

**Next Generation**

# **Political empowerment of women and girls**

**What we know brief**

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# Executive summary

This thematic briefing paper seeks to understand the enablers of and barriers to the political empowerment of women and girls in seven countries where Next Generation studies were conducted between 2018 and 2023. These are spread across South and East Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Europe, and include Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Viet Nam, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Poland.

The paper has applied a socio-ecological lens to draw insights on enablers and barriers at various levels: individual, interpersonal, organisational, community, societal, and policy and legal. It also incorporates the principles of gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) to research design and delivery across the various country contexts. It reanalyses seven Next Generation datasets to the extent possible based on age (15–24 and 25–35), sex (young women and men), and location (rural and urban). Insights are also drawn from primary qualitative data, collected in 2023.

Overall, there is a greater volume of evidence on barriers than enablers. This points to the heightened need for galvanising action on amplifying enablers and mitigating barriers.

## Enablers of political empowerment

Youth-centric policies and initiatives are key drivers of the broader political empowerment of young people. However, in the case of young women and girls, the protection of their rights and safety are identified as integral to their political empowerment and lead to their increased representation in political spaces. Key enablers emerging from the evidence include:

- **Individual:** Young people engage in politics through diverse activities, including voting, and interactions on social and traditional media.
- **Interpersonal:** Engaging in discussions with family and friends and drawing on their support.
- **Policy and legal:** Progressive initiatives to enhance women's representation in political spaces, and positive qualities among politicians, such as fairness and transparency. The existence of youth-centric policies, affirmative action, and campaigns against corruption are found to act as a motivational force.

- **Cross-cutting enablers:** Digitalisation offers opportunities for engagement, learning, and activism. The digital sphere is a dynamic avenue for breaking down barriers and fostering inclusivity in political landscapes, however access is more limited in rural and remote areas.

## Barriers to political empowerment

While the lack of opportunities, political awareness, representation, and scepticism towards governments emerge as key barriers across young people in general, gender stereotypes, lack of safety, and regressive gender and social norms especially affect women and girls. These not only hinder their political engagement but condition them to see their primary role as carers rather than leaders.

- **Individual:** Young people express dissatisfaction and scepticism towards political systems, driven by a perceived disconnect from day-to-day realities. There is a stark mismatch in the age and gender profiles of politicians and young people, which contributes to a representation gap and disempowerment. Limited awareness of political issues among young people amplifies this disconnect. Lack of access to education and disadvantaged economic backgrounds limit young people's political engagement further.
- **Interpersonal:** Rigid gender and social expectations within families constrain opportunities for women and girls to engage in politics.
- **Organisational:** Young people feel unrepresented and unsupported by existing institutions. The lack of opportunities to participate in political activities (including in schools) further limits their political engagement.
- **Societal:** Societal and gender norms proscribe women and girls' role in society, shaping their behaviour and opportunities to engage in the political sphere.
- **Policy and legal:** Policymakers fail to communicate effectively with youth, negatively impacting their awareness of existing policies, laws, and initiatives and their political



engagement. Feeling underrepresented leaves young people voiceless in addressing their concerns.

- **Cross-cutting barriers:** Geographical disparities and offline and online violence against women and girls jeopardise their political engagement.

## Way forward

The findings of this paper reveal how young people generally, and women and girls specifically, may be politically empowered.

1. Families, peers and friends are critical allies in the development of young women's political ambitions and interest in politics. Specific efforts by them would include:
  - Bringing in women and girls in decisions that affect their lives rather than deciding for them.
  - Encouraging critical and non-judgmental political discussions within the home and familiar social circles so that women and girls develop greater self-confidence and self-expression.
  - Adapting household responsibilities within the family structure that free up women's time to engage in political and social causes.
  - Challenging harmful gender and social norms that subjugate women and girls to men and boys and impede their political empowerment.
2. Schools and higher education institutions are vital in shaping the next generation of values-based political figures. Investments from them would include a focus on:
  - Nurturing curiosity, honesty, integrity, fairness, ethical behaviours, and leadership qualities that young people have already expressed a clear desire to see in political leaders.
  - Embedding skills development into learning agendas and rewarding critical thinking and analysis, effective persuasion and influencing, public speaking, networking, and leadership for social and political causes.
  - Promoting leadership positions for girls in schools and universities, including in student unions.
3. Cross-sectoral alliances and collaborations between different types of civil society actors and service providers (public and private) can raise awareness among youth and women and girls by developing effective channels of communication. This would include:
  - Reinforcing positive social and gender norms that promote gender equality.
  - Highlighting opportunities in and sharing information about activism, volunteering, and social development.
  - Offering advice and guidance on youth engagement and participation.
  - Amplifying the role of women as leaders and role models who can share their empowerment journeys and their political choices and trade-offs so that young people can learn from these experiences.
  - Engaging men and boys as gender equality champions in empowerment programmes for women and girls.
  - Promoting transparent salaries and gender pay gaps in politics.
  - Supporting public awareness campaigns to highlight the importance of women's participation in political decision making.
  - Organising networking and knowledge-sharing events for women working in or interested in working in politics.
  - Promoting gender diversity in corporate leadership positions, setting an example for other sectors and encouraging women to aspire to leadership roles in various fields, including politics.

- Addressing technology-facilitated gender-based violence against women working in public roles (e.g. journalists, politicians, activists) in addition to developing monitoring and safeguarding tools that are country specific and informed by local languages and cultural norms.
4. The role of the media, both traditional and digital, such as technology platforms, social media, radio, and television is crucial in elevating rather than marginalising young people's and women's participation in politics. Areas the media could consider include:
- Building safer spaces for young people and women to share their political preferences and views while alleviating fear of intimidation.
  - Developing online safeguarding mechanisms to better protect young women from online harassment and violence.
  - Representing the concerns of young people, especially women and girls, to hold the governments accountable for their actions and bring about legal change.
  - Changing media representation of women in politics, moving away from objectifying them to focusing on their success stories in leadership roles.
5. Policymakers and legislators play critical roles in advocating for inclusive and increased youth participation in political spaces. Areas to focus on would include:
- Evaluating the quality of existing laws, policies, and initiatives aimed at politically empowering women and the barriers they face in achieving their political pursuits.
  - Amending laws and law enforcement to create a political environment that does not silence political engagement in the form of peaceful protests and activism.
  - Establishing schemes and strategies in educational spaces to politically engage women and girls from an early age.
  - Strengthening legislation to prevent and respond to technology-facilitated gender-based violence against women in public roles and the wider population.
  - Co-creating social policies and legal frameworks that support youth and women's empowerment, agreeing on measurable outcomes over time, and encouraging greater public scrutiny over resource utilisation and planning decisions through feedback loops.
  - Improving access to different types of political information, such as on existing political parties and their agenda, the election system, and current political debates, so that young people can make more informed decisions about their role in political change processes.
  - Increasing political representation across diverse demographics, including youth, women, and persons with disabilities, through targeted quotas, so that imbalances may be corrected over time and the profiles of politicians change from being mostly male and older.
  - Sensitising government actors through workshops and training courses on political participation of women using a gender-transformative lens.



