Collective Voice: Reaching Critical Mass for Women’s Empowerment

Chapter Summary

Social norms determine who has a voice in society. When the norm is for women to be excluded from decision making, then they will have little say over policy formation that is in the best interest of everyone. This chapter considers how women’s collective voice in politics and civil society can promote gender equality, remove barriers to women’s empowerment, and bring an end to hunger and extreme poverty.

Women are grossly underrepresented in government decision-making bodies nearly everywhere in the world. They are half the global population but hold an average of just 22 percent of seats in national parliaments. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set a target of 30 percent representation by the end of 2015, but the world is clearly nowhere close to reaching it. Progress has been slow for a number of reasons discussed earlier: discriminatory laws, underinvestment in women’s human capital, traditional beliefs and social norms that cast doubt on women’s capacity as decision makers, and a highly inequitable burden of unpaid care work.

Post-conflict periods are typically where we see women’s share of political power increases suddenly. Post-conflict reconstruction, an unsettled but peaceful time, is an opportunity to redress previous gender inequalities. The collaborative leadership style and conflict resolution skills of many women are assets that countries are belatedly beginning to recognize. We will have a closer look at post-genocide Rwanda, the only country where women hold a majority of seats in parliament.

More than 80 countries—including Rwanda—reserve a share of seats in parliament for women. India’s Gram Panchayats (village governing councils) use these set-asides to ensure that women are represented in local government. In a country the size of India, a nationwide institution that brings more women into government deserves attention. Do women govern differently from men? While this question is clearly too broad to have one definitive answer, researchers have found, for example, that women on India’s village councils place greater emphasis than men on some social services—particularly education and also clean water and sanitation. The Gram Panchayats are discussed later in this chapter.

Beyond government, we also look at how women are acting in civil society to overcome discrimination. In Chapter 1, we considered how producer groups can give women the “strength in numbers” they need to increase their economic power. Here we consider how women can lift their voices collectively in nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to influence policy. In Cambodia, women garment workers have organized to protest low wages and unsafe working conditions, sometimes working together with men and sometimes—when they find that men marginalize their female coworkers—without them. In Malawi, young men and women, better educated than their parents’ generation and more open to working together, struggle to make their voices heard and their priorities for their country known. Chapter 3 includes case studies from each of these countries.

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS IN THIS CHAPTER

- Make it easier for women to run for public office at all levels of government.
- Increase the proportion of women peace negotiators.
- Create more space for women-led civil society groups to participate in public policy debates.
- Build a generation of women leaders in government and civil society, especially young women.
Rwanda: A Majority Speaks

Most people in the United States know this small East African country only for three months of savage killing in 1994. Rwanda’s extraordinary rise from the ashes of genocide has everything to do with women’s empowerment. The carnage that took place must never be forgotten as a reminder of the horrors human beings are capable of inflicting on each other, but Rwanda also deserves our attention for its achievements since then. Perhaps most strikingly, Rwanda is the only country to elect a parliament that is majority female.

After the genocide, women and girls made up 70 percent of the population. The disproportionate slaughter of men left Rwanda a country of widows and orphans. Women, who had always been important as Rwanda’s farmers, caregivers, and workers, stepped forward not only to rebuild their country but to lead and govern it. Notably, women from all walks of life took the nontraditional step of running for public office. Before the genocide, women had never held more than 18 percent of the seats in Parliament. In the most recent election, women’s majority increased from 56 percent to 64 percent. Member of Parliament (MP) Evariste Kalisa says, “Rwandan society [formerly] regarded women as good for nothing else than caring for children and households, but now since we have them at the top, it is encouraging future generations to be ambitious and to follow in the footsteps of their mothers. They are role models to children, to girls.”

In 1996, when the post-conflict transition was still in its early stages, female elected officials established the Forum of Rwandan Women Parliamentarians, uniting women from different political parties. The goal, as Roxane Wilber explains, is “to discuss issues facing women and the nation as a whole, to formulate policy priorities, and to amplify women’s voices in a newly shared agenda.” Today, every piece of legislation that comes before Parlia-
ment is analyzed in terms of its fairness to women and men. This deliberate attention to gender issues has brought gains for women under the law and in society. The legal system treats them no differently than men. Daughters are entitled to inherit property every bit as much as sons, women can access financial services and buy and own land, and girls and boys attend school at the same rate.

The law that codified women’s inheritance rights did not pass without debate, as one female MP recalled: “We had a long, long sensitization campaign….we were asking [male parliamentarians], “Ok, fine, you think only men can inherit, not girls. But as a man, you have a mother who might lose the property from your father because [your uncles] will take everything away from her. Would you like that?” When you personalize things, they tend to understand. When [the issues] remain just in the abstract…women and men become two distinct people, but the moment you personalize it, they do understand.”

