



## Policy Brief: **Designing Programs to Increase Women's Participation in Local Government**

*Written by Jessica Gomez*

***This policy brief is part of a series derived from a three-year field program on the role of women in Rwanda. More broadly, these briefs provide policymakers, donors, and program planners with strategies for consolidation of democracy in post-conflict societies.***

Devolving authority from central to local government offers a critical opportunity to ensure wider representation and improve post-conflict democracy. When elected, female officials in particular can enhance the legitimacy of local government, improve service delivery, and facilitate communication with the local population. Yet too often women are not given the information, training, and support necessary to run successfully for office.

In 2006, The Initiative for Inclusive Security partnered with the Rwandan Association of Local Government Authorities (RALGA) and the National Women's Council to conduct training to increase women's participation in the 2006 local elections. The preparation of more than 2,300 female candidates helped Rwanda successfully fulfill a constitutional quota at the local level. Women captured over 30 percent of the seats in district government and are now one-third of district executives throughout the country, as well as two-thirds of executives in the city of Kigali.

Partnering with RALGA and the National Women's Council allowed the program to reach a strategic group of participants, established community leaders likely to share the information widely with other women. Training sessions were held at annual provincial meetings of the National Women's Council throughout the country.

RALGA framed the curriculum in the Rwandan context and wrote and delivered the training in the local language. Featuring experienced elected women leaders, the program encouraged participant mentoring. National women parliamentarians traveled to provinces to encourage participants to stand for local office. These legislators spoke about their motives and challenges in campaigning for office and emphasized the importance of women's leadership in government.

Training was designed to address challenges specific to women's political participation. Some of the most significant barriers are cultural attitudes about gender roles (often more persistent at the local level than the national) and a lack of self-confidence. To mitigate such problems, RALGA staff facilitated a discussion of women's leadership strengths, obstacles to their candidacy, and strategies for overcoming those challenges. The program conveyed basic information regarding rules and criteria for election that women do not often hear, including requirements for candidacy, campaign regulations, and plans for decentralization of government. Skills building focused on technical skills relevant to campaigning, such as preparing election platforms, budgets, and messages.

Women in local government can enhance the efficacy of the decentralization process. While quotas like Rwanda's create room for women, they must be coupled with projects that increase the number of qualified candidates and enable women to assert their priorities in government.

## Findings and Recommendations

**Finding:** Women's participation in local government can improve the delivery of social services and the relationship between government and local communities.

→ **Recommendation:** Provide financial and technical assistance to promote women's inclusion in local government.

**Finding:** Quotas help ensure sufficient representation of women in office but they do not ensure that female legislators are skilled and active.

→ **Recommendation:** Complement the push for quotas for women's participation with capacity building for potential candidates.

→ **Recommendation:** In countries with quotas, fund programs to increase the number and quality of women candidates.

**Finding:** Mentoring by experienced elected women leaders inspires less experienced women to run for local office and gives them strategies for dealing with challenges to their participation.

→ **Recommendation:** Include veteran women government leaders as role models in programs to increase women's presence in local government.

**Finding:** Local partner organizations and local trainers ensure that programs are culturally appropriate and help reach women leaders at the community level.

→ **Recommendation:** Involve local organizations in designing and delivering programs.

**Finding:** Women often lack access to information regarding elections.

→ **Recommendation:** Target women in disseminating information; inform them of criteria for candidacy, election timing, and campaign rules.

**Finding:** While many women possess leadership qualities that make them effective local government officials, they often lack the confidence and skills to launch successful bids for office.

→ **Recommendation:** Fund campaign training to enhance women's abilities to create a platform and cultivate a local constituency.

→ **Recommendation:** Emphasize confidence building in efforts to recruit women candidates, particularly by enabling them to speak with experienced women leaders about the challenges they face.

**Finding:** Among the most significant challenges women face in local politics are cultural attitudes regarding their leadership.

→ **Recommendation:** Facilitate discussion among experienced women officials and program participants on the strengths of their leadership and approaches to overcoming cultural barriers to their political participation.

→ **Recommendation:** Create electoral systems mandating that all voters select women from among candidates so that the population becomes accustomed to voting for women.