# 1 Introduction

Political empowerment, defined as the ability to participate in decision making and to create change within political systems, is pivotal for realising human rights and fostering inclusive governance (Fox and Romero, 2017; Sandler and Lane, 2021). However, the exclusion of many young people, especially women and girls, from the political sphere perpetuates gender inequalities and obstructs democratic participation.

By excluding this demographic from political discourse, societies miss out on the richness of ideas, unique problem-solving approaches, and the transformative power that diverse voices bring to the decision-making table. Furthermore, the perpetuation of gender disparities within political spheres exacerbates broader social and economic inequities, hindering the overall development trajectory of nations. Empowering

this demographic politically is not just a matter of equity; it is an investment in the collective future and prosperity of nations. This briefing paper, a part of the British Council's thematic study, *Next Generation: What we know on women and girls*, delves into the enablers of and barriers to political empowerment in seven countries: Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Viet Nam, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Poland. The overarching research question guiding this exploration is:

*'What do we know about the political empowerment of women and girls?'*

The paper is organised as follows: Chapter 2 presents the research methodology; Chapter 3 introduces country contexts; Chapters 4 and 5 delve into the key enablers and barriers; and Chapter 6 concludes with recommendations.

## What is the Next Generation programme?

The Next Generation is a global research programme that explores the needs, potential, and aspirations of young people across the world. The research seeks to analyse the conditions that support young people to reach their potential as fulfilled, productive and active citizens. It includes those from underprivileged or geographically isolated backgrounds, as well as those from more established communities and represents the aspirations of young women and girls, as well as young men and boys.

Research is initiated in countries that are experiencing a period of notable change, with the purpose of ensuring that young people's voices are heard, no matter their background or gender, and that their interests are properly represented in decisions that will have lasting implications for their lives. The research is always completed with a series of recommendations to support policy change.

The overall aim of Next Generation is defined through three strands:

- **Research:** Understanding youth attitudes and aspirations, including those from underprivileged backgrounds and differences by gender.

- **Youth voice and capacity building:** Amplifying youth voices from a range of backgrounds, including supporting their active participation, inclusion within the research process and opportunities for skills development.
- **Policy impact:** Supporting better youth policymaking, including perspectives of underprivileged youth and support that increases the inclusion of women and girls.

Next Generation research has been conducted in Colombia, Indonesia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Viet Nam, Lebanon, Turkey, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Albania, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Poland, and the UK. Follow-up reports have been developed for Myanmar and Lebanon, and an overview report has been conducted on Next Generation countries in Africa. Work is currently underway in Iraq and Bangladesh, and new research will shortly be launched in Brazil and Kazakhstan.

This is the second of the 'What We Know' research series based on the Next Generation studies, with a central focus on women and girls.

## 2 Research methodology

The paper uses a mixed-methods approach. It combines insights from the seven Next Generation country-level reports and datasets from 2018 to 2023 and new qualitative interview data from 2023.<sup>1</sup> Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model from the 1970s, which posits that people exist and interact within a complex ecological system of interrelated levels, provides a compelling framework to analyse the data. The five levels include:

1. **Individual:** The physical and cognitive characteristics of youth, such as age, education, income, experience, interests, attitudes and beliefs.
2. **Interpersonal:** The immediate social circle of youth, such as peers, partners, family, teachers, and community leaders, who influence young people's perceptions and behaviours.
3. **Organisational/community:** The structured communities and settings in which social relationships occur, including schools, workplaces, training academies, and neighbourhoods. The characteristics and interactions in each space can either facilitate or hinder young people's access to education, political, social and economic empowerment. Furthermore, they play a crucial role in fostering or addressing violence against women and girls.
4. **Societal:** The broad societal factors that shape youth participation in education, political, social and economic change processes, including social and cultural norms that help to maintain or rebalance inequalities and violence between groups in society.
5. **Policy and legal:** Public policies, laws and regulations at various levels – including local and national policy frameworks – and programme interventions around education, skills, violence against women and girls, and broader policies on empowerment.

Since the Next Generation reports were published at various points in time over the five-year period, the team reviewed policy and grey literature published between 2018 and 2023. This helped to better understand the contexts of each country. The research team also clustered key findings from the seven reports into themes, enablers, and barriers using the different socio-ecological levels. Fifty-eight semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted across the seven countries in native languages and English. Stakeholders for the KIIs included government officials, bilateral and multilateral development agencies, implementing partner agencies, and civil society (academics, thought leaders, activists, influencers, and rights-based organisations). Data from the interviews was anonymised and coded in a qualitative analysis grid using the socio-ecological levels. Enablers and barriers common to at least three or more countries are presented in the paper.

Cross-country insights derived from global and Next Generation datasets have focused on questions that allowed comparisons across at least four of the seven countries. These are related to political empowerment, a sub-index of the World Economic Forum's 2023 Global Gender Gap Index, and Next Generation data on interest/engagement in politics among young women and men, the top three political activities they engage in, and their rates of membership in political parties.



<sup>1</sup> Reports (most recent first): Pakistan (June 2023), Indonesia (October 2022), Poland (May 2021), Nigeria (November 2020), Viet Nam (August 2020), Ethiopia (October 2019), and Sri Lanka (March 2019).



### 3 Country contexts

The seven countries in this paper have diverse political, social, and economic conditions. Three of them (Indonesia, Pakistan, and Nigeria) are the world's fourth, fifth, and sixth most populated countries with sizable youth demographics. Youth aged 15–35 constitute a significant share in each country (25 per cent in Poland and between

30–38 per cent in the other six countries). In most countries, women and girls make up equal shares of the population, and so their representation in political change processes is crucial for their own empowerment journeys and for the nations they represent.

**Table 1. Key data on each country**

Key indicators	Pakistan	Sri Lanka	Indonesia	Viet Nam	Nigeria	Ethiopia	Poland
Income classification*	LMIC	LMIC	UMIC	LMIC	LMIC	LIC	HIC
Total population (in millions)	234	22	277.5	99	219	123	38.4
Share of girls and women in total population	50%	52%	50%	51%	49%	50%	52%
Share of youth aged 15–35 in total population	37%	30%	33%	32%	34%	38%	25%
Share of women parliamentarian/legislators in lower house	21%	5%	22%	30%	4%	41%	29%
Share of women parliamentarian/legislators in upper house	19%	no data	no data	no data	3%	31%	19%

Sources: UNDESA (2024) and UN Women (2023).

