Girls and women leadership in West Africa

Not enough seats at the table

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Photos used in this document feature children and adults from communities with which Plan works, but it should not be inferred that they represent the persons whose voices are heard in this report.

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Cover photo:
Gifty and her friend address a village meeting on the importance of girls' education, Ghana
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This report discusses the progress and the remaining challenges of girls and women in West Africa and Cameroon to make their voices heard and listened to at key decision-making tables. It provides compelling insights into the views of girls and women on what progress has been made and what continues to hold them back from getting a fair share in taking decisions. In many extents, it tells my story and that of the far too few other African women who are occupying seats at the decision-making tables in their countries and institutions.

It comes at a moment of time where globally, decision-makers discuss a new global sustainable development framework that will provide the world with new directions for the coming 15 years. This framework not only aims to close the gaps in regard to social, economic and environmental aspects of sustainable development, it also needs to continue in the spirit of the MDGs by addressing some their unfinished business. Reaching the poorest and excluded people who did not equally benefit from the tremendous progress achieved by the MDGs for broader population groups belongs to this unfinished business. Addressing shortcomings in good governance and creating more accountable institutions is another one.

Upholding gender equality and women’s rights within the Post 2015 framework will be essential for addressing this unfinished business and for carving more equitable results for girls and women, particularly those from marginalized and excluded groups.

The UN High Level Panel on the Post-2015 agenda has recommended an inclusion of a stand-alone goal on gender equality and empowerment of women and girls, supported by the mainstreaming of gender equality as a core principle across all other goals. Plan’s report illustrates why a stand-alone goal is of fundamental importance for the future of girls and women in this part of the world. Here, women’s ability to take part in key decisions that affect them, and that guide the efforts of their families, communities, and countries, is dramatically curtailed by inadequate legal protection and frameworks and a lack of economic opportunities, strong female role models, and opportunities to learn and exercise their citizen- and political leadership. A stand-alone goal, clear targets and indicators are needed to help maintain focus and investments in girls and women under the new framework.

This report makes another important contribution to some of the challenging discussions of those deciding on the final Sustainable Development Framework: it offers important insights in regard to girls as a group that is particularly excluded from decision-making not only because of their gender, but also because of their age. The report makes practical recommendations on how girls’ can be supported to develop political agency and engagement, which is critical for getting more women into decision-making positions at government level, within civil society or the private sector.

I recommend this report, which brings out the voices of girls and women living in West Africa clear and loud, to the reading of all decision-makers.

Yours,

Mrs Aminata Touré,
former Prime Minister of Senegal.
Executive summary

Men and women from the community of Waragni-solidarité. Plan helped to build a primary school and nursery in the community in 2010 with funds from the Church of Ireland.
Executive summary

What kind of world will the children in West Africa grow up into? More particularly, can girls in this region look forward to an adult life where they exercise autonomy and agency, take initiatives, and make decisions that influence the lives of others?

Since the great international campaign for women’s rights that expressed itself in the United Nations Decade for Women (1975-85), women’s access to decision-making processes has been recognised as a fundamental necessity. The education and empowerment of girls are major drivers of gender equality, but their impact is undermined if society as a whole remains patriarchal and governments that have signed international commitments on women’s rights do not actively encourage women’s leadership.

What is happening in the West African context? Where and why are women making progress? And if they are not, why are they not?

This report sets out a digest of the results of an exhaustive process of research and analysis conducted by independent consultants on behalf of the Plan West Africa Regional Office (WARO) between November 2013 and April 2014. Four comprehensive research reports, packed with insights and ground-breaking statistical analysis across thirteen study countries, plus a synthesis report, are available from Plan WARO.

The researchers’ conclusion? ‘While positive change is taking place throughout the study countries, it is halting, often frustratingly slow, and begrudged by men. But’, they say, the direction of travel is ‘forward nevertheless’.

What an analysis of statistical data shows

Women’s participation in positions of political leadership, reflected in the percentage of women ministers and parliamentarians, has improved for the West Africa region and Cameroon, largely because of the quota system. But the system has not taken root, government efforts are insufficient, and civil society activists need to keep pressing for meaningful and sustainable change. Political engagement by women gender activists and their allies, for all its difficulties, offers the most immediate possibility of transforming the overall situation for women; their political engagement is a necessity, not a choice.

Women’s participation in the salaried sector is stagnating in between a dismal 7 - 8 per cent of the female workforce. In addition, women make up only 4 per cent of the professional and technical managerial workforce, a figure that is no better than it was a decade or so previously. And spousal/partner control over women’s earnings is on the rise.

The barriers blocking women’s access to decision-making processes

Pervasive negative attitudes to girls and women and systematic discrimination and violence against them are the biggest barriers girls and women face to have their voices heard where it matters. The favouring of boy-children over girls in matters of education and the relegation of girls to heavy duties in the domestic sphere stifle girls’ ambitions and their opportunities. A huge array of social, economic and political factors that flow from women’s subordinate position in society – including suspicion and mistrust from other women – hinders their ability to develop their capacities and exercise leadership. These barriers are rooted in a patriarchal system that, in many respects, remains as powerful now as it was when the UN Decade for Women began.

The enablers of women’s participation in decision-making processes

Support from national leaders and parliaments for gender parity and quota laws, and sustained efforts to enforce them at every level of governance – national, regional and local – are key. Gender awareness among the tens of thousands of associations that flourish at community level in West Africa can also increase women’s and girls’ capacity for leadership.

Our research showed the need for a comprehensive change agenda that supports girls and women in West Africa to gain more power and access the decision making table.
This agenda should include sets of actions in four different spheres:

1. **better legal protection and enforcement of girls’ and women’s civil and socio-cultural and economic rights, sound state policies and plans,**
2. **opportunities to learn, develop, and exercise citizenship skills,**
3. **access to economic opportunities and**
4. **role models that can inspire them and society to change the views of what girls and women can and should do.**

The high level recommendations for each of the four spheres are summarized in the “call to action” below.

/// WE CALL ON GOVERNMENTS TO:

- Ensure that all births are registered – those of girls as well as of boys – so that women have appropriate access to citizenship, can register to vote, stand for election, sign a legal document, present themselves at a bank and ask for a loan.
- Pass gender equity and quota laws and enforce them. Take a sustained public stand against violence against girls and women, and bring perpetrators to justice, so that girls and women see that the state defends their human rights and their rights as citizens.
- Take strong measures to harmonize formal and traditional legal frameworks and their applications.
- Strengthen investments in girls education and training opportunities, improving education quality to in view of preparing girls and boys adequately for economic activity, employment and civic engagement;
- Establish inclusive public accountability and oversight mechanisms at different levels that give girls and women the opportunity to engage with, feedback or complain on quality of services and political processes, and give them opportunities to gain confidence in exercising their participation rights.
- Promote the creation of girls’ and equitable young people’s parliaments and mechanisms to associate them formally to planning of government policies, plans and budgets and to the monitoring of their execution.

