might enable them to more proactively promote YWPP. More broadly, discriminatory legislation (e.g. in relation to marriage and divorce rights, property ownership and inheritance) could also be considered for reform.
- **Strengthening electoral processes:** Critical to any work to support YWPP during electoral contexts is ensuring that electoral processes are credible and safe and are designed to enable young women to meaningfully participate. EMBs should and related electoral bodies (e/g political parties regulatory bodies or civic education bodies) could be supported to undertake specific assessments and programming directed at enabling YWPP. AU Member States also need to take action to review their laws and

processes to ensure that violence against women in politics is criminalised and addressed in practice.

- **Reforming key political institutions:** Key political institutions need to open up to young women for them to meaningfully engage:
  - a. National legislatures are encouraged to inquire into whether and how they can more effectively support YWPP, including by supporting law reform, but also by supporting existing young, female members of the legislatures. Women and youth parliamentary caucuses need to be re-sourced and their members given opportunities within legislatures to speak, move motions, run inquiries and develop their leadership capacities;
  - b. Political party law reforms and other institutional reform initiatives need to be encouraged by the AU and its Member States and implemented by political parties across the continent. Good practice in the region can be learned from (e.g. political party quotas for candidates as well as internal executive structures) and adapted as appropriate. Political parties need to more proactively reach out to young women and give them opportunities to engage. Violence by political parties and their supporters also needs to be addressed;
  - c. At the sub-national level, 27 African countries have introduced quotas for women: 12 countries have legislated political party quotas;<sup>50</sup> 15 countries have reserved seats;<sup>51</sup> and another eight AU countries have voluntary political party quotas at sub-national level.<sup>52</sup> Five countries already have more than 40 women elected at local level,<sup>53</sup> but estimates show that the representation of women in local governments across Africa range from 5 to as high as 48%.<sup>54</sup> Sub-national governance institutions provide an excellent opportunity for young women to “learn on the job” by developing their community engagement skills as well as inputting into local policy and decision-making processes. This level of government has often been overlooked, but provides a major space within which young women can seek to become more active by working with local governments directly, as well as making themselves known to political parties by running at this level.

- **Supporting young women and their networks:**

Already, there have been numerous capacity building and training opportunities to develop women’s campaigning and advocacy skills, in which a handful targeted directly at young women.<sup>55</sup> These existing initiatives implemented at different levels can be learned from and adapted, as appropriate, to develop young women’s leadership skills, self-confidence and networks, so that they have the skills to succeed if and when they choose to engage in politics. There is also an emerging trend across the region of more young women-led civil society organisations dedicated to mobilising and supporting young women in politics; these can also be harnessed and strengthened, including through support for national and regional young women’s networks.

- **Investing in social norm change:** Social norm change requires broad engagement across a range of stakeholders and sectors. Work to address social norms will often be integrated into other development activities, but the fundamental importance of supporting broad-based social norm change also requires that this work warrants prioritisation in its own right. Significantly, the new AU Strategy on GEWE included Outcome 2, which focused on social norm change, noting that “The social norms around gender in the home, community and work result in women being effectively silenced. Without voice, there can be no choice, and certainly no control”. Achieving this end will require considerable resourcing and a long-term commitment to supporting change by stakeholders at all levels across the continent.

## Recommendations

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- AU Member States to use the transformative opportunity presented by the COVID-19 pandemic to more fundamentally reflect on the inclusion of women and girls in politics and decision-making and to proactively implement COVID-19 responses that are gender sensitive and specifically address the economic, social and political impacts of the pandemic
- AU Member States to ratify key treaties on gender equality and democracy, in particular the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Good Governance and the African Youth Charter the Maputo Protocol, and to submit comprehensive reports on time. Such reports should include data disaggregated by sex and age, and specific analysis regarding young women's political participation and empowerment.
- AU Member States to ensure the implementation of the AU GEWE Strategy, in particular in relation to Pillar 4: Leadership, Voice and Visibility which calls for action both to directly empower young women and to support broader social norm change across the continent.
- AU and stakeholders to support AU Member States to carry out law reform to introduce political affirmative action quotas based on age and sex, drawing on good practice already existing in the region.
- Key political institutions, including legislatures, political parties, electoral management bodies and local government bodies, to engage and build the capacities of young women more proactively.
- AU Member States to strengthen women's participation throughout the electoral cycle, including by advancing law reform and other actions to address violence against women in politics
- AU, Regional Economic Communities and development partners to develop and implement specific policies and actions plans which prioritise young women's engagement in politics, policy processes and decision-making at global, continental and national levels.
- Development partners to support the development and implementation regional and national programmes that directly build the leadership, advocacy and engagement capacities of young women and their organisations, drawing on existing good practice and resources from across Africa.
- AU, RECs, Member States and development partners to strengthen their collaboration in order to more systematically collect and publish regional and continental data on young women's participation in politics and decision-making.

# ENDNOTES

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With the burgeoning youth population that dominates Africa's demographics, the active participation and leadership of Africa's young people, including young women is critical to achieve the development, peace and integration aspirations of the continent in Agenda 2063 and other commitments.

However, their political power has not reflected their demographics. For young women, representation in political institutions, policy-making and decision-making processes has remained limited. The disproportionate impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on women's social and economic lives puts the limited progress at risk and threatens to reverse the gains made if specific attention is not given to specifically addressing the needs of women, including young women.

This policy paper and accompanying policy brief carry a collection of good practice and lessons learned from around the Africa and the world, with a view to enabling the AU and its organs, as well as its Member States, to identify possible entry points and strategies for ramping up efforts to realise the AU's GEWE commitments, and the many national gender equality and youth policies and strategies across the continent. The paper and policy brief offer more than fifty recommendations for consideration by the AU, AU Member States, and other stakeholders at the continental, regional and national levels to address the complex challenge of empowering young women across the continent to more effectively engage in political life. It calls on deliberate efforts to put the needs of young women at the centre of the COVID-19 response and recovery plans so that gains made around political participation are not reversed by the pandemic.



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