In a survey of more than 50,000 people in 34 African countries, nearly 70 percent of women said they believe that women are as capable of being political leaders as men, while 29 percent of women think only men should be elected as political leaders.4

Women are the majority of trade union members in one-third of nations for which data are available and in another third women are over 40 percent of the membership.5

Figure 3.1 Share of Women in Parliament by Region and World, 1997–2013

Equality before the law—particularly the right to buy, own, and inherit land—brings direct benefits for food security. Women produce at least as much of the country’s food supply as men, and owning land enables them to use it in more sustainable and productive ways. The effect of land reform and the other moves toward legal equality on the country’s psyche is harder to gauge. Change in the family is clearly moving more slowly than change in the law. For example, Rwanda has progressive laws against sexual and gender-based violence, but when researchers held workshops to gauge the effects of these on relations between the sexes in the home, the comments suggested that individuals and households have not caught up with the legislators.\footnote{12} According to Rwanda’s 2010 Health and Demographic Survey, 41 percent of women between the ages of 15-49 have been the victims of gender-based violence.\footnote{13} MP Judith Kanakuze, the former head of the Rwandan Forum for Woman Parliamentarians, led the drafting of a bill outlawing domestic violence and imposing harsher punishment for rape. “We don’t want to just make a law,” she said in 2005\footnote{14}—the legislation was part of a larger effort to change cultural norms that condoned violence against women. Before Kanakuze passed away in 2010, she finally saw the legislation she had championed signed into law. The fact that passage took years—until 2008—suggests that a woman’s right to protection against gender-based violence was a hard sell to male MPs, just as inheritance equality had been. Not by coincidence perhaps, 2008 was the year women crossed the 50 percent threshold to become a majority in Parliament.

Rwanda still has a long way to go; it started as one of the least developed countries in the world. Its most recent composite score on the Human Development Index ranks it 167\textsuperscript{th} out of 194 countries.\footnote{15} But its standing on gender equality is much better, ranking 76\textsuperscript{th} overall and first among the nations of sub-Saharan Africa.\footnote{16}

One reason that women were able to become a parliamentary majority is that they got their “foot in the door” of the legislature from a provision in the new Rwandan constitution that reserves 30 percent of seats for women. After they were elected, of course, they had to prove themselves just like male politicians.

With women now occupying nearly two-thirds of the seats in Parliament, is it time to retire the policy of reservations for women? In March 2014, Bread for the World Institute staff asked this question of parliamentarian Connie Bwiza, who represents the Nyagatare district in Rwanda’s Eastern province of the country, during a conversation in her office. She was
adamant that it is far too early to end the reservation policy. Bwiza was 26 at the time of the genocide and fought alongside men in the Rwandan Patriotic Front to end the slaughter. Afterward, she directed the Ministry of Rehabilitation’s program for orphans and unaccompanied children. She ran for office in 1998 and has served as an MP since then.

Bwiza does not take for granted the progress women have made in Rwanda. Being the most progressive nation on gender in sub-Saharan Africa does not mean that Rwanda has achieved gender equality. She mentioned a parliamentary vote that had been held just days before in Kenya, another East African country that reserves 30 percent of seats in Parliament for women. The female MPs tried, but were unable, to prevent the male majority from passing legislation to legalize polygamy, a bill that was later signed by the president. Without the 30 percent guaranteed, it would have been even more difficult to advocate in Kenya’s Parliament for women’s rights. Reservations remain necessary to ensure that women hold onto bargaining power once they gain it. Bwiza also cited an example from the developed world, recounting how surprised she was to find out, at an International Women’s Day conference in Austria, that even women in wealthy countries have not yet won the struggle for equal pay. She also bristles at the notion that anyone outside of Rwanda should know what’s best for Rwandans, not a surprising view having lived through the international community’s abandonment of the country during the genocide.

Rwanda’s struggle against gender inequality is unfolding very much in its own context and culture, just as in every other country, yet the fact that women and men share power in government makes it a pioneer. The implications of equal political representation for gender equality in the home and workplace—and the take-away messages for women and men in other countries—are still emerging, but steps such as equal land rights and stricter laws against gender-based violence hold the promise of further improvement in the near future.

