Preamble

About FOWODE: Forum for Women in Democracy (FOWODE) is a national women’s rights organization that grew out of the women’s caucus of the 1994-1995 Constituent Assembly that passed the 1995 Constitution, acclaimed to be one of the most gender responsive in Africa. FOWODE has a vision of a just and fair society where women and men equally participate in and benefit from decision making processes, with a strategic goal of fostering governance that is women-centred, transformative and accountable.

Beijing +25: The global community will mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women and adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) in 2020 as the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda reach a five-year milestone. The year 2020 is therefore a pivotal year for the accelerated realization of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, everywhere. In preparation for Beijing +25, FOWODE, with the support of Woman Kind (WK), is taking stock of the progress made towards Uganda’s commitments on women and leadership. This policy brief is informed by FOWODE’s work on women and leadership over the past 20 years and other secondary sources of information.

Policy Framework

The Government of Uganda is a signatory to several international and regional human rights instruments that affirm women’s right to participate in decision making and leadership. These include; the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR), 1325, Beijing Platform of Action and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). At the regional level, the Government has ratified the protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol). Article 9 asserts African women’s right to participation in the political and decision-making process.

All these international and regional human rights instruments are key in the promotion and protection of the rights of women and play an important role in enhancing their leadership and participation in democratic governance. Uganda has domesticated them by putting in place a supporting legal and policy framework. The 1995 Uganda Constitution, the supreme law of the land, which reafirms equality and women’s leadership in Article 33 (4) states that “Women shall have the right to equal treatment with men and that right shall include equal opportunities in political, economic and social activities.” Article 32 provides for affirmative action “in favour of groups marginalised on the basis of gender, age, disability or any other reason created by history, tradition or custom, for the purpose of redressing imbalances which exist against them.” The National Gender Policy and National Gender Action Plan provide strategic guidance to Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) about mainstreaming gender. Also worth noting is the Electoral Commission (EC) Gender Strategy (2019) which highlights the steps the EC plans to take to mainstream gender in the Commission and the entire election cycle.

Uganda has a Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD), the national machinery for gender equality and the empowerment of women. The Ministry has played a key role in promoting gender equality despite the fact that it is poorly resourced and has gone through numerous changes over the last 25 years. Other laws in place to protect women and engender an environment in which they can better participate in decision making include the Local Government Act 243 (1997) and the Public Finance Management Act (2015).

Inspite of the enabling framework, many women remain voiceless and powerless to influence decisions that impact their lives. This brief highlights the successes, the challenges that still have to be addressed and provides some recommendations to overcome the persistent bottlenecks that prevent Ugandan women from fully participating in decision making.
KEY MESSAGES
Democratic governance is the hallmark of building viable and sustainable democratic systems in society.

Art 33(4) of the 1995 Uganda Constitution states that
Women shall have the right to equal treatment with men and that right shall include equal opportunities in political, economic and social activities.

Women’s Participation in Decision Making
The participation of women in leadership and decision-making remains central to gender equality and the advancement of women’s rights. The attainment of sustainable development is improbable without the improvement of women’s and girls’ social, economic and political status. The demand for equal participation in decision-making is a major step towards challenging patriarchal forms of oppression that constrain women and girls’ participation in leadership.

Equality in political decision making performs a leverage function without which it is highly unlikely that a real integration of the equality dimension in policy making is viable. When women’s perspectives are not integrated in decision-making, the goals of gender equality and sustainable development remain unreached. Achieving the goal of equal participation of women and men in decision making will provide a balance that more accurately reflects the structure of society and is needed in order to strengthen democracy and promote its proper functioning.

Our Journey Since 1995: The Milestones
Uganda’s policy on affirmative action in education and politics has seen more women taking up leadership spaces in various institutions in the public and private sector at all levels. There has been an increase in the representation of women in Parliament from 19% in 1996 to 35% the current Parliament (FOWODE, 2019). Women make up 29% of the Executive. Also worth noting is the fact that the Speaker of Parliament is female. Having women in positions of power is critical as they motivate other women into vying for leadership positions while acting as role models for young women.