\*LIC: low-income country, LMIC: lower-middle-income country, UMIC: upper-middle-income country, HIC: high-income country.

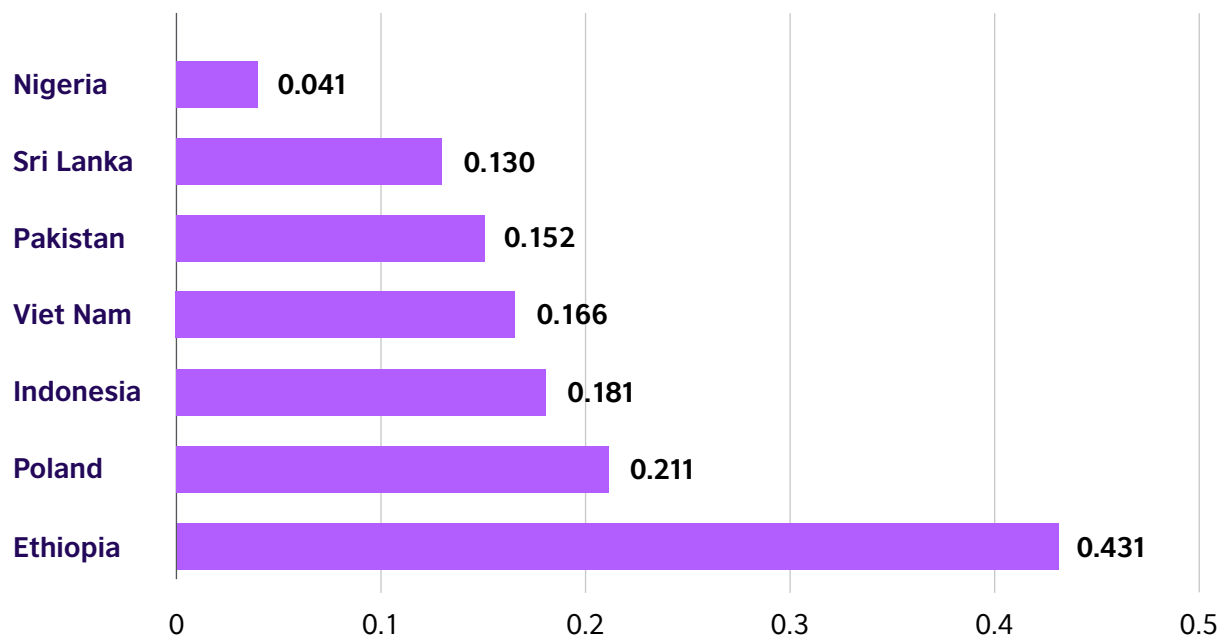
#### Key statistics

##### Political empowerment

The 2023 Global Gender Gap Index provides a useful measure for comparing country performance on political empowerment. This sub-index measures the gap between men and women at the highest level of political decision-making through the ratio of women to men in ministerial positions and the ratio of women to men in parliamentary positions (WEF, 2023). The index also includes the ratio of women to men in terms of years in executive office (prime minister or president) for the last 50 years (ibid.).

**Of all seven countries, Ethiopia leads with the highest score, 0.431, and ranks 25 out of 146 countries in terms of closing the gender gap in political empowerment between men and women. Nigeria has the lowest score, 0.041, and ranks 142 (WEF, 2023) (see Figure 2).**



**Figure 2. Political empowerment sub-index, country scores (0–1)**

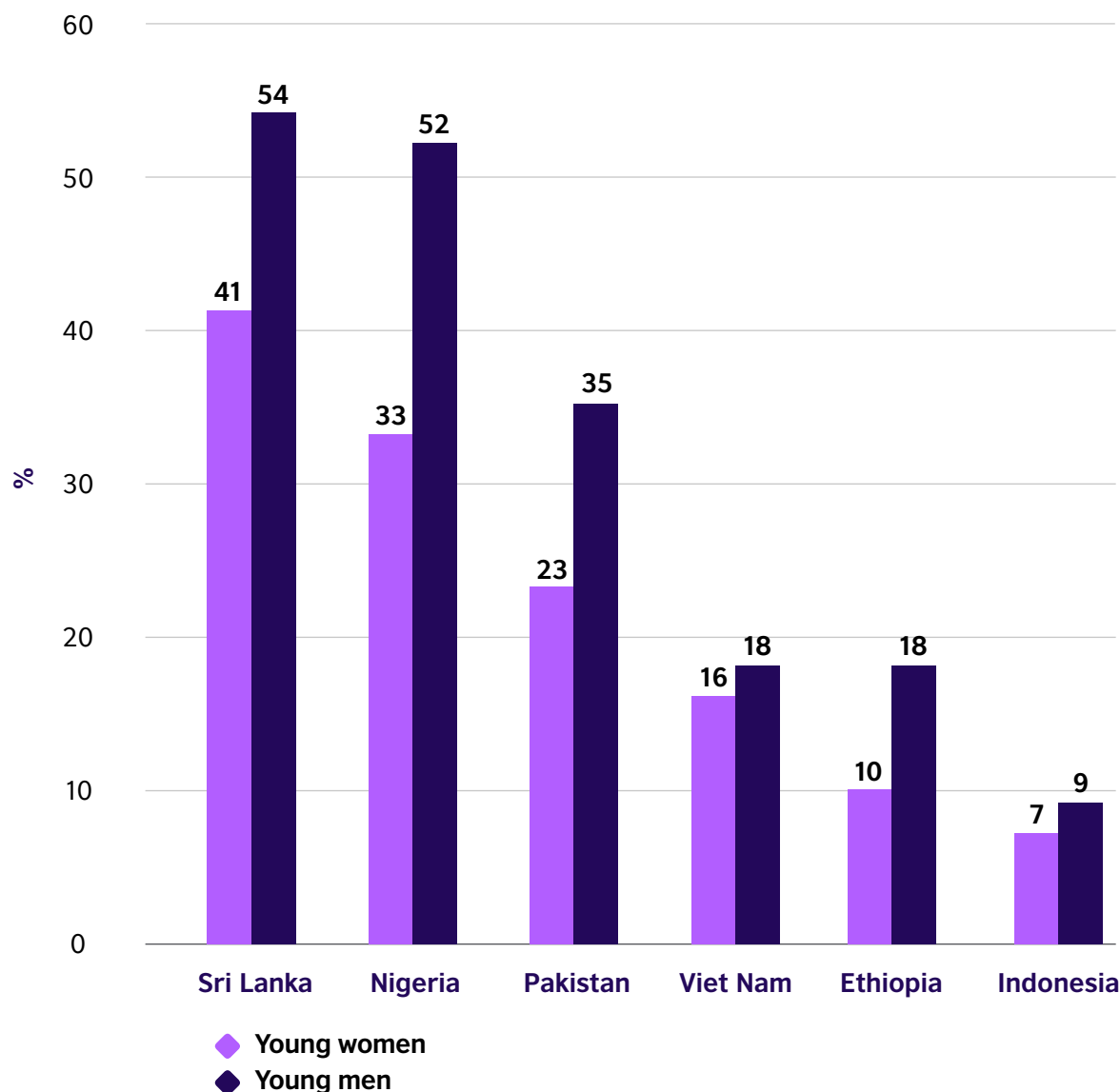
Source: WEF (2023).