/// WE ASK CIVIL SOCIETY, INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS, DONORS, POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE UN SYSTEM TO STRENGTHEN THEIR EFFORTS TO:

- Advocate towards governments to bring forward and implement national gender policies.
- Practise women’s and girls’ empowerment in their own organizational processes. This includes the introduction of quota for decision making positions as well as female frontline staff, in particular in rural areas.
- Identify and work closely with “gender champions”- women and men in position of power including traditional and religious leaders - who can act as catalysts for gender equality and for questioning gender stereotypes.
- Implement programmes that promote and bring to scale both girls’ and women’s economic empowerment (savings groups and women’s business associations) and their active citizenship, activism and effective networking;
- Implement programmes promoting female leadership within the movement or organisation to groom role models for girls and young women.
Introduction

Woman dance at VSLA meeting in the Bafata region of Guinea Bissau
What does it take for a woman in West Africa to get involved in politics and function effectively? These adolescents have a few ideas: ‘Women have an intellectual force in themselves that enables them to get involved in politics,’ says one. ‘A woman can succeed if she has confidence in herself.’ ‘Certain qualities are necessary for a woman in politics’, says another, ‘being brave, demonstrating wisdom, and having the ability to influence others.’

The young people speaking here are boys, not girls. As they see it, resilience is the key to women’s successful political involvement; if you have it, gender falls away. Political involvement for girls begins, one adult male respondent said, with them having ‘freedom of expression that enables them to give their opinion to the family… Girls should be allowed to mix with boys often, so they get used to them, and learn to discuss without fear or apprehension’.

Why are we surprised by these encouraging male voices? Perhaps we assume too readily that every man in West Africa shares prevailing views of girls being subordinated: ‘The weight of housework reserved for girls hinders them from realising their ambitions’, said one interviewee. ‘Girls have not removed the plates, and thus cannot get into politics.’

But there’s a countervailing force, and it’s expressed by this hopeful girl in a village in Togo: ‘Educating girls helps them to have an opening to the world’, she said. It stimulates ‘dynamism, courage, respect for self and others, and wisdom’; essential qualities, she thought, for any girl who wanted to get involved in politics.

Thirty years ago, a schoolgirl in West Africa might have read the final statement from the 1985 World Conference on Women and thought the world really was about to open up to women. The Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women, adopted as a United Nations general assembly resolution in December 1985, named women’s ‘right to take part in national and international decision-making processes’ as fundamental to the progress of ‘equality, development, and peace’. Ten years later, the Beijing Platform for Action identified persistent inequality between men and women in the sharing of power and decision-making as one of the Beijing World Conference on Women’s ‘critical areas of concern’.

Nearly twenty years on from Beijing, our report investigates women’s and girls’ access to decision-making processes, both political and economic, in twelve West African states plus Cameroon: Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo.

Of these states, only four have not so far ratified the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa, adopted by the African Union in 2003, article 9 of which concerns women’s right to participate in the political and decision-making process.

To what extent are women making progress? If girls and women in West Africa are, as the boys observed, just as capable of ‘intellectual force, bravery and wisdom’ as men, what is the landscape that lies ahead of any visionary and committed young woman in West Africa who arms herself with the African Union protocol and the nominal support of her government and sets out to attain political or economic influence on behalf of herself and her community?

Plan West Africa commissioned an independent research team to investigate the socio-political and economic factors that on the one hand obstruct women’s and girls’ access to decision-making processes, and on the other hand facilitate it. How do women become politically engaged? What are the most promising approaches? How does the existence of girl and women leaders influence the agency and aspiration of girls?

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1. This conference was preceded by a first global women’s conference in Mexico City in 1975, which called for a UN Decade for Women and proposed a convention on women’s rights. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979.
2. Fifth women’s world conference: http://www.5wwc.org/conference_background/1985_WCW.html
4. Cameroon, Guinea, Niger and Sierra Leone
Introduction

The research shows that women’s participation in positions of political leadership, reflected in the percentages of women ministers and parliamentarians, has improved for the West Africa region and Cameroon, largely because of the quota system – ‘creeping forward’, is how they describe it.

But economically, women in West Africa are at a standstill. Only 7 per cent of working women are in salaried positions – 1 per cent less than ten years previously. And women have not increased their presence in the professional and technical managerial workforce – only 4 per cent of working women have top level jobs, a figure that is no better than it was a decade or so previously. Women in professional and technical occupations get paid much less than men: in Liberia, for instance, women’s wages are just 0.32 per cent of men’s.

Political engagement supported by male allies – a key to success

Fox and Jah conclude that in order to make progress, women and their allies need to prioritise political engagement. They need to identify where real and potential champions for women’s empowerment are located and build constituencies for political reform around them. And, they say, it is important to remember that some of these champions can be men – a particular minister, member of parliament, judge, chief or religious leader who can become an ally. In December 2013, for instance, a paramount chief in Kailahun district in Sierra Leone told a public meeting marking 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence: ‘We will make sure that women are given equal opportunity to participate in the governance system of the chiefdom’.

In Niger, where, according to traditional norms, ‘simply daring to look a man in the face is a sign of disrespect’, women’s associations in the city of Zinder started a petition calling for deficiencies in the gender quota law to be remedied. They hoped for a thousand signatures; they got 1,395 from women – and 1,876 from men. As the campaign developed, Elhadje Omar Bashir, a local religious leader, was emboldened to tell a magazine: ‘Islam is not opposed to women accessing land... Women can inherit land as men can. No chapter of the Holy Koran or the hadith is opposed to that’.

‘We have to empower this generation of young men to understand the importance of gender equality’, says a key informant. ‘Men need to be partners in the process. If we can engage them at a young age, we can break a lot of the societal and cultural barriers that would otherwise prevent them being champions of gender equality.’

Transforming gender norms through innovative projects

In West Africa, culture and tradition prevent most young girls putting on shorts and football boots and running around a football pitch. Since 2010 Plan Togo and Plan Ghana have smashed through this barrier by establishing a Girls’ Leadership through Soccer programme. In 36 communities in Togo, girls are now putting on shorts, practising controlling footballs, and playing matches, and more than 57 per cent of comments in the Togo focus groups applauded: ‘Those who are on the team do not leave school’, said a respondent. ‘They do not contract

Girl interviews Ms. Priscilla Berry Possy Quenum, a lawyer specialized in EU law and president of the Pulse Association of Community law, Benin

8. Quoted in Imam and Kamminga, ibid.
early pregnancy. They want to go far. They are an example for other girls.’
So, the long march towards girls’ and women’s empowerment continues. There’s no doubt that getting involved in public life can seem like one commitment too many to women – as Rose Mensah-Kutin says in Honorable9, Yaba Badoe’s film about district assembly women in Ghana, ‘Women are overburdened – they have to combine so many responsibilities in the household with activities to generate some income, and then community responsibilities as well. So women get tired, and sometimes they just want to maintain what they are used to rather than venture out.’

But political power at every level of public life offers women and their allies effective means of challenging the status quo. Plan WARO presents this research in the hope that many more women and girls will experience the exhilaration of ‘venturing out’, becoming agents in their own lives, and exercising power to transform the lives of others.