At district level, representation of women in Sub County and Town councils stands at 41%. This demonstrates an increased interest by women in leadership which has been to a large extent supported by civil society organisations such as the Women Democracy Group (WDG) that provide training and mentorship programmes for women. The media has increasingly played a key role in covering progress by women politicians, thereby boosting the public’s interest in having more women in leadership and encouraging increased participation in politics. Women’s representation of special groups including youth, the elderly and persons with disabilities (PWDs) ranks above 47% for each of the groups (UBOS, 2018).

Civil society organisations like FOWODE have played a key role in building the capacity of women as leaders and encouraging them to step into political spaces where they previously did not dare to venture. Engagement with women’s organizations not only equips women with leadership and civic skills it also connects them to the voters, as they are able to tap into the grassroots networks of these organisations. Also worth noting is the increased focus on building the capacity of young women in leadership by civil society in a bid to continually replenish the pool of strong women leaders in Uganda.

As women acquire the requisite tools for leadership, they still have to navigate the social space that remains highly patriarchal, keeping a significant number of women excluded with their priorities relegated to the periphery of development. Despite the progress, Government plans and budgets are yet to effectively cater for game changing interventions like addressing violence against women and girls (VAW/G), family planning and menstrual health that would help transform the lives of women and girls. It is clear that a lot more needs to be done to change the status quo.

The Pitfalls
While there is a sizeable percentage of women council members at local government level, only 1% are chairpersons at the different levels (LC1 to LCV), representing a limited number of women excluded with their priorities relegated to the periphery of development. Despite the progress, Government plans and budgets are yet to effectively cater for game changing interventions like addressing violence against women and girls (VAW/G), family planning and menstrual health that would help transform the lives of women and girls. It is clear that a lot more needs to be done to change the status quo.

Women make up 35% of the National Parliament and 41% of Sub County and Town Council leadership.

Evidence has shown that having more women in leadership can amplify their voices and ensure that key priorities for women and girls are delivered.

Civil society organisations play a key role in equipping women with leadership and civic skills while connecting them to voters.

WDG is a coalition of women’s rights organisations in Uganda working to strengthen women’s leadership and influence gender responsiveness in democratic governance. It is made up of CEWIGO, FOWODE, UWONET, ACFODE and WDN-U.
“king makers” and the media who would in turn help them win the elections. The lower levels of education among women and their concentration in the low paying and poorly regulated informal sector puts them at a clear disadvantage, compounded by a weak regulatory framework for campaign financing.

Violence against Women (VAW) is a key inhibitor to their participation in politics. FOWODE’s study on Violence Against Women in the 2016 General Elections (VAWE) highlights incidents of violence against women who stood for elective office or voted contrary to the desire of a spouse or relative. The violence included sexual assault and the use of derogatory and sexist language, keeping many capable women from standing for elective office. In some instances, widows, single or divorced women were pushed to identify a man to pose as a husband during the campaigns. It was not uncommon for spouses to refuse their wives to attend campaign events, giving male candidates an edge.

A FOWODE study documenting the experiences of women on open seats in Parliament and Local Councils in Uganda reveals a widely held misconception by citizens that open seats belong to men while affirmative action seats are reserved for women. Gender blind electoral data does not help the situation as the magnitude of inequalities cannot be easily determined and addressed. Women's direct competition with men is seen as a transgression over expected social boundaries and often comes with the price of derogatory titles and questioning of women's moral uprightness.

The thinking that LCIII and LCV chairperson positions, critical points of service delivery in local government structures, ought to be held by men is deeply ingrained in communities’ view of political leadership. Deeply rooted patriarchal, cultural and religious practices and beliefs play a key role in influencing the actions of citizens, with many women playing the role of unsuspecting foot soldiers of patriarchy by echoing views that accord women a subservient position to men. There is a clear need for civic education that addresses women’s rights and debunks key gender stereotypes if women and men are to equally benefit from democratic processes.