### Political interest/engagement across countries

**Next Generation data points out higher interest/engagement in politics among young men than women in six countries. The most interest/engagement among young women emerges in Sri Lanka relative to other countries. Engagement/interest is at 41 per**

**cent overall (it is 40 per cent for young women in rural areas, and 42 per cent in urban areas) (see Figure 3). Indonesia shows the lowest interest and engagement rates for both young women and men.**



**Figure 3. Personal interest/engagement in politics (%)**

Source: Next Generation data (2019–2023).

### Main types of political activity

#### **Voting ranked as the most prominent political activity for women in four of the seven countries.**

The shares for young women varied significantly across countries, from as high as 83 per cent in Poland, 59 per cent in Nigeria, 48 per cent in Viet Nam, to as low as 18 per cent in Pakistan, and 7 per cent in Ethiopia. Signing political petitions ranked in the top three political activities for young women in both Poland and Sri Lanka. In Poland's case, a higher share of young

women in comparison to young men engaged in this activity (41 per cent vs 35 per cent). This was reversed in Sri Lanka, with a lower share of young women signing petitions relative to young men (26 per cent vs 37 per cent).

Watching or listening to political talk shows on TV or radio and political podcasts appeared in the top three activities for young women in Indonesia and Ethiopia. In Indonesia, a slightly larger share of young women watched or listened to political shows on TV, radio, and podcasts in comparison to young men (29 per cent vs 27 per cent). In Ethiopia, this was reversed.

**Table 2. Top three political activities of young women and men, by country (%)**

Top three political activities by country	Share of young women engaging in the stated activity	Share of young men engaging in the stated activity	Percentage point difference between young women and men engaged in the stated activity
<b>Poland</b>			
Voted	83%	80%	+3
Signed a petition	41%	35%	+6
Bought goods for ethical or environmental reasons	21%	24%	-3
<b>Sri Lanka</b>			
Attended a community meeting	49%	57%	-8
Contacted local government about an issue	30%	40%	-10
Signed a petition	26%	37%	-11
<b>Nigeria</b>			
Voted	59%	70%	-11
Became a party member	13%	24%	-11
Persuaded others to vote	13%	20%	-7
<b>Pakistan</b>			
Voted in a national/provincial/local election	18%	20%	-2
Attended a discussion on national/local issues	6%	10%	-4
Attended a political rally	5%	10%	-5
<b>Viet Nam</b>			
Voted	48%	47%	+1
Joined the Communist Youth Union	39%	37%	+2
Engaged in political discussions through an informal club	3%	3%	0
<b>Ethiopia</b>			
Discussed politics with family and friends	29%	43%	-14
Watched/listened to political talk show on TV/radio/podcast	28%	38%	-10
Voted	7%	9%	-2
<b>Indonesia</b>			
Watched/listened to political talk show on TV/radio/podcasts	29%	27%	+2
Volunteered for a social cause	25%	30%	-5
Discussed politics with family and friends	17%	17%	0

Source: Next Generation data.

Notes: + denotes share of women exceeding that of men, - denotes share of men exceeding that of women.

### Political party membership

**Small shares of young women and men reported being members of political parties in five of the seven countries.** Membership in political parties was the highest in Nigeria among

both young women and men (13 per cent and 24 per cent, respectively). It also had the widest gender difference relative to other countries (11 percentage points).

**Table 3. Share of women and men in political parties, by country (%)**

Indicator	Poland	Sri Lanka	Nigeria	Viet Nam	Ethiopia
Share of women in political parties	7%	7%	13%	1%	2%
Share of men in political parties	6%	8%	24%	1%	5%
Percentage point difference between women and men	+1	-1	-11	0	-3

Source: Next Generation data.

Notes: + denotes share of women exceeding that of men, - denotes share of men exceeding that of women.





## 4 Enablers of political empowerment

This section explores the enablers of political empowerment of young people, with a focus on women and girls. See Table 4 for a summary of key enablers.

### 4.1 Individual enablers

#### Multiple avenues exist for political and civic engagement

**Young people participate in civic and political activities through diverse avenues.** Their involvement takes various forms, including leveraging social media platforms, exercising their right to vote, participating in political dialogues, and joining peaceful protests. Poland stands out for its high consumption of political content through traditional media, highlighting the continued influence of established channels (Raven et al., 2021).

In Pakistan, young people utilise informal communication channels, notably social media, to amplify their voices (Babar et al., 2023). Political activism in Pakistan, outside of voting, has also grown over time. This shift has been accompanied by a belief among 53 per cent of young women and 60 per cent of young men that online civic and political activism can bring about meaningful change (Next Generation data), underscoring the transformative potential of digital platforms in shaping political discourse.

In Sri Lanka, a prevailing sense of civic responsibility is evident, with 73 per cent of young women and 69 per cent of young men expressing a commitment to exercise their voting rights as their citizenship duty (Next Generation data). Moreover, 49 per cent of young women and 57 per cent of young men attended community meetings as a form of political activism (ibid.).

### 4.2 Interpersonal enablers

#### Open political discussions with family and friends

**Political empowerment among young people is significantly influenced by open discussions within the familiar circles of family and friends.**

These play a crucial role in creating a space for exchanging political ideas and opinions and can act as fertile ground for politically empowering young women and men.

In Viet Nam and Indonesia, young people feel comfortable expressing their views and concerns in small, closed circles and online (Lamphere-Englund et al., 2020; Allison et al., 2022). In Indonesia, similar shares (17 per cent) of young women and men hold open discussions with family and friends (Next Generation data).

Interestingly, the Next Generation research in both countries found that youth in rural areas have a stronger connection to policymakers than their urban counterparts, which is often due to their family's personal relationships (Lamphere-Englund et al., 2020; Allison et al., 2022). As a result, the familial environment serves as a bridge between youth and policymakers, potentially facilitating political debate and providing a forum for the exchange of ideas and perspectives (ibid.).

Close family and friend relationships are also important in shaping political awareness and opinions among politically engaged young Nigerians and Ethiopians (De Schryver et al., 2019; Curran et al., 2020). In Nigeria, these networks are used to disseminate political information, with fathers playing an important role in educating and guiding their children (Curran et al., 2020). Fathers' roles in politically empowering children underscore the gendered experience of political engagement.

