LEADING THE WAY TO CHANGE

Women everywhere have proven their merits as leaders and activists, pressing for a more fair and inclusive world. They still do not have an equal share of the positions where decisions are made, however, even where choices affect everyone, women and men. Despite many obstacles, women are not waiting for an invitation to the table. With growing skills and perseverance, and with UN Women’s support, women politicians, electoral officials, voters, lawmakers, civil society activists and many others are claiming their equal right to lead and be heard. The time is now.

RUNNING FOR OFFICE

Her unassuming nature belies her courage and prowess in a country where men dominate politics. This is Alice Wahome. She tried three times before she finally won a seat in Kenya’s Parliament from the county of Murang’a, which had never before elected a woman.

Once in office for the first time in 2013, Wahome quickly set out to justify the faith her constituents had placed in her, improving infrastructure for farmers, access to electricity and water, and education. When she ran again in 2017, these successes did not deter vicious attacks linked to her gender, including on social media and in a scuffle with an election official. But she kept going straight to another victory, helped along the way by training and information provided by UN Women.

“The society says women are making noise. But I say no, women are speaking. We are having democratic conversations about the future of this country,” Wahome says.

When Abdia Gole first announced her decision to stand as a candidate in the 2017 elections in rural northern Kenya, people in her conservative community ridiculed her. The Council of Elders, the influential and traditional leaders of the community, weighed in with their disapproval. It didn’t matter that the 33-year-old was a recent graduate from one of Kenya’s leading universities. Women are expected to stay home and care for their families. No one had ever heard of a woman competing for political office.

But that didn’t stop Gole. While she did not ultimately win a seat, she used the training provided by UN Women to blaze a new trail, demonstrating that a woman’s place is in elections too. Changing mindsets fuels progress, which is why UN Women also supported outreach to the Council and other key community members, opening a dialogue about a more inclusive society and the contributions women could make.

Altogether, in the lead-up to Kenya’s 2017 elections, UN Women trained more than 400 female aspiring candidates to better understand the electoral process and its rules and regulations, as well as on the contributions that a critical mass of women leaders can make to improving women’s lives. After the poll, women’s representation in the National Assembly edged up to 21 per cent, a slight increase from the last election in 2013. Women took 23 of the open seats that are not reserved specifically for them, up from 16. As importantly, women gained new leadership positions; three women governors and three women senators were elected in 2017. No women previously held any of these seats.

The barriers are still significant. Even though by law political parties must nominate women as at least one-third of their candidates, this does not happen in practice, an issue compounded by other deterrents such as violence against women candidates and lack of funding. But women regardless are geared up to keep on mobilizing. As Wahome tells other women candidates: “No one will move for you. Go and take it.”

Women in Nepal are also on the move in politics. The Constitution there makes an explicit commitment to gender equality, including through election quotas. So with the first local elections in 20 years in 2017, a major step towards decentralizing the Government and bringing it closer to people in local communities, an opportunity sprang open for more women to contest for office. UN Women supported electoral officials and sponsored a landmark national conference.
for women leaders. It also joined activists from excluded groups, such as home-based workers and survivors of trafficking, to prepare women candidates to run. When the polls closed, 14,000 women, the highest number ever, had taken 41 per cent of local seats. Building on a groundswell of women’s activism, and rallying around the principle of leaving no one behind, they are setting a new direction for inclusive and accountable local governments across the country.

MOBILIZING FOR EQUALITY

Where women’s rights are embedded in the law, women gain a critical foundation for claiming their rights in all spheres of life. As Georgia began orchestrating a shift to a parliamentary system of governance, UN Women stood behind successful advocacy for constitutional guarantees of gender equality. The new Constitution, adopted in 2017, requires that the State play an active role in achieving gender equality, which means systematically instituting new laws, policies and programmes so that women enjoy not just equal opportunities, but equal results. This significant advance came through concerted lobbying by civil society, women’s groups and development partners, spearheaded by a Task Force on Women’s Political Participation.

EMBEDDING GENDER PERSPECTIVE

In Bolivia, UN Women worked closely with the Electoral Tribunal to weave gender perspectives across electoral administration and management. The goal: a more representative democracy through women’s increased participation as voters, candidates and electoral officials. An Observatory on Parity Democracy, established within the tribunal, will routinely monitor progress towards parity in elections and full implementation of Bolivia’s unique Law on Violence against Women in Politics.

“THEY SAID THAT A WOMAN COULDN’T RUN FOR ELECTIONS... I PROVED THEM WRONG.”

COUMBA DIAW

Coumba Diaw is the only female Mayor of the Sagatta Djoloff community in the region of Louga, Senegal, which is made up of 54 other municipalities, all headed by men. She grew up listening to a rhetoric that restricted women from participating in politics and public life, but that didn’t stop her. Today she makes other elected officials aware of the importance of women’s leadership.

“...that a woman could not be a Mayor...that a woman did not have the skills to manage a community. I proved them all wrong.

I was born into a conservative family. Nothing [in my background] predestined me to take up politics. At the age of 14, I was forced to leave school to get married. For almost 30 years, I was a housewife, as was expected of me. But, I believed that I could change my destiny. I was inspired by the women in my country who had pioneered new careers... I joined politics in 1998. As a woman Mayor, I know that I must inspire other women. I also know that I must not disappoint the hopes placed in me. One of my first actions [as Mayor] was to install drinking water taps in 33 out of 43 villages of the Sagatta Djoloff community. This freed up women’s time that used to be spent fetching and collecting water from distant sources. I also set up a weekly market for women to increase their income. Recently, I received a training on women’s leadership and local governance. I will deliver the training to all the elected officials in my area so that they too see the value of women’s participation in public life and promote their leadership within institutions.”

Nakarna Kumari Dahal, 94, has her finger inked to show she has exercised her right to vote in Nepal’s 2017 election. It was a watershed moment, bringing 34,000 women into local government.