The research project

Research team leader Leslie M. Fox, gender research adviser Dr Fatou Jah and two research associates pursued four detailed areas of study under the heading Cross-Country Research Study on: Access of Girls and Women to Decision-making Processes in West Africa and Cameroon. Their reports:

- Literature Review, Leslie M. Fox and Dr Fatou Jah, February 2014: a comprehensive review of the literature produced on the subject in the previous five years. This review generated the case studies of good practice published during the course of this document.

- Analysis of Secondary Data, Leslie M. Fox, Dr Fatou Jah, Aminatta Sanyang, April 2014: a ground-breaking analysis using the databases of the World Bank, UN Women, the African Development Bank, the Economic Commission for Africa, and others. Where possible, the study compared the most recent data available with statistics from ten years previously; but in many instances, gender-disaggregated data were not available, and there were no data at all for certain countries.

- Key Informant Interviews, Leslie M. Fox, Dr Fatou Jah, Andrew John Howe, March 2014: a report based on wide-ranging but comprehensively structured interviews with more than thirty ‘key informants’ – women and men working across the region in concerned government departments, local and international civil society organisations and donor agencies on the issue of women’s empowerment.

- Togo Country Study, Leslie M. Fox, Dr Fatou Jah, Andrew John Howe, April 2014: a study based on more than 50 focus group discussions involving over 300 participants in urban and rural areas in Togo. The comments were codified and given statistical weight.

- Synthesis Report, Leslie M. Fox, Dr Fatou Jah, Andrew Johnson Howe, April 2014.

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9. Honorables: Film directed by Yaba Badoe on Ghanaian Women District Assembly members
https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLJLY8mkZweGPeqyH91wwG6r71ujoK8BrPx

Women’s training session in child nutrition practices, Senegal
What works in Ghana: young women parliamentarians

In northern Ghana, 40 young women stand solemnly in a circle, their hands clasped behind their backs. Madame Speaker leads them in a prayer to open the next session of the Young Female Parliament (YFP), an initiative of ActionAid Ghana (AAG) and NORSAAC (the Northern Sector Action on Awareness Centre).

In Ghana, women lack access to decision-making opportunities at all levels of society. Women hold just 8 per cent of seats in the national parliament, and make up 12 per cent of the administrative class in the civil service. In the north, where the YFP is based, women held just 38 out of 573 district assembly seats in 2010. AAG says: ‘Even in student representative councils at tertiary institutions, young women are under-represented’.

AAG and NORSAAC set out to work with young women aged between 15 and 27 in secondary and tertiary education – a rare group in Ghana, where just 14 per cent of primary school girls went on to secondary school in 2006. In northern Ghana, where early marriage and early pregnancy are common, the numbers are even lower. AAG and NORSAAC initiated the YFP to give young women experience of developing their voices, their ideas and their leadership capacities. Fifteen of the 20 districts in the north participate, with girls elected by their peers from senior high schools and colleges.

In 2010, two YFP members contested local district assembly elections; one said afterwards: ‘The parliament has taught me two big things: that I have the right to participate in decision-making and that I can be whatever I want to be in the future. Though I was not successful in last year’s election, I will never give up, and I’m working hard to come back.’

About Plan

Plan is a global children’s organisation, working in over 50 developing countries across Africa, Asia and the Americas to promote child rights and lift millions of children out of poverty, with neither religious nor political affiliation. Plan’s vision is of a world in which all children realise their full potential in societies which respect people’s rights and dignity.

In 2012, Plan launched the Global “Because I am a Girl” Campaign that aims at

- Providing direct support to 4 million girls to get the education, skills, and support they need to move themselves from poverty to opportunity.
- Improving family and community support and access to services for girls.
- Empowering 40 million girls and boys through gender-aware and gender-transformative programmes.
- Positively impact the lives of 400 million girls and boys through policy change.

As an organization, Plan has adopted a policy on gender equality that names gender equality as a core objective of its work as an organization. The policy includes standards of performance in offices and staff, programmes, partnerships, advocacy, and public engagement.

Plan’s Global Citizenship & Governance strategy supports the ambitions of its global campaign by providing a clear path of work that supports

- young women and men to become politically conscious, organize in groups and take collective actions, and engage effectively in public accountability mechanisms
- public decision-making mechanisms to be transparent, accountable and responsive to girls, young women as much as to boys and young men

The situation on the ground – what’s moved on, and what hasn’t: an analysis of secondary data

Women from Keur Maba harvesting vegetables from their drop irrigation gardening project, Senegal
A young woman at school in West Africa right now – she looks around her for role models, and what does she see? She sees Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the first woman to have won a presidential election in Africa. Sirleaf in fact won twice – in 2005 and again in 2011 – and has appointed women to high-level posts; in 2010 she said: ‘If I could have found them, I would have made an all-woman cabinet – but I didn’t find enough of them’\(^{11}\). But in 2011 women also stood as presidential candidates in Benin, Cameroon and Niger – the first time there were women candidates in Cameroon and Niger – and none achieved even 1 per cent of the vote.

In Senegal, a gender parity law passed in 2010 had the effect of raising women’s representation in the National Assembly to 44 per cent in the 2012 elections, and from September 2013 to July 2014 Senegal had a woman prime minister (the country’s second), Aminata Touré. But in Togo, women occupy just 14 of the 91 seats in the National Assembly, and make up 7.2 per cent of municipal councils. When women do enter politics, they’re often still expected to know their place – literally; a senior woman politician in Cameroon told a researcher in May 2013 that when male colleagues arrive late to a political meeting, ‘they will expect your seat’\(^{12}\).

What’s behind the headlines and the individual stories? What do statistics say about the trends in women’s access to decision-making processes – do they reveal progress, or the opposite?

Plan’s research team carried out a copious excavation of the databases of relevant international organisations for information relating to changes of women’s status and influence in the political, economic and the socio-cultural sphere. Through a comprehensive analysis of the secondary data, the research team set out to compile a statistical picture of how much has changed. Their intention was to compare the most recent available data with figures from roughly ten years previously. While they rapidly ran up against the paucity of sex-disaggregated data – for instance under the heading of women’s access to credit and resources – and in some cases the absence of any data at all, the analysis reveals a great deal.

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/// What the secondary data say about changes in women’s political leadership

Across the thirteen countries, between 1994 and 2010, the number of women cabinet ministers went up by about 11 per cent, to an average 17 per cent. But there are striking variations. In Liberia, around 30 per cent of ministers are women. In Sierra Leone, the figure is around 8 per cent. Both countries have emerged from vicious civil wars, but Liberia’s president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, has appointed women to positions ‘people thought only a man could do’, a key informant said.

In Guinea-Bissau the proportion of women cabinet ministers rose from 4 per cent to 23.5, and in Niger from 5 per cent to 22.6. The rise in Niger is due to the quota law passed in 2000, which, for all its limitations, has had some effect.

With respect to women parliamentarians, the average numbers rose in the same period to around 12 per cent across the region. But not all countries made progress: in Benin there was no change; and in Ghana and Mali, numbers of women parliamentarians actually went down. It is noteworthy that soon after this data were collected, Senegal doubled the percentage of seats held by women: elections to the National Assembly were organized in July 2012 and the proportion of elected female parliamentarians jumped from 22 percent in the previous parliament to 43 percent for the incoming session.