FOWODE’s VAWE study highlights the normalization of sexism in information systems and electoral management. Lists of sub-country/town/municipal division chairpersons for 2016 general elections were not disaggregated by sex, making it difficult to know how many of the elected leaders were male or female. While the LCV chairpersons’ list as shared by the Electoral Commission was sex disaggregated, all the district leaders including the 3 female district chairpersons were categorised as males. When government bodies are not deliberate about disaggregating data, they can and tend to render women invisible in highly androcentric political structures.

Insensitive and sexist coverage or limited coverage of women leaders by the media has been noted to negatively affect women’s participation by playing up patriarchal stereotypes about women’s leadership. As observed in FOWODE’s VAWE study, media often sexualizes and reduces women to objects of entertainment. An analysis of three Ugandan newspapers during the 2016 General Elections revealed that women were misrepresented and given less media time and coverage in comparison to men, diminishing their visibility, brand and outreach. Fair media coverage and representation can boost women leaders’ constituencies and give them solid platforms from which they can share their agendas.

FOWODE notes that weak democratic and support structures within political parties push women to stand as independent candidates. These weak systems foster unhealthy environments in which sexual demands from party leaders and campaign managers are a norm. Women noted that seeking redress through petitions to political party electoral commissions were often inadequately addressed and justice not served.

**KEY MESSAGES**

- Women’s participation in leadership and decision making remains low and yet this is a critical element for achieving gender equality.

- Women’s low literacy level and incomes disadvantage them in highly commercialised electoral processes.

- As long as most data on electoral violence remains gender-blind, it is impossible to properly address the problem and bridge the gap in political participation.

3 Ibid. 2018
5 Ibid. 2019
6 Ibid. 2019
7 Ibid. 2018
Policy Recommendations

**Government**

- Reform electoral laws, to ensure that they are responsive to the realities and needs of women and men. This includes civic education that seeks to address historical gender imbalances that keep women from participating on an equal footing with men, curtailing the commercialisation of electoral processes and eliminating regressive election practices such as lining up behind candidates that increase conflict in communities.

- Systematically collect sex disaggregated data at national and local level to inform gender responsive policy formulation and implementation.

- Review Political Parties and Organisations Act 2005 to promote gender equality beyond “due consideration for gender equity.”

- Hold EC and political parties accountable on the implementation of their gender strategies and the Constitutional provisions on women's political participation.

- Conduct continuous documentation & publicizing of testimonies of female trailblazers on the Open Seats i.e. women who have contested (winners and losers) for Open Seats to challenge the myths of these seats as men's spaces.

**Political Parties**

- Put in place and implement gender policies to promote equal participation and benefits for women and men in political parties, including supporting women to stand on open seats.

- FunctionaIize the existing database of political parties with an aim of generating gender disaggregated data to monitor and track political party processes from a gender perspective.

**KEY MESSAGES**

- For democratic governments to deliver their mandate, they must be truly representative, gender responsive and recognize that women must be equal partners in the development process.

- Only when women have full access to decision making positions will laws, policies, and budgets reflect the needs of all citizens and support women’s rights.

- Male involvement critical in transforming negative mindsets for the support of women’s participation in leadership.

- Civil Society undertake nation-wide ongoing civic education, voter education and public education campaigns from grassroots level that seek to prevent perpetuation of negative beliefs and practices that keep women away from participating in politics and leadership.

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- Engage male religious, cultural and opinion leaders in challenging negative patriarchal practices and damaging gender stereotypes that hold back women from equal participation in decision making processes.

- Work with the media to promote positive portrayal of women in power and decision making and increase the visibility of women contestants, particularly those standing on open seats.

**References**

- Beijing Platform for Action, 1995
- The National Gender Policy 2007
- The Sustainable Development Goals
- The Uganda Constitution, 1995

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