

“Nothing, arguably, is as important today in the political economy of development as an adequate recognition of political, economic and social participation and leadership of women.”

Amartya Sen¹

Leadership and voice: More than ‘add women and stir’

Transformative development requires women in all their diversity* to have opportunities to lead and have their voices heard. Women taking up leadership positions in society can influence the aspirations of younger generations,² and has the potential to shift gender norms³ and deliver more inclusive policies and development.⁴ However, barriers to women’s leadership and voice are many and they operate at multiple levels, through both informal and formal norms and practices. Given this, what does it take to support women’s leadership and voice in communities, in workplaces, in politics and more broadly? It certainly involves more than an ‘*add women and stir*’ approach.⁵ It requires consideration as to whose voices are being heard, the quality (not just quantity) of leadership roles, and the broader structural changes in political, economic, cultural and religious systems that can foster a meaningful increase in women’s voice and influence.

Whose voices?

Women’s voice, leadership and contribution to decision-making is increasingly recognised as important in all spheres of life: communities, households, workplaces and politics. As the gender and international development agenda has shifted to address the structural inequalities that create unequal models of development,⁶ it has emphasised “*women’s right to set the development agenda*”,⁷ a

trend replicated in the WASH sector.⁸ Voice and leadership are seen as key to supporting the expression of women’s preferences, demands, needs, views and interests,⁹ well-beyond the previously emphasised instrumental or efficiency perspective associated with involving women.¹⁰ In the course of this shift, a notion of power, ‘*power to*’ – agency to act and make decisions – was introduced as an enabling and energising force for women.¹¹ Development projects informed by this aim have supported women to organise themselves towards collective action. Such initiatives have reinforced locally-driven movement building towards women in the Global South becoming a powerful political voice.¹² However, “women’s voice” as an abstract concept risks masking women’s diverse interests, identities, choices and preferences, shaped by differences in class, religion, ethnicity, caste, age and sexuality. Inevitably, “*some groups of women – as individuals or collectively – are better equipped to wield influence than others*”.¹³

‘Southern’ women’s non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have been described as the “*ultimate organizational form of grounded, subaltern, collective action*”,¹⁴ able to facilitate the inclusion of the most marginalised. That said, it cannot be assumed that the voices and views of women in such NGOs are representative of all women, particularly the marginalised.¹⁶ Nor

can the same be assumed for women in politics or those women achieving decision-making positions in other facets of life. Differences in women’s cultural background, class, and marital status inevitably affect the perspective they bring.¹⁷ This is exemplified in Indonesia, where the welcome emergence of female local politicians has not necessarily guaranteed political policies that prioritise all women’s perspectives¹⁸ nor the perspectives of people of all genders.¹⁹ Those women most likely to stand as candidates are elite, educated women with social, economic and political support behind them. As beneficiaries of the status quo, these women may not be committed to the inclusion of the marginalised.²⁰ The same is true for female leaders in workplaces, where it cannot be assumed that their leadership will be inclusive. Research points to how gender intersects with ethnicity, religion and other dimensions significantly shapes women’s experiences and roles.²¹ Greater diversity in representation of women in decision-making roles may lead to more gender responsive approaches and outcomes, and to more diversity in voice and leadership. However, quantity, quality and leadership styles all need consideration.

* In this article we write about ‘women’ with the intention of focusing on ‘women in all their diversity’ and recognise that even this terminology unintentionally excludes non-binary, third gender or otherwise gender diverse people. In drawing on existing literature and debates, many of these are framed with a focus on women (rather than people of all genders) in regards to the topic of leadership and voice.

Quantity and quality

Research has shown that women holding one-quarter to one-third of positions in representative decision-making bodies was necessary to influence public policy or political behaviour in the context of governance of local forests.²² A recent study also found that in developing countries with a higher proportion of women in national parliament, gender-sensitive laws on sexual harassment, rape, divorce and domestic violence were more likely to be passed and implemented.²³ Measures put in place to create opportunities for women in decision-making positions, such as gender quotas, reserved seats and targets have also been effective in increasing women's political leadership.²⁴ This is exemplified in Timor-Leste, where a formal gender quota was mandated in the 2007 National Election Law, establishing that one in every four candidates should be a woman. As a result of this law, in 2018 women held 34% of seats in Parliament, the highest rate in Asia.²⁵

Yet while increasing the number of women in decision-making bodies and forums is necessary ('add women and stir'), it is not sufficient. Increasing only the *number* of women in leadership roles may not address more fundamental questions of unequal power dynamics, or lack of opportunity for meaningful influence.²⁶ Instead, to increase women's leadership and voice substantively, at least three key challenges must be considered, applicable across political, economic and other leadership roles. Firstly, we need to tackle discriminatory social norms such as unpaid caring responsibilities, restrictions on women's freedom of movement, acceptance of violence against women and other discriminatory perceptions that women are not suitable leaders.^{27,28} Secondly, in contexts where women remain a significant minority, support to overcome a range of constraints is needed. This includes addressing biases in the recruitment practices of gatekeepers and prejudices that favour men,²⁹ and normative constraints that see women held to different standards of behaviour³⁰ or perceived as less experienced or autonomous as compared with men.³¹ Thirdly, women will have a range of perspectives

and interests and it is important to recognise women's diversity and support them to define and organise around their different priorities and interests.³² Such barriers have been evidenced in the WASH sector, with one study warning that quotas for women's involvement in water management has potential to result in 'token representatives' unless wider power dynamics are addressed.³³