A correlation of these numbers with other factors reveals that higher representation of women in parliament is significantly associated with a decline in infant mortality. Government investment in the health sector, especially where it directly impacts on women and children, is thus critical to elevating women’s political status, and vice versa. Our investigation further revealed the positive effect of women ministers on the human development index in all 13 study countries.

13. See pages 18 and 19, Fox, Jah, Sanyang, Analysis of Secondary Data, 2014
14. See Table 20, page 34, ibid
With every unit increase in the representation of women ministers, the human development index can be expected to rise significantly.

This is the strongest possible argument for the appointment of women ministers; any government interested in the welfare of its citizens must welcome their positive effect on educational, health and economic outcomes.

/// Changes in women’s economic empowerment - or not...

Analysis of the data paints a dismal picture. Across the 13 study countries, only an average 3.9 per cent of the workforce in technical, professional and managerial positions are women – and this figure is just 0.2 per cent higher than it was ten years ago. Numbers of women in these positions have gone down in Cameroon, Guinea and Nigeria. For Liberia, Sierra Leone and Togo there are no figures for the earlier period, and for Guinea-Bissau there are no figures at all15.

There are higher numbers of women in administrative positions – an increase on average of around 9 per cent to 18 per cent of the relevant workforce. Guinea-Bissau currently has the highest proportion – at 37.5 per cent – and Cameroon the lowest, at 11.1 per cent. Data for top women managers in commercial firms were unavailable for all study countries ten years previously, and are only available currently for eight of them. Liberia has the highest number of top female managers, with 30 per cent of the relevant workforce.

Despite the low representation of women in technical, professional and managerial positions, huge numbers of women in West Africa and Cameroon are part of their country’s labour force. Figure 3 shows that on average 64.4 per cent of all adult women across the study countries are economically active, up only 2.2 per cent from ten years previously. The majority of women in West Africa and Cameroon are very busy trying to earn an income.

Of these women, only 7.1 per cent are on wages or salaries – and the startling fact is that that figure is 1.2 per cent lower than it was ten years earlier.

Where women are earning salaries, they are earning at best only 0.73 times what men earn16. In Ghana, women’s wages are 0.37 per cent of men’s; in Liberia, 0.32 per cent. Our data analysis shows that, as more women enter professional and technical occupations, the gender wage gap in these areas is growing17.

An average 54.3 per cent of working women are employed in agriculture, up 1.4 per cent from ten years ago (though women’s agricultural employment figures for Burkina Faso, Liberia and Nigeria have remained pretty much static, suggesting that this labour market is saturated). On average 36.2 per cent of women work in sales and services, with a significant drop in the figure in this area in Mali and smaller decreases in Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone and Senegal.

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15. See Figure 3, page 6, ibid.

16. See Figure 8b, page 11, ibid.

17. See Table 15, page 32, ibid.
The high representation of women in the agricultural sector is accompanied by their appallingly low representation in the more profitable and secure salaried and industrial sectors. Once in salaried employment, women earn a fraction of men in similar positions.

There is a correlation between the improved attendance of girls at primary school and their representation in administrative and technical fields. But our finding that the passage of time has not enhanced women’s ability to enter the professional and technical fields, despite their progress in educational attainment, points to the persistence of perceptions about traditional role models and negative assumptions about women’s ability to do such work. Women are still neither sufficiently supported by legal frameworks nor by their husbands and other male relatives who are reluctant to share the burden of household chores and parenting.

/// Decision-making in the family

Our research analysed data on women’s participation in financial decision-making in the household. Most women in West Africa and Cameroon decide how to spend their earnings, and have done for at least the previous decade or so. On average 72.4 per cent of women control their own earnings, a rise in most countries – though the most recent Liberian figure is 22.5 per cent, and for Guinea-Bissau there are no figures at all.

However, in seven of the countries, spousal or partner control over women’s earnings is rising – Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal. In Ghana the rise is over 11 per cent, from 5.4 per cent of women to 16.7 per cent. In Sierra Leone, 37 per cent of women are subjected to spousal control of their income. The numbers from Liberia are most shocking: over half of the women (53 per cent) have their earnings controlled by their partner.

At the household level, where the majority of women in West Africa decide how to spend the money they’ve earned (and typically spend much of it on social security, school-fees and health-care), it appears that in seven countries their power to do so is being eroded. Since our analysis demonstrates that women who control their own earnings have greater autonomy in their use of health services, for instance, this erosion is likely to have direct consequences for their own well-being as much as for that of their children.

It appears from this analysis of available data that the political empowerment of women and girls is creeping forward – but economically, women have made very little progress. Without a degree of financial independence, women cannot move.

‘Local women lack the financial means to invest in politics’, an interviewee in Togo said. ‘The little they have is only enough for their needs.’
What works in Sierra Leone: increasing women’s representation in parliament

Sierra Leone’s violent eleven-year civil war ended in 2002, but before it did, a small group of professional women had come together as the 50/50 Group to lobby for women’s representation in parliament, cabinet and local government in equal numbers with their presence in society.

Twelve years on, women are still under-represented – only 15 out of 124 parliamentarians elected in 2012 were women, and 14 per cent of ministers and deputy ministers. Women have to battle very hard in a conservative patriarchal society which views them as second-class citizens, and where politics have involved corruption and extreme violence. But 50/50 encourages them into battle: before the 2007 election, 38 women were trained and supported by 50/50 to stand as parliamentary candidates, and 16 were elected.

In 2009, 50/50 established a School Club at a girls’ secondary school in the capital, Freetown. If funds were available, such clubs could be established all over Sierra Leone.

A Gender Equity Bill is expected to be passed during the 2012-17 parliament, and 50/50 and other organisations are pressing for it to include a 30 per cent gender quota. Work with men is regarded as essential, given the scale of resistance and ridicule that women involved in politics encounter. In 2002, Zainab Bangura, a long-term women’s rights activist, stood for the presidency; she was subjected to scathing coverage in the press, and received less than 1 per cent of the vote. However, after Ernest Bai Koroma won the presidency in 2007, she subsequently became foreign minister and minister of health. To date, her contributions to developing national programmes on affordable health and to enhancing the multilateral and bilateral relations with the international community have been widely recognized.

In the struggle for gender equality in Sierra Leone, says researcher Hussainatu Abdullah, ‘the women’s movement should strive to maintain an independent voice and resist co-option by the state and its allies’. Because the Sierra Leone experience shows there is no guarantee that women parliamentarians automatically support women’s rights. A previous gender equality bill, fiercely struggled for by women’s organisations, failed to be adopted before parliament lapsed in 2012. ‘What was worrying was the lack of support from the majority of female parliamentarians,’ says Abdullah. ‘The deeply entrenched political party loyalty and power struggle by female political operatives took precedence over their collective gender interest.’

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Stopping women in their tracks: the barriers to women’s participation as decision-makers in politics and the economy
The majority of girls grow up in households where they play subservient roles, are treated unequally and are taught to accept this unequal treatment as a given. It would be difficult for a woman who grew up in a household of this nature to be confident and engage in political campaigns in a country where women face insults, intimidation, and even threats to their lives when they declare their intention to stand for local or national government.