*Rwanda: Lessons in Post-Conflict Reconstruction*

Ending global hunger and extreme poverty by 2030 will require much more attention to post-conflict and fragile countries, precisely because war is a major cause of hunger: these nations’ vulnerability to a relapse into violence makes them one of the greatest threats to sustaining a hunger-free world. Thus, the international community has a key role to play in post-conflict countries—supporting their reconstruction efforts, improving living conditions, and facilitating a more rapid transition to economic stability and growth.
One way of helping countries recover from war is to push for gender equality in the realm of public affairs. The suffering that women endure during armed conflict drives their priorities for the reconstruction agenda. For example, we mentioned that in Rwanda, female members of Parliament pushed through reforms that mandate much stronger protections against gender-based violence. Yet few women participate in peace processes and most peace agreements fail to even mention women’s rights or gender equality. Donors, governments, UN agencies, and civil society organizations should all work to promote women’s visibility and influence in peace-building and conflict resolution.

Not only are women’s voices more important than ever in post-conflict environments, but such situations—with so much being rebuilt—are opportunities to build institutions that will reinforce gender equality. Post-conflict states need all the help they can get to restore and improve infrastructure and institutions that were destroyed in the fighting and may have been dysfunctional before the violence even started. It can take many years for a country to recover and put itself on a sustainable development path. Rwanda was a shattered nation in 1994—and for many years thereafter. Both female and male MPs have helped drive some very impressive development initiatives, but the fact is that Rwanda needed and continues to need a great deal of assistance from the international community. Donors have provided steadfast support. In 2000, the government relied on donors for 86 percent of the national budget. Now, 20 years after the genocide, donors supply 40 percent of the budget. It is not uncommon for fragile and post-conflict nations to need so much support from outside. It simply takes a long time to recover from war.

Too often, war normalizes violence, so that when the fighting stops, women and girls remain extremely vulnerable. For example, Rwandan women and girls suffered appalling levels of sexual violence during the genocide. Grief, frustration, and post-traumatic stress, combined with hunger and poverty, make women and girls easy targets for predators in any post-conflict setting. Most perpetrators escape prosecution, fueling a culture of impunity. Some women, with no way of earning a living and desperate to feed their children and themselves, are forced to resort to prostitution. And while the fighting may be over, the shattering of a society by war makes any form of normalcy illusory.

Despite the fact that the G-8 (Group of 8 developed economies) issued a long overdue statement, the “Declaration on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict,” in 2013, there is little the international community seems willing to do to respond to the normalization of

Twenty years since the genocide, Rwandans continue to experience post-traumatic stress. These women participate in a support group called Step Forward.
sexual violence in conflict. The threat of violence to women and girls sometimes comes even from men who are charged with protecting them, but who instead exploit the chaotic conditions—and the war survivors. Cases of abuse by U.N. peacekeepers have been reported in the DRC, Liberia, South Sudan, Sierra Leone, Haiti, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and others.23

Donors deserve credit for all the help they’ve given Rwanda, but the hard work of rebuilding institutions depends on leadership within the country itself. Consider the impressive progress Rwanda has made in reducing the stunting rate of children under 5, which was reduced from 52 percent to 44 percent between 2005 and 2010.24 Much of the pace of progress can be credited to the fact that many of Rwanda’s female members of parliament are also mothers.25 As parliamentarian Speciose Mukandutiye explained, “In normal family life, you will find that [women’s] first priority is children. When one of my children is sick, I am suffering too. So when we are fighting for women’s right, we are fighting also indirectly for children’s rights.”26

UNICEF concluded that Rwanda’s progress against stunting was primarily due to the community-based nutrition programs established around the country. “This was all done with the help of food grown locally, and not packaged interventions provided by donors,” explained Fidele Ngabo, a director in the Ministry of Health. “Each village comes up with community-based approaches to tackle malnutrition and food insecurity that don’t cost money—we [the government] are at the center to provide support and play a monitoring role.”27

Rwanda’s health care system remains in fragile condition.28 In 2010, there were just 625 doctors in the country, serving 12 million people. To help address the unavailability of even basic health care, 45,000 community health workers were recruited and trained. There are three in each village, all elected by their community.29 One of the community health workers is a man named Theo Ntacumura, who is one of the men selected by district officials to participate in the first group trained in the MenCare program (see Chapter 2, page 89, for more about MenCare). When he meets with husbands, he advises them on how to be most helpful to their pregnant wives and explains the importance of ensuring that pregnant women have transportation for prenatal care appointments and opportunity to rest after giving birth. Between 2000 and 2010, the percentage of women who gave birth under the care of a skilled health worker jumped from 39 percent to 70 percent.30

Rwanda has benefited from the support of donors such as the Clinton Foundation and USAID, but it is the Rwandan government who drives these development initiatives. The
country’s ambitious development goals are all clearly spelled out in *Vision 2020*, a document used to drive progress and serve as a touchstone for leaders to hold themselves accountable. Donors and their implementing partners tailor their approach and programs to the country’s development plan.

