



Policy Brief: **Increasing Women's Participation in Local Government**

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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 authorities can enhance government's legitimacy and increase its accountability to citizens. Moreover, the process of decentralization can facilitate the democratic participation of groups that are frequently marginalized within formal governing structures. Women are one such group, and their policy priorities often include the issues that affect their families' daily lives: healthcare, education, and infrastructure. Increasing the number of women in local leadership therefore can enhance the provision of basic services and improve citizens' perception of government.

In 2006, Rwandan women captured 33.3 percent of district council seats nationwide and 66.6 percent in the capital city of Kigali, up from 27 percent nationwide in the 2001 elections. The country's constitutional quota requiring 30 percent women in all decision-making bodies was decisive in achieving this level of participation. The quota was buttressed by programs that connected local candidates with female parliamentarians and other national-level mentors, as well as efforts to provide campaign training and disseminate information about upcoming elections to women in rural areas.

In Rwanda, the 30 percent mandate is implemented at the local level through a triple balloting system that requires each voter to cast a general, youth, and women's ballot. This system ensures women's presence in elected office and accustoms the public to voting for them. More flexible candidate eligibility criteria at the local level also boosted the number of women in government. With less formal education than men, especially in rural areas, women can use the reduced requirements to enter the political system at the local level. For example, while national candidates must have a university degree, literacy is not required of all local candidates, and proceedings are often conducted in local language.

Local government in Rwanda has also benefitted from a recent reorganization that expanded the portfolio of what had previously been the vice mayor for gender, the office women most commonly occupy. In 2006, the responsibilities were broadened to include youth, culture, and health—issues of great concern to women. The expanded portfolio of responsibilities has strengthened local government's provision of services and increased women's leadership by giving them experience working on policy issues beyond gender.

Research demonstrates that women improve constituent relations and the delivery of social services, keys to effective local government. International actors investing in decentralization should encourage and assist countries to enact electoral policies that promote women's inclusion in local government.

Findings and Recommendations

Finding: While pushing for improved social service delivery, women in local government focus on education, health, and infrastructure.

- **Recommendation:** To improve service delivery, partner with women in local government.
 - **Recommendation:** Advocate for policies that promote women's presence in local government.
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Finding: Women's representation in local government is best ensured by quotas.

- **Recommendation:** Advocate for quotas for women's representation at all levels and within all positions of government.
 - **Recommendation:** Encourage innovative mechanisms, such as Rwanda's "triple balloting" system, to realize quotas at the local level, build willingness to vote for women, and create more broadly representative elected bodies.
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Finding: Local elected positions can be entry-level political opportunities for women and provide them with the experience needed to run for national office.

- **Recommendation:** Relax eligibility criteria for local government candidates (relative to national candidates) in order to create opportunities for women who may have less education.
 - **Recommendation:** Require local government proceedings to be held in local languages.
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Finding: Local government achieves the best results when women are not limited to positions that deal solely with gender issues.

- **Recommendation:** Cultivate portfolios that combine responsibility for gender with other functions.
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Finding: Local women's associations can function as feeder systems through which women acquire leadership experience; they also provide the organizational infrastructure to contact and encourage female community leaders to run for formal office.

- **Recommendation:** Support women's groups and enhance their links with local government.
- **Recommendation:** Provide opportunities for women's participation at the most local level of government, particularly by encouraging female civil society leaders to organize meetings with elected and appointed leaders.