Key informant in Sierra Leone

“The people Plan interviewed for this study overwhelmingly identified pervasive negative attitudes to girls and women and systematic discrimination and violence against them as the biggest barriers girls and women face in increasing their participation in politics – the area of power most likely to progress women’s rights.

Plan WARO went to two groups of ‘experts’ – the first, whom we’re calling ‘key informants’, more than thirty women and men who have spent many years working in the field of gender equality and women’s empowerment in West Africa; the second, the girls and boys, women and men of rural and urban Togo, whom we interviewed in more than fifty focus groups across the country. These two groups of people are voices from the frontline of the battle for women’s equality in West Africa, either through their efforts over many years to promote women’s empowerment, or their struggles in their own lives to gain more autonomy – or reinforce the status quo.

The key informants consistently identified the socio-cultural dimension as the most formidable obstacle. One said: ‘A lot of our work is just about getting women to perceive themselves as having capacity, when they’re being told all the time they don’t have capacity.’ Another told Plan: ‘People think that men are more capable than women. The man is strong and the woman is weak... Therefore, a woman wouldn’t know how to lead. She can just be the shadow of the man.’ When Plan interviewed several hundred people in Togo, many of their comments demonstrated the strength of this mindset. ‘It is said in the Qur’an that it is the man who should make the decisions,’ said one woman. ‘We submit to respecting this. Even when a woman is obliged to say something, she should consult her husband first.’ Another one highlights: ‘The fact that since the dawn of time, women have not had the right to speak in the presence of men, developed women [in a subservient role] in our traditional context’.

What particular difficulties stand in the way of girls and women participating in public life and making decisions? We asked both the key informants and focus group participants in Togo to identify the problems as they perceive them.
Lack of education was seen as the main barrier by nearly 50 per cent of Togo respondents, who cited ‘parental neglect’ as part of the picture – the unwillingness of parents to invest in the education of their daughters. ‘There are parents who think that daughters do not benefit them at all later, because they are made for someone else’s home’, said an informant in Togo. ‘They prefer to invest in their sons.’ And girls internalise a feeling of inferiority: ‘Girls have always thought that their schooling will not amount to anything’, said someone in Togo. Lack of education also makes language a barrier for women if the business of government is conducted in French or English and she speaks only her regional language. A participant in Togo said that because the majority of women do not speak French, ‘the many smart ideas they have and are able to articulate in their mother tongue do not get shared broadly in the larger society’.

Illiteracy amongst adult women is a major current barrier. ‘A high level of our women are illiterate’, said a key informant in Liberia. ‘Basically, women are at the bottom of the social ladder because of their level of education.’ Illiteracy amongst women is a factor of poverty and patriarchy, related to parents valuing their daughters less than their sons and society expecting girls to marry, have children and do household work.

Lack of time – even to vote or to participate in meetings. A key informant asked: ‘Are voting hours set up in ways that make them more accessible to women who may have many other responsibilities, such as with children, the elderly, their small or medium enterprises, women’s drudgery, their having to collect fuel and water and those things? Are we establishing those systems in a way to make it more possible for women as voters to be engaged directly?’ Another said: ‘Late and unplanned meetings are less favourable to women who have domestic responsibilities.’

Lack of safe access to public spaces: Poor roads, lack of public transport, lack of lighting at night, aggravate women’s restricted social mobility to reach political meetings, particularly in rural areas.

Lack of spousal support. A key informant in Ghana said: ‘A woman cannot get up and say, “I’m going to participate in politics”. No, she must first seek the permission of the husband... When the husband answers “No, I don’t agree”, that’s the end of her ambition, that’s the end of her chance to participate directly in local governance.’ Even to attend a meeting, a woman needs ‘to get permission, or be accompanied, since they do not have freedom of movement’.

The power of unfavourable customary law. For instance, in Benin, the Code of Persons and the Family, passed in 2004, makes the legal age of marriage 18, and gives women equal inheritance rights to men. But in practice, many women’s lives are governed by the Coutumier de Dahomey, a collection of customs codified by the French in 1931, which describes women as the property of their husbands and treats them as legal minors. Customary law also hinders the access of many women in the region to owning land or to obtain credit at a bank which is not possible without their husband’s permission. A focus group discussant in Togo said: ‘It is important that women first have a job that enables them to be independent, before trying to engage in politics. However, here, apart from menial jobs and small trade, women do not have any significant source of income.’
The high cost of political campaigning and widespread poverty. Headteacher Rose Okley, one of the Ghanaian district assemblywomen featured in Honorable, describes the needs at her level: ‘If you want to organise a rally, you have to see the chiefs and give them some drinks. Then the hiring of canopies and chairs for the gathering – you have to foot it. Posters – some of the children have friends who are computerised, and they did it for me...But those who did it on their own, they paid a lot.’ Many women simply cannot afford to make membership payments to political parties, or pay a deposit as a candidate for election. And poverty makes simple survival the priority: ‘We don’t know anything about politics. We are in our village suffering every day. We think about what our children will eat.’ Women focus group respondents from Togo explained.

Lack of gender sensitive electoral legislation; for instance, says a key informant from Niger, ‘The electoral laws do not focus on enhancement of women’s participation in politics; there is no specific article in the election act to do with this.’ Another from Sierra Leone says: ‘A bill to ensure that for elective positions and for nominations to administrative positions there would be 50 per cent men and 50 per cent women did not pass in the parliament, composed of 98 per cent men.’

Lack of support from party structures can relegate a woman candidate to the lower reaches of the party list at election time, or see her dropped off altogether. Zoulaha Moussa, a widow in her 50s in Zinder, Niger’s second city, was a long-term party activist, and a candidate in a local election. Her party won six seats, but refused to give one to Zoulaha. In normal circumstances, the party’s decision would have stood; but a coalition of women’s associations and human rights groups was active in Zinder. With their support, Zoulaha challenged her party at the Tribunal of Zinder on the basis of Niger’s quota law, and got her seat.

Slander – a key informant in Benin told the story of a woman who stood twice as a presidential candidate, but had ‘committed the sin’ of not marrying. Men told women, ‘Vote for her, and she'll have you out of your homes working as prostitutes’. In both elections, the woman achieved less than 2 per cent of the vote, confirming the slander influenced voters. A focus group participant in Togo said: ‘Most of the time when we women see our sisters succeed, we envy them. We do not encourage them, and we speak badly about them.’ A key informant in Senegal said: ‘Our society can’t understand that a married woman could participate in meetings late into the night, especially if she has children. These women face a lot of difficulties; there is the fact that often the husband is jealous, and society is hypocritical or spreads rumours.’
So a woman gets elected to parliament – what happens next?

“While quotas are a good first step, they have not necessarily resulted in the actual political empowerment of women... Often women are relegated to the type of parliamentary committees geared to the perceived interests of women, such as family, children, health. Women do not typically find representation in home affairs or public works or foreign affairs, areas where they may have significant interest but are not perceived as having any capacity to be involved in.

‘Additionally, women are not necessarily empowered within their own political parties. So when they want to raise potential legislation, they are told they basically have to toe the party line.

‘The facilities in parliament – are they friendly to the needs of women? Are there adequate restroom facilities, is there daycare, and so on? Female politicians are still wives and mothers and are still expected by their societies to fulfill those roles as well...

