



The Gender of Democracy Matters

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Democracy has become a truly universal value and pursuit. Though democratic principles are continually reinforced through international instruments, norms and standards, this goal is a daunting challenge across the world.

As one of the key players in the democracy community, International IDEA has identified gender equality as an important strategic objective in building sustainable democracy worldwide.¹ This is premised on the important need to create an understanding

¹ 'Gender' refers to socially constructed roles of both women and men, as well as the relationships between them in a given society at a specific time and place. The qualities, identities and behaviours expected from men and women are determined through the process of socialisation

of democracy and its intersection with gender equality if democracy is to be firmly institutionalised.

Several landmark governmental declarations, conventions and instruments agreed upon at various global and continental platforms provide comprehensive mandates for ensuring that gender equality and women's empowerment are actively addressed as core democratic and development concerns. Consequently, in national constitutions and legislation, gender equality is reaffirmed and now formally embodied in the democratic principles of most countries. To a certain extent, gender equality is broadly seen and understood as an issue for all who want to realise the "perfect democracy".

However, despite the widespread commitments to the principles of gender equality translation of these principles into practice and substantive gains remains uneven and incomplete across the world. What happens between the signing of progressive declarations and taking the international gains home? What are the missing links? Does democracy need gender equality? Can democracy transform power relations between women and men? How can gender equality transform the face of democracy?

The present ideal for democracy is that it should be inclusive, participatory, representative, accountable and transparent. However, there are numerous arguments to justify the exclusion of segments in our societies, especially women, even though they constitute half of the world's population.

As a system for participation and representation, can a nation be described as democratic if there is no equal participation and representation of women and men when and where decisions that

shape democracy are taken? How can it be real democracy if at least half of the population is not represented to input their practical needs and strategic interests? Can a country's democratic credentials be judged by its record on gender equality? There are more questions than answers and there is need to distil the current thinking and practice on these issues.

Far-reaching interventions which deconstruct and transform rather than modernise gender relations are needed. This necessitates the equal distribution of power and influence through interventions that encourage men to loosen their grip and relinquish some of their economic, political and social power if women are to have their fair share of it. Giving up power and privilege is something that only a few can gladly do.

It could also be that the gender agenda may be threatening to the power and privilege of the "male stream" democracy. In the same vein, it is worthy to note that men must not be solely regarded as impediments and obstacles to gender equality in democracy building, but that men perform an important role in efforts to transform the gender of democracy.

Striving for gender equality as a pillar in democracy requires transformative and visionary leadership. This is the type of leadership that is committed to use power not as an instrument of domination and exclusion but as a conduit for liberation, inclusion and equality. Otherwise, democracy remains a hollow concept out of the reach of ordinary men and women and therefore serves political interests of a small clique of the powerful elites.

Another essential underpinning is that gender equality has to be treated as an explicit goal for democracy building processes and

institutions. If gender is treated as an “add-on” then it is unlikely that gender equality will be a reality in democracy building.

Difficulties also arise when gender equality goals are perceived as “self-implementing” along with real or feigned ignorance about the nature of gender disparities.

Democracy and gender is also a conceptual issue and if driven by policies and democracy programmes not grounded in conceptual clarity and adequately tailored to address existing gender differentials, the interventions therefore tend to perpetuate and exacerbate inequalities.

While elections are an important ingredient of democracy, elections on their own do not make a democracy, the gaps and challenges for democracy attest to this assertion. When electoral democracy tends to receive more attention than the people themselves and fails to facilitate the “will of the people”, both women and men by transforming their conditions it is not sustainable and needs to be interrogated.

It is essential to highlight that democracy should transcend beyond contestation for political power through elections, where the contestation is almost always between candidates of the same gender. There is no doubt that the absence of a true culture of gender equality is a great impediment to democracy.