
Information Sheet: Addressing Constraints on Women's Participation in Leadership

What are some constraints on women's participation in leadership?

Constraints on women's participation in leadership may vary, depending on factors such as race, ethnicity, age, health, socioeconomic status, disability status, gender identity, and sexual orientation.

Household work and family responsibilities- Women are responsible for a large portion of work at home. Taking care of children and family member and managing household work, often on top of work outside the home, constitutes many responsibilities and limits the time women can participate in community affairs and leadership.

Cultural and social norms or expectations- Women may be limited from participation in leadership because of strong gender roles, where men are expected to serve as leaders. In some settings, women are also not expected to move unaccompanied, speak publicly, travel, or engage in other activities that may be essential for leadership.

Stereotypes and biases- Strong gender roles can also relate to stereotypes where women are not considered to possess attributes of leadership. For example, women may be stereotyped as caring, nurturing, or indecisive, and these may not be considered qualities of strong leaders. Women may also shy away from leadership opportunities if they fear being associated with characteristics unbecoming of women.

Lack of family support- Often related to social norms and stereotypes, women's partners or family members may not approve of women's participation.

Limited representation and networks- Women lack role models in leadership and access to influential networks critical to moving up the leadership hierarchy.¹²

Gender-based violence- Pathways to leadership are minimized or blocked when women and girls face threats, sexual harassment, and other forms of GBV. Early/forced marriage, discriminatory inheritance laws and denial of critical opportunities and services, including education and family planning services, constitute significant barriers to women's participation in leadership.

Limited access to financial resources- Women experience limited financial autonomy and control over financial resources at community and household levels. This limits women's opportunities and perpetuates perceptions that women are not suited for leadership.

Practical barriers- Women are disproportionately affected by a range of barriers, including transportation, language, literacy, and physical locations of leadership venues.

¹² AAUW. (2016). *Barriers and Bias THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP*. https://www.aauw.org/app/uploads/03/2020/Barriers_and_Bias_summary.pdf

Why address constraints on women's participation?

Addressing constraints helps women more fully participate in community affairs. Where women participate in leadership, community wellbeing improves.

What can be done to address constraints on women's participation?

Constraints on women's participation can be addressed in multiple ways, from high level support of lawmakers to working with families and individual women and girls.

➔ Provide training, knowledge, and skill building opportunities for women and girls

➔ Enact zero tolerance policies for sexual harassment and other forms of GBV.

➔ Promote men's participation in childcare and household work.

➔ Consult with women about the timing of meetings or leadership activities.

➔ Provide safe spaces where women can meet to build leadership strategies and networks.

➔ Promote healthy relationships and joint decision-making at the household level.

➔ Pick locations for leadership meetings that are easily accessible for women and girls.

➔ Consider providing transportation, or rotate locations to expand participation

➔ Advocate with lawmakers to change exclusionary policies and structures.

➔ Engage community leaders to understand and address constraints to women's participation in leadership.

➔ Challenge harmful social and cultural norms, stereotypes, and biases that constrain women's participation in leadership.

➔ Organize discussions and meetings to address constraints to women's participation in leadership.

➔ Establish and strengthen mentorship opportunities.

➔ Prohibit early/forced marriage and promote girls' education.

➔ Organize networking events and social opportunities.

➔ Recognize the important contributions of women serving in formal and informal leadership positions.

➔ Hold meetings in common, or multiple languages, and accommodate different literacy levels.

➔ Organize trainings on human rights and women's rights.