‘We need stronger, better organised women’s caucuses that can cross party lines, cross ethnic lines, cross regional lines... But men need to be part of those caucuses as well, as champions for women’s equality”.

Interview with a key informant

Lack of mentoring and encouragement from women who are already involved in politics. One person in Togo said: ‘Women who have succeeded do not do a lot so that other girls can reach where they are. There is no sharing of experiences by women leaders with girls from our area.’ A girl in an urban area in Togo said she only saw women politicians during election campaigns, when ‘we see them coming out of big cars to convince us to vote for their political party’.

Religion is invoked to justify keeping women in the background and prevent them stepping forward. A key informant said: ‘Women think that it is God who created things as they are today, and there’s no way to change it.’ Religious bodies can organise powerfully to block change. For instance in Mali, where a new Family Code raising the minimum legal age of marriage for girls, improving women’s inheritance and property rights, and removing a clause demanding a wife’s obedience to her husband was passed by the National Assembly in 2009 but not implemented because of vociferous protests from the Islamic Council, amongst others, which called the new code ‘an open road to debauchery’. When it finally passed into law in January 2012, the code made 16 the legal age of marriage for girls, and said women must obey their husbands. ‘Neither the grievances of women...nor the cries of victims’ could challenge the power of religious groups, says a key informant.

Gender-based violence, which is, a key informant said, ‘one of the clearest manifestations of the inequality of women’. Right now, most instances of gender-based violence in the West Africa region go unprosecuted. Burkina Faso and Cameroon are the only countries enforcing laws against gender-based violence to any degree; prosecutions have stagnated in Mali and declined in Benin, Ghana and Nigeria; and in Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Togo, violence against women is not outlawed through specific legislation.

A disabling media and publicity environment. The media and publicity overwhelmingly portray women as wives and mothers but not as political leaders or otherwise active in public life. Women candidates can be – and are – treated scathingly in the press.
Opening up the world: Key enablers for women’s participation as decision-makers in political and economic life

Women celebrate opening of Plan Fundong’s Children library project, Cameroon
We asked our key informants from the region and study participants from Togo to describe the most important factors that enable women to become political and economic decision-makers in their context.

Support from national leaders and parliaments for gender parity and quota laws and their enforcement, is, the key informants said, the most significant political factor: for instance, the gender parity law enacted in Senegal in 2010 led to women winning around 44 per cent of national parliamentary seats in the 2012 election.

This works at the community level as well. A key informant in Sierra Leone said: ‘At the community level, women are now given mandated membership of school and health committees, local council ward committees and project committees or groups established by NGOs. Girls’ clubs in schools, and other school clubs that require 50 per cent female membership, are also contributing to girls’ and women’s participation in decision-making at the community level.’

Laws that target gender-based violence, early marriage, and girls’ right to education, amongst many other women’s rights, are almost equally important, in the view of the key informants. ‘Benin passed laws against sexual harassment and violence against women, and against Female Genital Mutilation’, an interviewee told us. ‘Women are now more inclined to denounce such cases and file a complaint with law enforcement…and perpetrators are more frequently identified and punished.’

Activism by civil society organizations and pressure from international organisations and donors are, say the key informants, instrumental in raising awareness throughout West Africa and shifting the dialogue in individual countries towards support for women’s rights. In Guinea-Bissau, for instance, women’s organisations developed a Women’s Political Platform in 2008; in spite of the political crisis in the country, with the support of UN Women a Ministry of Women, Family and National Solidarity has been established, and a National Gender Policy for 2013-16 approved. On the day it was launched, the leaders of all political parties were asked to sign a declaration committing themselves to include women candidates in their electoral lists; a key informant told us: ‘Two parties signed that very day’.
For people on the ground in Togo, women cannot get involved in politics without the support and respect of their communities. An overwhelming 74 per cent of responses cited this as the primary enabler of women’s participation.

What this finding suggests is the scale of the slander, backbiting and sabotage that can engulf a woman who enters public life, and which women and girls contemplating political leadership clearly fear. Both men and women believe women can only weather this bleak landscape through involvement with allies, at every level of political participation.

For the key informants, the proliferation of women’s organisations and networks that followed the democratic transitions of the early 1990s is the main factor challenging women’s subordination and enhancing their potential for access to decision-making processes.

Even though, as a key informant said, ‘the Liberian culture is still so entrenched in male dominance’, the after-effects of women organising to bring the second civil war to an end in 2003 are still apparent, not only in the presence of president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and the powerful positions to which she has appointed women, but in continued women’s activism on the ground. In the city of Sanniquellie, in Nimba county, heavily affected by the civil wars, a key informant described the establishment of a new branch of the Women’s Action Group: ‘I see them march whenever a woman is raped; or whenever a woman is married, I see them go there to show solidarity... Now Liberia is really turning the corner. Our traditional leaders are coming to accept that men and women are partners in progress... I was in the traditional forum when the head of the
A traditional council made a public declaration that we are going to work with our traditional leaders, with all our district and country structures, to ensure that women are represented... That is very promising.

Ambitious girls and women are encouraged by the presence of role models in high-level positions: ‘The example of other local women who have become deputies, doctors, teachers, etc., pushes girls to make an effort in order to become like them’, said one respondent. Togo’s Minister for Communications, Culture, Arts and Civic Education, Koumeala Anate, was mentioned in a number of responses. ‘We would like to be like Mrs. Anate and follow her example’, said one woman. ‘The women regain their value from Mrs. Anate.’

Nearly two-thirds of respondents in Togo cited education as the primary socio-cultural factor enabling women’s participation in public life. ‘Educating girls is the surest means for a girl to engage and succeed in politics’ was a typical response. ‘Today, educated girls aspire to all the activities that people think are only for men’, said an adolescent girl. Another person said, ‘Educating girls changes a lot of things in the attitude of parents. It brings people to think that girls are not useless, as was previously thought.’ Parents willing to pay school fees for their girl children were cited as an enabling factor, and a significant number of respondents mentioned NGOs like Plan – one talked about the importance of ‘support from NGOs who help girls go to school and promote their well-being’.

Individual confidence was the second highest-rated of socio-cultural enablers for the Togo discussion groups – significantly lower than education, but significantly higher than the role of women’s or mixed groups. But there was a great deal of discussion of the role of community groups. ‘Here it’s the women’s agriculture group that works a lot to create equality between men and women’, said one respondent in Togo. ‘Women who lead mixed groups have the most influence on other girls, women, boys and men by creating equality of men and women in society’, said another.

The issue of whether women-only or mixed community groups are more helpful to women, and more influential in promoting gender equality, was discussed without a definitive

Figure 7: Socio-cultural enablers of women’s access to decision making process according to Togo focus groups
result. As one group noted: ‘Opinions are divided. Some think that women-led community groups have the most influence because their [savings and credit] activities enable women to come out of insecure conditions and promote themselves. For others, it’s about mixed groups, insofar as they enable women and men to participate in decision-making.’