### 4.3 Policy and legal enablers

#### Legislative and policy changes

Changes in legislation and policy have contributed to the political empowerment of young women and girls. Interviewees highlighted various initiatives to promote social change and enhance the political representation and engagement of young people. In Pakistan, key informants underscored the pivotal role played by female legislators and parliamentarians in developing legislations that directly address women's concerns, including child marriage, child labour, rape, and honour killings. Over the parliamentary sessions from August 2018 to August 2020, even though women constituted only 20 per cent of the total assembly, they proved to be highly engaged in scrutinising the government and holding it accountable. This involvement included using legislative tools such as resolutions, raising points of order, and asking questions (HRCP, 2020). While women have demonstrated their capabilities in handling

parliamentary business outperforming their male colleagues (ibid.), they recognise the need to increase direct representation in elected seats and decision-making bodies and to address legal and cultural barriers that hinder their performance and growth (interviews, 2023; HRCP, 2020).

In Sri Lanka, where women face underrepresentation at all levels of the national legislature (IFES, 2022), interviewees emphasised the positive impact of initiatives such as the legislative quota mandating 25 per cent of local council members to be women (Vijayarasa, 2020; UN Women, 2023; interviews, 2023). In key informant views, this has resulted in increased capacity building, opportunities, and exposure for women. Additionally, they stated that women's confidence and security have grown through the National Action Plan for Women, Peace, and Security and the Parliamentary Women's Caucus (interviews, 2023).

Interviewees from Nigeria cited a range of progressive policy changes. This includes the role of the Gender Technical Unit in the National Assembly, which aims to support legislators in addressing the needs of young people, especially girls and, more critically, the reduction in the minimum age for political positions that has been made possible under the Not Too Young to Run Act (NTYTRA) of 2018 (interviews, 2023). This legislation led to a decrease in the age requirements for the positions of President, from 40 to 35 years, House of Representatives, from 30 to 25 years, and State House of Assembly, from 30 to 25 years (Itodo, 2023). Developed and co-ordinated by young Nigerians, the act signifies a commitment to dismantling age barriers in elective offices (Curran et al., 2020). The 2023 general election in Nigeria marks the second election following the enactment of the NTYTRA. The subsequent increase in young Nigerians running for and holding elective positions underscores the profound impact of legislative changes on political empowerment.

### Increased representation of young people

**Steps to increase the political representation of young people fosters political empowerment.** Greater representation of young people in the government and in laws and policies makes young people feel listened to and empowers them to further engage in politics.

In Pakistan, initiatives like the Young Parliamentarians Forum serve as conduits for engaging young individuals from diverse backgrounds in policy discussions, aiming to augment inclusivity and participation in political activities (Babar et al., 2023). This approach not only empowers the youth, but also enriches the political landscape with diverse perspectives. A similar youth-centred shift is taking place in Indonesia with the women-led Indonesian Solidarity Party (Partai Solidaritas Indonesia, PSI). It aims to improve the representation of youth and women in the policymaking process and to take an active stand against any forms of 'old guard' political corruption and nepotism (Allison et al., 2022). While the party's strong reformist agenda does not sit well with all young people, the rising representation of young generations in politics inspires the country's youth, acting as a catalyst for heightened political engagement (ibid.).

### Political alignment with young people's value systems

**Aligning with young people's values on issues like corruption has become a key enabler, driving increased political engagement and support.** Even though politicians are often associated with corruption and bribery, the youth appreciate those with cleaner track records. In Sri Lanka and Pakistan, ending corruption significantly shaped the voting decisions of young people (Perera et al., 2019; Babar et al., 2023). The emphasis on combating corruption not only reflected the moral compass of the youth but also underscored their desire for a clean and transparent political landscape (ibid.). Next Generation data from Sri Lanka shows that 83 per cent of young women and 88 per cent of young men stated being honest and free of corruption were important qualities they look for when voting for candidates. In Pakistan, 40 per cent of young women and 41 per cent of young men expressed similar views (ibid.).

In Indonesia, youth revealed that politicians who embody admirable qualities such as honesty and integrity and align with young people's values wield considerable influence in fostering youth engagement and trust (Allison et al., 2022). Around 24 per cent of young women and 25 per cent of young men expressed the willingness to enhance their political engagement if Indonesian politics better reflected their personal views or opinions, emphasising the pivotal role of shared values in

mobilising youth participation (Next Generation data). Similar findings emerged from research on Ethiopia, where 25 per cent of young women and 36 per cent of young men shared that they would increase their political engagement if Ethiopian politics reflected more of their personal views and opinions (ibid.).

In Viet Nam, the younger generation viewed government efforts to tackle corruption favourably, indicating a shared commitment to ethical governance (Lamphere-Englund et al., 2020). While they may not feel empowered to report corruption, their expressed desire to do so underscored an aspiration for active participation in promoting transparency in governance (ibid.).

## 4.4 Cross-cutting enablers

### Digitalisation's growing influence

**Digitalisation plays a crucial role in young people's political empowerment.** In Pakistan, young people regard the internet as a transformative tool that elevates voices that were once marginalised and allows them to engage in political discussions (Babar et al., 2023). Similar shares of young women and men in urban areas (61 per cent and 62 per cent, respectively) agreed that online political and civic activism will help change Pakistan (Next Generation data). A higher share of young men in rural areas (62 per cent) in comparison to young women (41 per cent) agreed with this statement (ibid.). The large gap between men's and women's responses in rural areas, unlike urban areas, points to a gendered digital divide in rural areas (ibid.).

In Indonesia, youth saw social media as a powerful instrument for political expression (Allison et al.,

2022). From creating memes to mobilising around key issues, digital platforms provided them with an outlet to express frustrations with the existing political status quo (ibid.). In the 2019 elections, the leading contenders amplified their digital campaigns to connect with young voters. As a result of these efforts, there was a noticeable rise in youth voter participation (Jakarta Globe, 2019). Present patterns of online presence suggest that social media will continue to be a significant factor in the 2024 elections (Allison et al., 2022; Rachmah, 2023).

In Nigeria, 16 per cent of young men and 11 per cent of young women shared content on social media to raise awareness or show support for a political issue (Next Generation data); 51 per cent of politically engaged young men were social media users relative to 32 per cent of young women (ibid.).

In Poland, digital tools are being utilised for political activism (Raven et al., 2021), 19 per cent of young women and 22 per cent of young men reported participating in online activism (Next Generation data). Grassroots-led actions expressing dissatisfaction with the former ruling party unfolded through protests, online actions, and the development of mobile apps offering guidance on safety and legal assistance for young people joining peaceful protests (ibid.).