**Rwanda: Lessons in Post-Conflict Reconciliation**

Karama, Rwanda, 1995: Less than a year after the genocide, the priest directs members of his congregation to offer a sign of peace to their neighbors. The reaction in this town 150 kilometers south of Kigali, the Rwandan capital, was one that was mirrored in many other communities: Tutsi women sat on one side of the church, Hutu women sat on the other, and they never so much as looked at each other. This moment in the service passed the same way every week for years.

The Tutsi women in the congregation were widows from the genocide. The husbands of the Hutu women had raped the Tutsi women and killed their husbands and other relatives.

Months after the genocide, Hutu women had started to return to their villages. Their husbands had participated in the genocide, and they were in prison either waiting to be tried for their crimes or already serving sentences.

When the wives brought their husbands food at the prison, they were stoned by Tutsi women and children.

1998: The wives of the perpetrators approached a nun at the church and asked her to arrange a meeting with the Tutsi women. Several dozen Tutsi women agreed to meet.

As one of these women recounted years later when Bread for the World Institute visited the community, she was scared and as soon as she entered the church, she wanted to leave. “I saw them as their husbands,” she said. Her baby had been killed by one of these men; for days, she continued to carry the child on her back. The nun who had brought them together said, “You accepted and they are here. This is hard for them as well.”

A Hutu representative said, “We know we didn’t help you when your relatives were being killed, but we want you to listen to us.” The Hutu women had come to ask forgiveness. “It took more than three years to work up the courage to ask for this meeting. We’ve carried around our shame ever since we returned.”

The Tutsi women did not forgive them initially, but slowly their hearts softened. They were caring for many orphans from the genocide, and the Hutu women offered to help...
them by cleaning their homes, fetching water and firewood for them, working in their gardens, and caring for the children when the Tutsi women had to be away.

The turning point for the Tutsis came when they asked the Hutus to find out from their husbands where their victims, the Tutsi husbands and relatives, were buried. The Hutu women went to their husbands in prison and returned with the information.

The Tutsi women had formed support groups as early as the first months after the genocide to cope with their suffering. Now, they invited the Hutu women to join their groups. “I never thought I would be able to forgive them,” said the woman who had longed to run out of the church at the first meeting. “But I truly forgive them from the bottom of my heart.”

The women wanted their children to learn to get along, and for the first time allowed them to play together. The children have grown up as friends, and recently some of them have married each other.

“Today, we share everything,” explained one of the women. “We live like sisters.” The group continues to expand, consisting of more than 1,700 members.

Word began to spread around the country and to other parts of Africa about these women. They call themselves The Courage of Living. In 2010, The Courage of Living was honored by the national government, and in 2012, the group received a delegation of Kenyan women parliamentarians to discuss ways to reunite Kenyans who remained divided by post-election violence in 2009.

Since the year 2000, Rwanda has cut maternal and child mortality rates by more than half.
“WINNING RESPECT AND ACCEPTANCE IS CERTAINLY NOT A HOPELESS CAUSE. AS WE’RE SEEING IN THE UNITED STATES, ATTITUDES AND LAWS CAN CHANGE QUICKLY.”

Violence against gender nonconforming women is widespread. Perpetrators have used such language as “corrective rape.” Another motivation for such attacks is the belief—not supported by evidence—that sexual orientation and gender identity can be changed. In South Africa, a mother who feared that her 12-year-old daughter was a lesbian invited a stranger to live with the family and be the girl’s “husband.” But several years of nearly daily rapes, until the girl escaped, failed to turn her into a heterosexual. Also in South Africa, there has been a wave of vicious murders of women who openly dated or lived with other women—at least 30 in the past few years, according to human rights groups. Among the victims was one of South Africa’s top female soccer players, Eudy Simelane.

What can bring change? Education—that homosexuality is present in every society and, like heterosexuality, cannot be changed; that gender nonconforming women are human beings who contribute to their communities and have the same rights and aspirations as other people. Visibility is another key: when opponents of equal rights learn that a beloved son or daughter is one of “those people,” their attitudes often change.

At this writing, there are several proposals, including one introduced in the Senate, that the Obama administration appoint a first-ever Envoy for Global Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Rights. Such an envoy can not only champion lesbian, bisexual, and transgender rights at the international level, but also throw our country’s support behind education efforts and other measures that will make it safer for gender nonconforming women to be who they are.