However, there was general agreement about the positive effects of community organisations, which serve as laboratories for learning new ideas and putting them into practice. Ensuring good internal governance, making democratic principles work, mobilising members to defend their interests – whether the organisation is mixed or women-only, these activities can promote, directly or indirectly, gender equality in a space that can be nurturing to women and girls.

/// Economic enablers

A very large majority – 64 per cent – of key informants regarded women having access to employment, the means of production and as a result increased financial power as the most important factor enabling women’s empowerment in all spheres.

One respondent said, ‘When women are financially independent, their voices carry better. Women and girls have a great need for this.’ However, the information presented in our analysis of secondary data (see page xxx once layout is done) indicates how very far women in the West Africa region are from having access to well-remunerated employment. Women engaged in small-scale market trading control their means of production – because it is very often their own labour or that of their daughters that is in question – but they lack access to capital to expand.

The large number of savings groups that exists in West Africa does give women access to small amounts of capital, and was discussed by key respondents as also helping to change both men’s and women’s perceptions of women’s capacity. One respondent spoke about ‘the increased visibility and mobilisation of women’s savings and credit groups’ as a factor that contributed to a general sense of ‘the strength of women’s groups in bringing about change in their community’.

Togo focus group respondents gave almost equal weight to access to employment, control of household finances, financial and technical support and access to credit.

The strength of the control of the household budget response suggests the degree to which women’s control of household finance is known to benefit their children – if men have control of the budget, this figure suggests, money available will not necessarily assist their daughters achieve ambitions outside the home.

When asked what types of employment girls in Togo aspire to, many respondents volunteered areas of activity that are already hugely over-subscribed: sewing, braiding hair, small trading. ‘Girls aspire to jobs that allow them to earn money
TRANSFORMING THE LANDSCAPE /// case study

What works in Cameroon: new local institutions that empower women

In the Atuazire and Mugheb quarters of Bamenda, the capital of North West region, years of political neglect led to widespread solid waste issues. An Urban Council that was dominated by elderly men, lacked accountability and was viewed as illegitimate by local residents, had done nothing to resolve the problems.

A long process of consultation and mobilisation funded by the World Bank and the Cameroon government and conducted by a local NGO, the Integrated Development Foundation, sought to increase the participation of women and children in resolving these problems. Focus group discussions led to the creation of Quarter Development Associations (QDAs), made up of one man, one woman, one young person and one elder, elected by block members to represent each of the ‘blocks’ into which the quarters had been divided. This new structure, which necessitated the participation of women and young people, was challenged by traditional councillors and traditional authorities, but the QDAs were able to gain legal status as civil society organisations.

A new footbridge has now been constructed at a place where women and children cross to collect water and for school. New wells have been sunk, and there is an improved water collection scheme, both of which have helped the quarter inhabitants ‘by making water more affordable; we no longer need to trek long distances to get water’, one woman commented. A community hall has been built in Atuazire, and a woman from Mugheb said, ‘Nowadays in the general assembly meeting, women are always more active than men, because the meeting attendance rate for women is always higher than that for men’.

quickly’, said one respondent. An adolescent girl said that girls ‘have resigned themselves to menial jobs because in their culture, women should not aspire to big things’.

However, respondents said training programmes would provide them with the technical and management skills needed to start a business. Several young women saw employment in the police or military as a desirable option, noting that these jobs offered the stability of government employment, commanded respect, and offered the prospect of ‘easy money’ through bribes (seen as a perk of the job).

Men asked specifically to comment on women as economic leaders reported favourably; five out of six said women were good managers, and less prone to corruption and stealing. One said: ‘Women leaders in the economy are appreciated by men because of the transparency they have in the way they manage their responsibilities.’ But some women respondents were sceptical: ‘Men are afraid of women who have succeeded in the economic world’, said one, ‘and talk badly about them, and accuse them of stealing money entrusted to them.’
Conclusion

Women from palm oil extracting livelihood project, Guinea-Bissau
Decades on from the great upsurge of women’s rights activism that produced CEDAW, the Nairobi Framework, the Beijing Platform, the African Protocol, it is clear that in West Africa and Cameroon, men still wield overwhelming power in all three dimensions of societal decision-making – the national, the community, and the household. The problem may be primarily cultural, but our research suggests that the solution is mostly political. Large numbers of women – supported by men - need to be engaged in the political process at all levels, feeling comfortable wielding power and using it to end discriminatory practices, create inclusive structures, and promote the full participation of all citizens in political and economic life. If this does not happen, the strength of the patriarchal and neo-patrimonial system that marks West Africa will continue to impede the progress of women as full citizens.

Because state budgets are on the whole decided by men in power, allocations for gender equality and women’s empowerment programmes are generally insufficient to fund the necessary activities. Governments need to stop paying lip-service to the idea of gender equality and recognise their responsibility to fund and implement effective programmes. In Burkina Faso, for instance, nearly 42 per cent of rural women do not have a birth certificate and over 60 per cent do not have identity cards (compared with 24 per cent of rural men) – a situation that directly excludes these women from public positions. Gender-based violence still blights the lives of millions of girls and women, and the threat of rape is used to deter women’s entry into public life.

Customary law and practice very often contradicts women’s rights enshrined in national legislation and international conventions. In Sierra Leone, the constitution, adopted in 1991, even states that all persons are equal in the eyes of the law, ‘unless otherwise stated by customary law’. As long as this situation prevails, women will struggle to exercise their rights as equal citizens. In most countries of this study, women don’t have the right to own land, or are manoeuvred out of owning land. It’s time to end this injustice, but we recognise that more gender equitable solutions will endure longer if they have buy-in from other stakeholders in society. Extensive community discussion in three communes in Sikasso, Mali, for example, produced ‘local conventions’ that gave women and young people a greater voice in decision-making on the use of land.

The fact that only 7 per cent of the 70 per cent of women who are economically active are in secure employment and earning salaries is one of the clearest indicators of women’s continuing subordination in West African society. Prevailing socio-cultural perceptions hamper women’s ambitions and continue to define their main vocation as raising children and taking care of the household. The staggering gender gap in pay for women who do have professional or salaried employment, and the evidence from our analysis of secondary data that as women enter professional jobs, the rates of pay go down, are unacceptable.

23. Emily Polack, Diana Fleetschmer and Moussa Djire, Gender-equitable land tool development in West Africa, IIED, April 2014; PDF available at http://pubs.iied.org/17215IIED
If girls are to grow up believing they as women have as much right to exercise decision-making power as men, they need the kind of education that broadens their horizons, encourages their resilience and celebrates their initiative. They need to practise solving problems and speaking in front of their peers. They need their brothers to help remove the plates. Girls’ and young women’s education needs to encourage them to take initiatives, solve problems and think critically, understand that the structure of society can change, and encourage them to see themselves as potential agents of change – certainly as people with the capacity to be agents in their own lives. Change does not come because more women are slotted into existing structures. New structures are often needed. And when women exercise boldness, they transform countries.

A man in Togo told his focus group:

‘Everyone thinks that women who are in politics are dynamic, are not faint-hearted, and can face any trouble’.