Political parties have astutely capitalised on the digital activism of young people, harnessing social media to amplify their messages. In Indonesia and Nigeria, high levels of political disinformation and uses of generative AI would reinforce the need for educating younger audiences on how to better engage with these messages.

**Table 4. Summary of enablers of political empowerment**

Level	Enablers of political empowerment
Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Multiple avenues exist for political and civic engagement</li> </ul>
Interpersonal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Open political discussions with family and friends</li> </ul>
Policy and legal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Legislative and policy changes</li> <li>Increased representation of young people</li> <li>Political alignment with young people's value systems</li> </ul>
Cross-cutting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Digitalisation's growing influence</li> </ul>

Source: Authors' analysis.

## 5. Barriers to political empowerment

Even though political empowerment serves as a cornerstone for an inclusive society, numerous barriers impede young people's active participation in the political landscape. Whereas many barriers apply to both young women and men, women and girls face distinct challenges owing to their gender and other markers of marginalisation. See Table 5 for a summary of key barriers.

### 5.1 Individual barriers

#### Distrust in local political systems

**Distrust in local political systems influences the political participation of young people.** In Pakistan, 39 per cent of young women and 59 per cent of young men intend to vote in the country's next elections (Next Generation data). They expressed deep levels of distrust in the political system, which is perceived as disengaging and unrepresentative of their concerns (Babar et al., 2023).

In Sri Lanka, 73 per cent of young women and 69 per cent of young men felt that voting was their responsibility as citizens. However, the main reasons for not voting were not being registered, not knowing where or how to vote, and not liking any of the candidates (Next Generation data). Nigerian youth echoed these sentiments, as they perceived their voices as relatively limited and insignificant compared to more dominant, older male voices (Curran et al., 2020). They lacked faith in the country's political system and feared political violence (ibid.).

#### Lack of access to education

**The inability to access education is a pivotal obstacle to achieving political empowerment.** Education plays a crucial role in forming young people's views and providing them with the skills, networks, and opportunities needed to engage

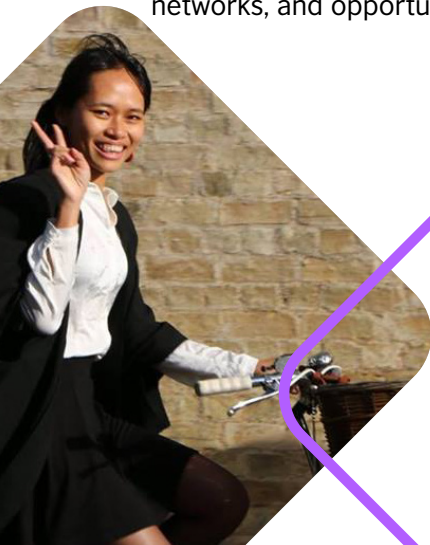
in politics. In Ethiopia, interviewees believe that women's political engagement depends on education, and that support from society, families, and schools is essential in empowering women and girls to actively engage in politics (interviews, 2023).

In Nigeria, limited educational attainment restricts the number of girls who can pursue higher education, where enhanced leadership and political empowerment opportunities often unfold (ibid.). In Sri Lanka, the reluctance of families to allow girls to participate in extracurricular activities (public speaking, debates, etc.) poses a significant challenge (ibid.). This reluctance jeopardises girls' exposure to opportunities that can help them develop essential skills and be prepared for political careers (ibid.).

#### Disadvantaged economic backgrounds

**The lack of economic empowerment and disadvantaged economic backgrounds represent barriers to women's political empowerment.** Across various countries, economic empowerment was described as crucial to politically empowering women, as financial independence enables women to discover their capabilities, enhances their confidence, social status and trust, and helps them to assume leadership positions.

Interviewees revealed that young women and girls are far from being economically empowered. In Viet Nam, the financial constraints associated with engaging in politics, particularly for those from middle-class families, present a significant obstacle (interviews, 2023). The perception that politics is reserved for the wealthy contributes to the reluctance of middle-class families to encourage women to enter this field (ibid.). This perception also emerged in Pakistan, where interviewees explained that because of the financial resources required to enter politics and the low stipends of parliamentarians, politics is often perceived as an exclusive arena that is not suitable for individuals from less financially stable backgrounds.





## 5.2 Interpersonal barriers

### Family influence and expectations

**The influence of family structures and societal expectations narrow women's political empowerment journeys.** Across Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Viet Nam, interviewees explained the debilitating impacts of deeply ingrained norms on women and girls. These dictate rigid gender roles and underscore familial responsibilities, often overshadowing individual pursuits. In Pakistan, family dynamics, particularly the roles of fathers, brothers, and husbands, significantly shape a woman's trajectory in politics. The reliance on familial connections or male endorsements underscores the challenges faced by women lacking such support, illustrating the limited avenues for independent political engagement (interviews, 2023).

In Sri Lanka, the reluctance of parents or partners to send young women to empowerment programmes has hampered their access to opportunities for political empowerment, perpetuating a cycle of restricted choices (interviews, 2023). In Viet Nam, societal expectations for women manifest in the prioritisation of family over career or political involvement. The reluctance of women to pursue higher education or ambitious careers stems from the pervasive fear that such pursuits may lead to marital discontent, highlighting the negative impact of societal norms on women's aspirations (ibid.).

## 5.3 Organisational barriers

### Limited support from institutions

**Young people do not feel supported by existing institutions.** Young people in Pakistan, Indonesia, Viet Nam and Ethiopia believe that there are not many opportunities for them to participate in politics. In Ethiopia, formal and informal avenues for participation were seen as restricted (De Schryver et al., 2019). There, 24 per cent of young women and 29 per cent of young men expressed that they would increase their engagement with politics if students were more actively encouraged to do so in schools (Next Generation data). Similar results emerged in Indonesia, where 18 per cent of young women and 15 per cent of young men expressed this desire (ibid.). Social and political institutions in Pakistan and Viet Nam

were perceived as inadequate in representing the interests of the youth and in providing the support needed for their growth (Lamphere-Englund et al., 2020; Babar et al., 2023).

## 5.4 Societal barriers

### Restrictive gender and social norms

**Gender and social norms restrict the political empowerment of women and girls.** These norms are etched in society, interpersonal relationships, and community dynamics, and heavily shape women's behaviours and opportunities. In Pakistan, key informants shared perspectives on entrenched patriarchal norms, such as the expectation that women should prioritise having a family over their career and be caring and submissive, rather than leaders, profoundly influencing their political participation (interviews, 2023). Media campaigns that disparage successful women contribute to a broader societal reluctance towards outspoken, educated, and assertive women (ibid.). According to the interviewees, the patriarchal fabric of Pakistani society, where men control household decisions, creates substantial opposition for women attempting to step outside traditional roles. The perception of politics as a male-dominated and unattractive profession further compounds the challenges faced by aspiring women leaders (ibid.).