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India: Empowered to Speak

In 1993, the Indian government passed a law requiring that one-third of seats in local governing councils (Gram Panchayats) be reserved for women and that one-third of council leaders (Pradhans) also be women. It was both an effort to decentralize power so local jurisdictions had greater say over funding for public goods, and to enable more women to participate in governing their communities. The broader law applied to every level of government, but we focus here on the local level and the impact of women’s presence in Gram Panchayats.

More than 20 years since the law passed, it is clear that the reservation policy has had significant effects on the provision of public goods such as schools, roads, and better access to clean drinking water and sanitation. As the term suggests, public goods benefit everyone in a community. But women and girls, with their far heavier household responsibilities and close day-to-day involvement in children’s well-being, tend to benefit more than males from investments in public goods. As we saw in the previous chapter, women spend an inordinate amount of time carrying daily water supplies for their households. Having more sources of clean water closer to their village saves them time as well as enabling them to drink clean water. UNICEF estimates that as many as 1,400 children die daily from diarrheal diseases linked to poor sanitation and lack of access to drinking water. Poor sanitation also contributes to stunting, and a lack of proper sanitation in schools is one of the main reasons girls stop attending. Women’s clearer recognition of the importance of investing in clean water and sanitation has indeed meant that female members of the Gram Panchayats are more inclined to call for investments in improving water and sanitation.

In Bihar, one of India’s poorest states, 50 percent of Gram Panchayat seats have been reserved for women since 2006. Researchers have found that this reservation policy is positively associated with an increase of births in health facilities. The researchers argue that these results reflect women’s greater concern about child health, as well as better information available to representatives on the Gram Panchayat. “A world run by women would look decidedly different,” says economist Esther Duflo, whose research on women’s political participation in the Gram Panchayats has contributed a great deal to the knowledge on the subject we have today. Her comment seems to hold true even in areas where women traditionally have very little power and female literacy rates are quite low. Research shows that the reservation policy has had positive effects on the
aspirations of teenage girls, for example. Exposure to women leaders coincides with a desire to marry later, have fewer children, and obtain jobs requiring higher education.41

“India has nearly 1.5 million elected women representatives at the local level—in terms of numbers, this is the highest globally,” says Anne Stenhammer, program director at the South Asia Sub-Regional Office of UN Women. “However, even more important than the numbers is the issue of actual leadership and action on women’s rights.”42 The actual leadership and action is certainly what matters, but it is the fact that women are allotted one-third of the seats that creates the opportunities for leaders to emerge. The Hunger Project, an international NGO based in the United States, has been documenting examples of women’s leadership on Gram Panchayats since the law was enacted. In 2013, the organization published its 8th volume of stories titled Thus Spoke the Press, collecting dozens of articles published in the Indian press that document women’s leadership. Several of the examples that follow are drawn from Thus Spoke the Press.

“My mission is to help the poor as I am poor myself.”43

Perceptions do not change overnight. The reservation policy was initially met with suspicion, Duflo says, because it was assumed that women would be ineffectual leaders, too weak to assert themselves or easily manipulated by their husbands and the men on Gram Panchayats with whom they share power.44 And it still is viewed suspiciously to an extent. But 20 years of experience has shown that women leaders are embracing their role as decision makers in their communities. Moreover, local opinions of women as decision makers have changed, including the opinions of men, who appear to have become more favorably disposed to sharing political power with women.45

Many of the women who’ve been elected to village councils have little formal education. But that doesn’t prevent them from championing education for girls. The women understand that it was their own parents’ attitudes that education for girls is not valuable that prevented them from continuing past the early primary grades of school. Since the reservation policy went into effect and women reached more of a critical mass in the village councils, female members have made it a priority to dispel such prejudices. As one elected representative put it, “I hold meetings with parents, mostly mothers, in small groups and try to explain to them that if they do not educate their daughters, their fate, too, will be sealed like them and the vicious cycle of struggle for survival will continue for generations together. Their daughters will remain shackled by household work.”46

When Panchayat representative Radha Devi visited the secondary school in her village, she found girls carrying buckets of water from the hand pump outside the compound to the kitchen for preparation of the school’s mid-day meal. This seemed odd because the school employed workers for this task—and because while the girls were carrying water, boys were at their desks receiving instruction. The girls told Radha that if they objected or refused, the principal threatened to fail them. She confronted the principal and said in no uncertain terms that he must stop making the girls carry water, or he would be dismissed. “I realize the importance of education,” said Radha, whose own formal education ended at grade 5.
“The government is doing so much for education so it becomes our duty to make sure that nothing comes in the way. There should be no discrimination in schools, and in the last three years since I have been the sarpanch [the village head], I have made sure this doesn’t happen in my village.”