Such voices need to be widely heard.
Peninah, the Health Prefect at her school, giving a talk about a range of hygiene and health issues, including menstrual hygiene, Uganda
Women activists in West Africa and their allies have been promoting women’s empowerment for decades. Are there any new measures that are likely to make the empowerment of women happen more quickly? Or is it a case of simply trying much harder to challenge the obstacles that continue to prevent women’s autonomy, agency, and power in a part of the world where, as Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi, the African Development Bank’s special envoy on gender, says, ‘a woman needs permission from her husband to travel, to work, or to open a bank account’?

Our research indicated that a comprehensive change agenda is needed to help girls and women in West Africa to gain more power and access the decision-making table, bringing together various actors around a common goal to promote women’s leadership. Girls and women need more support in four critical spheres outlined in our model below; they need:

1. **better legal protection and enforcement of their civil and socio-cultural and economic rights, sound state policies and plans,**
2. **opportunities to learn, develop, and exercise citizenship skills,**
3. **access to economic opportunities and**
4. **role models that can inspire them and society to change the views of what girls and women can and should do.**

The interdependencies and synergies of these spheres are complex. Higher efforts in all spheres multiply the chances for sustainable change. This change will benefit girls and women as much as society as a whole. Decision-makers, civil society and girls and women themselves need to analyse and decide what is most important and has greatest potential to reach results in their context.

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Who can do what to promote Girls’ and Women’s access to the decision-making table?

Sphere 1
For better legal protection, policies and plans

/// WE CALL ON GOVERNMENTS TO:
- Establish adequate legal and regulatory frameworks that protect and promote girls’ and women’s rights to access information, express opinions, access and disseminate information, associate, assemble, participate and stand for elections and engage as politicians and activists;
- Take strong measures to harmonize formal and traditional legal frameworks and train all those who speak law – formal or traditional – how to apply them and how to guarantee women access to justice;
- For countries without specific legislation to punish acts of domestic violence – Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Togo: bring about such legislation and ensure rigorous law enforcement. For countries that do have laws, enforce them and train the agents of the state to protect victims, arrest perpetrators, and have them adequately tried;
- Adopt and implement legislations that establish equal wages for men and women: there needs to be a fair rate for the job, paid to whoever does it;
- Conduct legal reform to give women the right to inherit and own property and prevent land-grabbing;
- Promote comprehensive, gender-sensitive and rights based Civil Registration and Vital Statistics systems to capture on-time data disaggregated by sex as a basis for better planning;
- Ensure data collection is disaggregated by sex and age in all relevant surveys to inform government policies and practices.

/// WE CALL ON CIVIL SOCIETY BODIES TO:
- Advocate for the establishment of legal oversight mechanisms that help to promote better protection and help girls’ and women to access justice – such as ombuds(wo)men for girls and women’s and children’s rights;
- Advocate towards governments to bring forward and implement national gender policies. Advocacy activities should particularly target countries which do not yet have such laws – namely Togo and Benin – to encourage them to bring forward legislation and make sure it passes. Benin, Liberia and Sierra Leone are currently considering adopting a gender quota system; their governments need to be encouraged to do so.
Sphere 2
Economic opportunities

/// WE CALL ON GOVERNMENTS TO:

• Adopt inclusive, equitable and sustainable growth policies and plans and ensure the equitable use and investment of national resources and income with equal benefits for girls and women, particularly those who are marginalized;

• Adopt gender-sensitive employment policies and plans and develop professional pathways for girls and women including those into decision-making positions in political and legal systems and government institutions;

• Scale up activities promoting girls' leadership, for example, through the organisation of career weeks in girls' secondary schools and colleges, internships in enterprises and discussions in schools and colleges led by women who are decision-makers in politics, public service and private enterprise;

• Introduce quota for girls and young women in youth employment programmes.

/// WE CALL ON CIVIL SOCIETY BODIES,
INTERNATIONAL NGOS, DONORS AND THE
UN SYSTEM TO:

• Implement programmes that promote and bring to scale girls and women's economic empowerment (savings groups and women's business associations) and strengthen them to help them become models for democratic governance and female leadership in communities.
Sphere 3

Create opportunities to learn and exercise citizenship and become political leaders

/// WE CALL ON GOVERNMENTS TO:

- Strengthen investments in girls education and training opportunities, improving education quality to in view of preparing girls and boys adequately for economic activity, employment and civic engagement;
- Introduce and consistently apply women quota for national and district assemblies, ministerial and district level political leadership positions;
- Ensure Universal Birth Registration including free late registration as a means to support access for girls and women to legal documents, full legal citizenship, participation in and standing for elections;
- Establishing inclusive public accountability and oversight mechanisms at different levels that give girls and women the opportunity to engage with, feedback or complain on quality of services and political processes, and give them opportunities to gain confidence in exercising their participation rights;
- Adopt gender and child sensitive budgeting and participatory budget processes that give girls and women the opportunity to contribute to budget formulation and monitoring of its execution;
- Promote the creation of and/or strengthen existing girls’ and equitable young people’s parliaments and mechanisms to associate them formally to planning of government policies, plans and budgets; and to the monitoring of their execution;
- Strengthening existing national and local student councils to become more gender equitable and effective in their work.

/// WE CALL ON CIVIL SOCIETY BODIES, INTERNATIONAL NGOS, DONORS AND THE UN SYSTEM TO:

- Strengthen the capacity of civil society organizations to assess their inclusiveness and gender awareness and support them with the development of gender strategies that promote girls’ and women’s rights in civil society organizations and programmes;
- Initiate and implement programs to strengthen girls’ and women’s active citizenship, activism and effective networking; and that stimulate the establishment and effective use of public accountability mechanisms for and by girls and women and their access to and efficient use of public and social media;
- Build up enthusiasm for political leadership in girls and women, in particular in rural areas. This can happen, for example, through support to initiatives that give young women experience of thinking and speaking in public, and defending their point of view;
- Support research and the development of effective program models that combine strategies for socio-economic and political empowerment.
Sphere 4
Establish role models that inspire society to change its views on girls and women

/// WE CALL ON GOVERNMENTS TO:
- Introduce free air-time in public and private media dedicated to promoting girls’ and women’s rights and institute public media competitions for media productions promoting girls’ and women’s public image and challenging gender stereotypes.

/// WE CALL ON POLITICAL PARTIES TO:
- Develop and pass a gender policy including quota for decision making positions in the party and its youth movement and parity on electoral lists;
- Implement programmes promoting female leadership within the movement to groom role models for girls and young women;
- For women politicians: acts as role models to other women and girls, and make time either to mentor women who have just entered the field, or visit schools, tertiary institutions and women’s organisations with the specific purpose of encouraging girls and women to consider public life.

/// WE CALL ON CIVIL SOCIETY BODIES, INTERNATIONAL NGOS, DONORS AND THE UN SYSTEM TO:
- Introduce quota for female frontline staff, in particular in rural areas, to increase the number of role models available to young girls and women and the number of women in waged positions;
- Identify and work closely with “gender champions”- women and men in position of power including traditional and religious leaders- who can act as catalysts for gender equality and for questioning gender stereotypes;
- Introduce quota for decision making positions in their organisation and to groom female role models for girls and young women;
- Include girls and young women in activities: girls learn confidence and leadership skills from their more experienced older colleagues, and an organisation with a wider base has a greater impact on community dynamics.