In Sri Lanka, key informants stated that cultural expectations firmly position women in roles associated with household responsibilities and child/elderly care, significantly limiting their participation in political activities. In their views, the impact intensifies as post-puberty cultural norms reinforce patriarchal values, perpetuating the perception that women need to be protected rather than take on leadership roles (interviews, 2023). This narrative extends to media portrayals of female politicians, which tend to focus more on controversies than substantive contributions (ibid.).

In Indonesia, key informants highlighted the society's deep-seated lack of trust in women's political capabilities, reflected in preferences for male candidates, even among women voters (interviews, 2023). From their perspective, this ingrained mistrust obstructs women from pursuing leadership roles, forcing them to continually prove their worth in a society inherently sceptical of women in political arenas (ibid.). In Viet Nam,

key informants stated that societal norms expect women to prioritise family over personal interests, acting as barriers to their political empowerment despite the existence of policies that encourage women's political participation (ibid.).

In Nigeria, patriarchal norms embedded in societal responses and decision-making processes significantly constrain women's potential contributions to society in key informant perceptions (interviews, 2023). In Ethiopia, key informants expressed views on how ingrained cultural norms discourage girls from assuming leadership roles, compounded by biased decision-making processes within households (ibid.). The intersection of cultural practices and traditional beliefs perpetuates a male-dominated and patriarchal system, contributing to structural social norms that disadvantage women economically and politically (ibid.).

## 5.5 Policy and legal barriers

### Underrepresentation in government and political priorities

**Young people, especially women and girls, are underrepresented in political priorities, which is a common challenge with distinct manifestations across countries.** Both Pakistan and Sri Lanka share a notable experience of youth feeling underrepresented and lacking meaningful political voices. In Pakistan, despite significant youth-focused investments, representation remains symbolic and tokenistic: 63 per cent of young women and 62 per cent of young men believe their voices on national issues are either not heard by the government or if they are listened to, no action is taken (Next Generation data). While women in Pakistan have representation in parliament, it is primarily through reserved seats on party lists, and the inadequate nature of this representation is exacerbated by the reluctance of male candidates to relinquish their general seats for women (interviews, 2023). Female parliamentarians in Pakistan often experience marginalisation and are not treated as equals by their male counterparts (ibid.).

In Sri Lanka, despite the establishment of a 25 per cent women's quota for parliament, the intended impact has not materialised in key informant perceptions (interviews, 2023). In 2022, the proportion of seats held by women in Sri Lanka's national parliament remained nearly unchanged at around 5 per cent (that is only 12 out of 225 parliamentary seats), and local councils exhibit even more dismal ratios (IFES, 2022; von Kameke, 2023). The implementation of the quota tends to be tokenistic, with most women relegated to the back benches and denied opportunities to voice their opinions (interviews, 2023).

Governments in Ethiopia, Poland, and Nigeria have also failed to represent the interests and concerns of young people. In these countries, governments are perceived as serving the interests of a select few rather than prioritising the broader masses (De Schryver et al., 2019; Curran et al., 2020; Raven et al., 2021). Interviewees from Nigeria raised concerns over the country's rankings on women's representation. Based on data from the 10th National Assembly, the country continues to occupy the lowest position in the African Parliaments' ranking, with three female senators out of 109, a reduction from seven in the 9th Assembly (PLAC, 2023; Iniobong, 2023). The scarcity of women policymakers and politicians persists, and those who do enter political parties frequently find themselves overshadowed by their male counterparts (interviews, 2023).

### Youth have limited visibility of policy initiatives

**Policymakers often fall short in effectively communicating policies and laws to the youth, negatively impacting their political awareness and engagement.** This lack of visibility and dissemination prevents young people from being aware of vital initiatives that could support their political engagement. In Ethiopia, young people felt that they have minimal influence over important decisions due to insufficient awareness of governmental initiatives and youth policies (De Schryver et al., 2019). This dearth of awareness contributes significantly to a prevailing sense of disempowerment, restricting their active participation in political processes. In rural areas, a higher share of young women (73 per cent) relative to young men (66 per cent) were unaware of any government policies on youth (Next Generation data). Similar shares of young women and men (45 per cent and 43 per cent, respectively) reported this issue in urban areas (ibid.); 90 per cent of young women and 82 per cent of young men claim not to be engaged in

politics (ibid.). When asked what could boost their political engagement, 39 per cent of young women and 50 per cent of young men stated more accessible political information (ibid.).

In Sri Lanka, most young people lacked awareness of crucial government programmes, including the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC), Office for National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR), Office on Missing Persons (OMP), and the National Policy on Reconciliation (NPE) (Perera et al., 2019). This unawareness not only disconnects them from critical national reconciliation efforts but also hampers their capacity to contribute meaningfully to discussions on governance and societal rebuilding. Crucially, women's engagement in reconciliation is central to sustainable peace agreements. A study conducted by the International Peace Institute, examining 182 signed peace agreements from 1989 to 2011, revealed that the inclusion of women in peace processes correlates with a 35 per cent higher likelihood that a peace agreement will endure for 15 years or longer (Lindborg, 2017).

In Nigeria, the inaccessibility of political processes poses a notable barrier, impeding effective engagement of young Nigerians in political affairs (Curran et al., 2020). A similar challenge is evident in Viet Nam, where the lack of awareness about initiatives and youth policies compounds the overall disengagement of young people from politics (Lamphere-Englund et al., 2020).

In Poland, young people have been advocating for improved education on politics and enhanced accessibility to political information, emphasising the need for a more informed and engaged youth population (Raven et al., 2021).

## 5.6 Cross-cutting barriers

### Geographic differences

**Geography affects the political engagement of young people.** In Indonesia and Ethiopia, the rural-urban divide contributes to limited participation, with young people in rural areas expressing a profound sense of neglect (Allison et al., 2022; De Schryver et al., 2019). In Ethiopia, rural youth were more critical of the government than their urban counterparts. Around 23 per cent of young women aged 25–35 in rural areas relative to 32 per cent of young women of the same age in urban areas trusted the Ethiopian government (Next Generation data). Only 8 per cent of women in rural areas relative to 28 per cent in urban areas within the same age group thought the government was effective (ibid.).

Key informants in Ethiopia stated that the absence of educational pursuits for women and girls in rural areas diminishes their prospects to actively participate in politics and acquire valuable leadership skills, hindering their political empowerment (interviews, 2023). Conversely, Viet Nam demonstrated a unique dynamic where rural youth felt closer to policymakers, while urban and peri-urban residents adopted a more critical stance (Lamphere-Englund et al., 2020).