Radha and other women elected to the Gram Panchayats have good reason to visit the schools and comment on standards. In 2009, India passed the Right to Education Act, which guarantees girls and boys equal rights and equal treatment. “I want to be true to my people,” says Rani, the first female sarpanch of the Gram Panchayat in Siddapur. “I am answerable for every rupee I spend. I tell them that they can enter my office any time and check the account books.” Rani’s sense of responsibility and accountability, and the transparency she insists on in managing the panchayat’s resources, are not uncommon in the stories collected in Thus Spoke the Press. Broadly speaking, we often find reduced levels of corruption when women have a greater decision making role in public life.

The women who’ve been elected to the panchayats have boldly taken on some of the most difficult and sensitive issues in Indian society. One example: alcoholism. It is a pervasive problem. Women elected to the Gram Panchayats understand better than their male counterparts the consequences for a family of the toddy shops where men go to drink with their fellows and of bootleg alcohol. They know from their own experience, or from the stories other women tell them, of men returning home drunk and beating their wives and children. In some villages, women acting in their capacity as elected officials to curb alcohol abuse have received death threats. Yashodha, president of a Gram Panchayat in Puttur Taluk, gained national attention for fighting alcoholism. “I have enrolled over 80 [men] to de-addiction camps and now they are teetotalers and are leading a decent life,” she says with pride.

Another consequence of the reservation policy is increased reporting of crimes against women and more arrests for such crimes. Panchayat leaders have also taken on another common form of gender-based violence: child marriage. India has had a law banning child marriage since 1929. Meanwhile, it is still the country with the greatest number of child brides, with girls as young as 7 forced into marriages. Where tradition and poverty are strong, the law is a weak deterrent.

One of the most difficult struggles against gender-based violence for the Indian government has been female infanticide and feticide (pregnancy termination). Female feticide is a nationwide problem, but of course that means it’s a local problem too, which involves the Panchayats. And it cannot be blamed simply on poverty.
or lack of education. The state of Uttarakhand, for example, with a female literacy rate of 70 percent, has a lower child sex ratio (ages 0-6) than its poorer and less educated neighbor, Uttar Pradesh\(^53\); only 886 girls are born there for every 1,000 boys. When a boy is born, there are drumrolls and the proud parents distribute sweets. The birth of a girl may elicit condolences instead, as the parents’ obligation to start saving for a dowry begins at once.

“Missing women” is a term coined by the Indian economist Amartya Sen. It is not exclusively an Indian problem, but India and China are missing the most number of women. The “missing” are girls and women who would not have died had they been born in a high-income country and benefited from access to health care, or had they not been victims of blatant gender discrimination.\(^54\) Of the 4 million women and girls under the age of 60 who go missing annually, 37 percent are missing at birth. The single biggest reason for this is parents’ preference for boys.\(^55\) “Better to pay 500 rupees now than 50,000 later,” reads a sign outside a clinic in Mumbai that offers ultrasound tests—the 50,000 figure referring to the dowry.\(^56\)

“Let Girls be Born,” a campaign launched in 2011, enlists the support of Gram Panchayat leaders. In the Bakshi ka Talab block in Uttar Pradesh, for example, female members of 20 Gram Panchayats\(^57\) have joined activists to crack down on hospitals and other medical centers that violate the 2002 Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostics Techniques Act, which prohibits the misuse of pre-natal testing for sex selective feticide.\(^58\) Once again, the existence of a law doesn’t independently change cultural norms, but the statement it makes that it is not acceptable is at least a start and a prerequisite for progress. And the reservation policy, in supporting the formation of a critical mass of female leaders, creates the opportunity for the emergence of committed leaders who will dare to confront the country’s most malignant attitudes.

National Agenda, Local Authority: The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act

The discrimination women face in labor markets, including a lack of bargaining power, is one of the biggest hurdles to economic empowerment. The Indian constitution guarantees equal pay, but this is almost impossible to enforce when 90 percent of employed women work in the informal sector, where there is little job security and virtually no bargaining power.