Transformational versus transactional leadership

Insights from organisational development and business studies suggest that women bring different approaches, perspectives and styles to leadership work. A meta-analysis of leadership styles in workplaces in high-income countries, conducted in 2003, found that the leadership style of women was more participatory and transformational than their male counterparts, who adopted a more transactional style.³⁴ Recent studies in Pakistan and Turkey education and health departments reinforce this finding.³⁵ Transformational leaders are seen as motivating, caring for the interests of their followers and community; whilst transactional leaders are characterized as critical and focused on establishing exchange relationships with followers which appeal to the self-interest of both.³⁶ While both leadership styles have been found to be effective, why is it that organisational and political leadership roles continue to be male dominated?³⁷

It has also been found that gender stereotypes can directly impact voting behaviour. Research from the United States showed that traditional roles portray men as political agents and women as falling under their protection,

leading voters to support male political leaders over their female counterparts.³⁸ Equally, in workplaces, research has found differences in how women are evaluated and expected to engage in line with their culturally defined gender roles.³⁹ There are multiple factors at play in sustaining these gender inequalities, including what is referred to as "*inequality regimes*" which are the interrelated practices, processes, actions and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender and racial inequalities in the workplace.⁴⁰

Defining female and male leadership characteristics and attributes is contentious. The majority of research on leadership styles has been conducted in the organisational sphere and its wider relevance is uncertain. A study on governance in Brazil, for example, found that female leaders were not necessarily more participatory or transformational in their leadership style than men and it "*appears that strategy, rather than style, likely determines whether a leader will be more inclusive*".⁴¹ There is also active debate on what constitutes 'feminine leadership', 'masculine leadership' and 'feminist leadership' when it comes to leadership traits, competencies and characteristics. This includes the question of whether feminist leaders are more collaborative⁴² and a cautioning against oversimplification of leadership into gender binaries,⁴³ recognising that women may also engage in combinations of masculine and feminine or feminist leadership styles.⁴⁴ While debates continue, there is a clear need for further empirical research on if and how women, particularly in the Global South and from diverse backgrounds, lead differently and the implications of this on policy and community development.

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Ingredients for change

The viability and sustainability of individual or collective voice and leadership depends on women's capability to mobilise (including working with men), to access resources for coalition building and the existence of institutional structures and political opportunities that "enable voice to become influence".⁴⁵ Women's rights organisations play a key role in supporting women to develop skills, knowledge, networks and confidence to take on leadership roles and mobilisation capabilities.⁴⁶ Male leaders and men that are supportive of gender equality are important allies in supporting women's leadership.⁴⁷ Supporting and resourcing women's participation and influence at the local and community level can provide pathways for wider leadership.⁴⁸ This includes logistical and networking support as well as opportunities to develop the skills needed to navigate formal and informal social and political spaces.⁴⁹ It also means support to female role models and strategies to enable shifts from passive to active participation.⁵⁰ In workplaces, better understanding leadership emergence and why men and women emerge into leader roles at disparate rates may provide new insight to supporting more inclusive workplaces and cultures,⁵¹ as would tackling intersectional aspects of recruitment, promotion and culture to avoid legitimising or perpetuating current inequalities.⁵²

Women's leadership and voice in WASH: where to from here?

What does this mean for water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) interventions? In designing development

programs that seek to promote women's leadership and voice, it is important that practitioners, policy makers and researchers are aware of the relevant debates to inform good practice and contribute to the growing evidence base. Some of the questions we will be exploring through our *Water for Women research project Gender in WASH: partnerships, workforce and impact assessment* include:

- How are local gender-focused and WASH civil society organisations interpreting their role in achieving increased women's voice? How representative are these organisations of the cross-section of women in their society, including women of different social classes and religions or sexual and gender minorities?
- When we think about the WASH workforce, is ensuring women have a place at the table in decisions on WASH policy and practice enough to achieve more gender and inclusive approaches and outcomes? Or do more structural questions of power and agency need to be explored, including in workplaces?
- What attributes support women and people of all genders to achieve and enact successful, inclusive leadership roles in institutions and more broadly?
- How can we meaningfully measure the impact of WASH programs on women's leadership and voice? How can we move beyond measures of inclusion and participation of women (quantity) towards a focus on the quality and nature of women's voice and leadership?

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In investigating these questions and debates, we hope to support the WASH sector's engagement with leadership and voice, so as to promote meaningful and influential leadership roles and an increased awareness of whose voices (including both women and men, in all their diversity) are being heard, or not.

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