### Offline and online violence against women

**Offline and online violence deters women from engaging in politics.** The fear and experience of violence and objectification jeopardise women's interest in making their voice heard and engaging in politics. In Pakistan, female parliamentarians encounter objectification. This deters families from supporting their daughters or wives in pursuing political roles (interviews, 2023). The absence of safe spaces for female politicians further impedes their political growth (ibid.). In Sri Lanka, women who engage in advocacy and politics, especially online, encounter significant hate speech (ibid.). The amplified safety and security threats, particularly through social media, contribute to a hostile environment. The prevalence of fake news further affects visible women involved in political work, creating reluctance among many young women to share their opinions on various matters, not just limited to politics (ibid.).

In key informant perceptions, Nigeria grapples with a reluctance to address gender-based violence. It is widely seen as a private, not a public, issue (interviews, 2023). This limits the creation and implementation of effective policies to end online and offline violence. The state's failure to recognise it as a broader challenge also shrinks women and girls' political engagement (ibid.).





**Table 5. Summary of barriers to political empowerment**

Level	Barriers to political empowerment
<b>Individual</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Distrust in local political systems</li> <li>• Lack of access to education</li> <li>• Disadvantaged economic backgrounds</li> </ul>
<b>Interpersonal</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family influence and expectations</li> </ul>
<b>Societal</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Restrictive gender and social norms</li> </ul>
<b>Organisational</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited support from institutions</li> </ul>
<b>Policy and legal</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Underrepresentation in government and political priorities</li> <li>• Youth have limited visibility of policy initiatives</li> </ul>
<b>Cross-cutting</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Geographic differences</li> <li>• Offline and online violence against women</li> </ul>

Source: Authors' analysis.





## 6 Conclusion and recommendations

This paper examines the enablers of and barriers to the political empowerment of young people, especially women and girls, across Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Viet Nam, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Poland. Broadly, the Next Generation reports and the interview data draw attention to the following:

Youth-centric policies and initiatives are key drivers of the broader political empowerment of young people. However, in the case of young women and girls, the protection of their rights and safety are identified as integral to their political empowerment and lead to their increased representation in political spaces.

While the lack of opportunities, political awareness, representation, and scepticism towards governments emerge as key barriers across young people in general, gender stereotypes, lack of safety, and regressive gender and social norms especially affect women and girls. These not only hinder their political engagement but condition them to see their primary role as carers rather than leaders.

Overall, there is a greater volume of evidence on barriers than enablers. This points to the heightened need for galvanising action on amplifying enablers and mitigating barriers.

### Recommendations

The findings of this paper reveal how young people generally and women and girls specifically may be politically empowered.

1. Families, peers and friends are critical allies in the development of young women's political ambitions and interest in politics. Specific efforts by them would include:
  - Bringing in women and girls in decisions that affect their lives rather than deciding for them.
  - Encouraging critical and non-judgmental political discussions within the home and familiar social circles so that women and girls develop greater self-confidence and self-expression.
  - Adapting household responsibilities within the family structure that free up women's time to engage in political and social causes.
  - Challenging harmful gender and social norms that subjugate women and girls to men and boys and impede their political empowerment.
2. Schools and higher education institutions are vital in shaping the next generation of values-based political figures. Investments from them would include a focus on:
  - Nurturing curiosity, honesty, integrity, fairness, ethical behaviours, and leadership qualities that young people have already expressed a clear desire to see in political leaders.
  - Embedding skills development into learning agendas and rewarding critical thinking and analysis, effective persuasion and influencing, public speaking, networking, and leadership for social and political causes.
  - Promoting leadership positions for girls in schools and universities, including in student unions.
  - Creating and strengthening elected student bodies that are free to organise and mobilise around issues that affect the country and the world with sufficient resources and involving them in decisions that affect their learning experiences.
  - Enriching academic life with political activism and civic education so that young people develop a greater sense of responsibility towards gender equality, nation-building, and social cohesion. This can be done through extra-curricular activities and events, as well as embedding elements of politics and civic education in the curricula.
3. Cross-sectoral alliances and collaborations between different types of civil society actors and service providers (public and private) can raise awareness among youth and women and girls by developing effective channels of communication. This would include:
  - Reinforcing positive social and gender norms that promote gender equality.
  - Highlighting opportunities in and sharing information about activism, volunteering, and social development.
  - Offering advice and guidance on youth engagement and participation.

- Amplifying the role of women as leaders and role models who can share their empowerment journeys and their political choices and trade-offs so that young people can learn these experiences.
  - Engaging men and boys as gender equality champions in empowerment programmes for women and girls.
  - Promoting transparent salaries and gender pay gaps in politics.
  - Supporting public awareness campaigns to highlight the importance of women's participation in political decision making.
  - Organising networking and knowledge-sharing events for women working in or interested in working in politics.
  - Promoting gender diversity in corporate leadership positions, setting an example for other sectors and encouraging women to aspire to leadership roles in various fields, including politics.
  - Addressing technology-facilitated gender-based violence against women working in public roles (e.g. journalists, politicians, activists) in addition to developing monitoring and safeguarding tools that are country specific and informed by local languages and cultural norms.
4. The role of the media, both traditional and digital, such as technology platforms, social media, radio, and television is crucial in elevating rather than marginalising young people's and women's participation in politics. Areas the media could consider include:
- Building safer spaces for young people and women to share their political preferences and views while alleviating fear of intimidation.
  - Developing online safeguarding mechanisms to better protect young women from online harassment and violence.
  - Representing the concerns of young people, especially women and girls, to hold the governments accountable for their actions and bring about legal change.
  - Changing media representation of women in politics, moving away from objectifying them to focusing on their success stories in leadership roles.
5. Policymakers and legislators play critical roles in advocating for inclusive and increased youth participation in political spaces. Areas to focus on would include:
- Evaluating the quality of existing laws, policies, and initiatives aimed at politically empowering women and the barriers they face in achieving their political pursuits.
  - Amending laws and law enforcement to create a political environment that does not silence political engagement in the form of peaceful protests and activism.
  - Establishing schemes and strategies in educational spaces to politically engage women and girls from an early age.
  - Strengthening legislation to prevent and respond to technology-facilitated gender-based violence against women in public roles and the wider population.
  - Co-creating social policies and legal frameworks that support youth and women's empowerment, agreeing on measurable outcomes over time, and encouraging greater public scrutiny over resource utilisation and planning decisions through feedback loops.
  - Improving access to different types of political information, such as on existing political parties and their agenda, the election system, and current political debates, so that young people can make more informed decisions about their role in political change processes.
  - Increasing political representation across diverse demographics, including youth, women, and persons with disabilities, through targeted quotas, so that imbalances may be corrected over time and the profiles of politicians change from being mostly male and older.
  - Sensitising government actors through workshops and training courses on political participation of women using a gender-transformative lens.



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