In 2006, the Indian government passed the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, later renamed the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). It is perhaps the most ambitious public works program in the world. MGNREGA
guarantees up to 100 days of minimum-wage employment (equal to $2 per day) and benefits approximately 50 million rural households annually.59

Unskilled workers (particularly women) and people with disabilities are the primary target groups. Those who apply for work and are accepted receive a job card and must be assigned to projects within 5 kilometers of their home. Projects are determined by what villagers and the Gram Panchayat jointly believe would most benefit their community. In line with the national government’s intention of transferring more authority to local bodies, MGNREGA uses a bottom-up approach. The program costs only 0.3 percent of GDP,60 and with the multiplier effects—wages being reinvested in the local economy as workers buy goods and services—the real costs are even lower. One study in different districts of the state of Karnataka reports multiplier effects of between 3.1 and 3.6.61 Typical work projects include building and repairing roads, digging ponds, and reforesting land. A 2013 study of empirical evidence from 40 sample villages “shows that MGNREGA works are generating multiple environmental and socio-economic benefits, leading to improved water availability and soil fertility resulting in increased crop production, increased employment generation, and reduced migration.”62

MGNREGA requires that at least 33 percent of the job cardholders be women. Women’s participation rates vary across the country, but overall they made up 53 percent of participants in 2012.63 This is a “remarkable” achievement, according to a 2013 report by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the United Nations Development Program,64 and a clear indication of the pent-up demand for work in the formal sector. Wages are paid by the national government. The law includes a legal guarantee to 100 days of work; if they do not receive this, workers are entitled to an unemployment allowance. Because state governments must pay for the unemployment insurance, it is in their interest to make sure people are employed.

MGNREGA requires that men and women be paid the same wage. Equal pay for equal work has the potential to dramatically improve women’s decision-making power in the household. But “potential” remains the key word. Equal pay has been difficult to enforce since men demand to be paid more. In 2011, the Overseas Development Institute reported that MGNREGA has, however, had some positive effect on women’s intra-household decision-making power.65 Women are earning more but still receiving little help on unpaid tasks, including care responsibilities. This could be addressed in various ways. MGNREGA has no provision for flexible work schedules, a disadvantage especially to women with young children; the law calls for the provision of crèche facilities at work sites, but implementation has been very limited.66
But MGNREGA has succeeded in reducing the gender wage gap in rural areas and boosted all workers’ bargaining power.\textsuperscript{67} See Figure 3.2. Since the law was passed, average wages in the rural economy grew by 9.7 percent from 2006 to 2009, and then by 18.8 percent from 2010 to 2011, according to India’s Ministry of Rural Development in 2012. Compare this to growth of just 2.7 percent from 1999 to 2005.\textsuperscript{68} A 2012 survey of 250 female participants in the Rohtak district in the state of Haryana found that 37 percent used their earnings to increase expenditure on children’s education, 62.7 percent to increase spending on medical expenses, and 69 percent said the money they earned helped to avoid hunger by increasing their spending on food.\textsuperscript{69} The same survey criticizes the program’s reach, however, showing that only 11 percent of households in Haryana completed 100 days of work.\textsuperscript{70} In Assam, another Indian state, only 3.7 percent of participants in 2011-12 worked 100 days.\textsuperscript{71}

The panchayats are responsible for planning, implementing, and monitoring MGNREGA projects, but many lack the skills to fulfill these functions. NGO involvement can help to build this capacity and, in fact, the central government has directed state governments to select NGOs to assist panchayats with these tasks. But these are not soft skills, and the low literacy level among both men and women is a barrier that is not easily overcome.

When capacity is lacking in the panchayats, support is supposed to be available at the district level, but there too, there are gaps in capacity. Anjali Godyal, a program leader in the Capacity Building Center at the Sehgal Foundation, paints a stark picture of the reality on the ground in Mewat, where “Gram panchayats do not assume the roles of planners, decision makers, or supervisors in the MGNREGA implementation process. Instead, it’s district administrations that do most of the work. To make things worse, the district administration lacks human resources to support panchayats for the efficient management of [MGNREGA]. There are not enough panchayat secretaries, accountants, computer operators, junior engineers, and sub-divisional officers at the district level to provide technical support to panchayats.”\textsuperscript{72}

Realistically, however, MGNREGA will need more time to overcome shortcomings such as these and live up to its transformative vision. Ambitious is too mild a description of what the program sets out to achieve. Its scale is unmatched anywhere in the world, and its potential to support women’s empowerment is one of the major reasons to strengthen it and to apply the lessons from its implementation to similar efforts in other countries. More than 350 mil-
lion Indians work at wage rates that don’t put them over the poverty line. Like some other middle-income countries, India’s middle class is growing rapidly while its working poor lag behind. Education is a catalyst to economic empowerment, but its orientation is towards the future. Regular employment at fair wages better defines empowerment in the here and now.

**Cambodia: Sounds of Solidarity**

In addition to the political realm, civil society organizations also offer an opportunity for women to use a collective voice to shape policy. Chapter 1 considered how producer groups can strengthen women’s bargaining power in the household and marketplace. While there are several other kinds of civil society organizations through which women can increase their bargaining power, we focus here on trade unions.

A recent report by the International Labor Organization on Cambodia’s ready-made garment sector, where women make up 90 percent of the workforce, explains why trade unions are important: they “can give voice to women workers at the workplace and empower them to challenge the discrimination they face at the workplace and beyond.” In Cambodia, agriculture employs the largest share of the female workforce; the manufacturing sector, in particular the garment industry, is second and the largest formal sector employer.

It may appear on the surface that female workers in the garment industry would have considerable bargaining power with employers, since the industry brings in more than 70 percent of Cambodia’s export revenue and employs about 500,000 people. Yet every improvement in working conditions, from higher wages and benefits to better health and safety conditions, has been a hard-fought battle. Women’s lives have been lost in the struggle.

On January 3, 2014, military police opened fire and killed five protesters in the capital city of Phnom Penh during a demonstration calling for higher wages. More than 40 others were injured in what the Cambodia Daily called indiscriminate shootings. Workers were demanding that the government raise the minimum wage to $160 per month. A month earlier the Labor Ministry announced that it would raise the minimum wage from $95 to $100. This was neither the first time workers had protested poverty-level wages, nor the first time protests had been forcibly ended by a government crackdown.

On April 24, 2013, the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh killed 1,138 garment workers, mostly female, and drew international media attention. In two incidents in Cambodia less than a month later, on May 18th and 20th, the ceiling collapsed at a shoe
factory and an overloaded storage bin collapsed at a garment factory, killing two and 23 workers respectively. But these tragedies scarcely got a mention in the Western press—because the death toll was tens of people rather than hundreds. Despite the laws and regulations in place, workplace health and safety violations are routine in both countries.

Cambodia and Bangladesh have made stunning progress in reducing poverty, particularly given their condition less than a generation ago. See Figures 3.3-3.5. Cambodia is likely to meet all of the MDGs, and in some ways, what Bangladesh has accomplished is even more impressive: Bangladesh has close to 160 million people in an area the size of Wisconsin, compared to Cambodia’s 15 million. The share of the Bangladeshi population living on less
than $1.25 a day shrank from 70 percent in 1992 to 43 percent in 2010. Once regarded as a
development basket case, Bangladesh created a model of export-driven growth for Cambodia
and other low-income countries.

These are not like the earlier pioneers in “basket case to prosperity” development, the Asian
Tigers (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore). While there is no longer widespread
hunger in the Tigers, Bangladesh and Cambodia are counted as Least Developed Countries—
where hunger remains quite widespread. Just like Rwanda, Cambodia has its own dark history.
During the reign of the Khmer Rouge (1975-1979) as many as 2 million people may have been
killed—the fact that there has never been a detailed count of the dead is a chilling indication
of what the country was like. A Vietnamese invasion drove out the Khmer Rouge but set off a 13-year civil war,
and Cambodia has only recently come off the World Bank’s list of fragile and
conflict-affected countries. Earlier, Bangladesh fought a bloody war for
independence from Pakistan, which it
won in 1971 at the cost of lives whose
number is also not precisely known
but surpasses 1 million.

Women’s rise to leadership in
the garment industry collective bar-
gaining movements did not follow
the same path in the two countries. In Bangladesh, women have found it
to their benefit to establish their own
informal unions rather than join male-
dominated unions. These exist in Cambodia as well, but are far less common. At the factory
level in Cambodia, women dominate union leadership positions. At the federation level,
however, which brings many factories together under one structure, their share in leadership
positions pales by comparison: women hold only 10 percent of leadership positions in union
federations—the exact opposite of the 90-percent-female workforce.

There are six major union federations, of which only one is run by women: the National
Independent Federation Textile Union of Cambodia (NIFTUC), with 25,000 members in 32
factories. Morn Nhim, president and founder, formed the union in 1999, which was still
during the early years of the industry’s rapid growth. Nhim was repelled by the blatant gender
bias she discovered among male leaders of the garment unions. She says that women have
not been welcome as leaders because Cambodian men are not predisposed to trusting them
with handling money. Women do not push for inclusion in the leadership ranks because
Cambodian culture prefers women to be shy, not courageous. Her own family was nervous
about her becoming a union leader. Leadership in union activities requires women to take
risks, including being fired or verbally and physically intimidated—and union leaders have
been killed. Nhim herself has received death threats for protesting working conditions. “More
women are becoming brave enough to be leaders,” she says, “but there are still not enough.”
From Deferential to Demanding

Phnom Penh, Cambodia’s manufacturing hub, is one of the fastest growing cities in the world—a fact attributed to the rapid expansion of the garment industry. Virtually all of the country’s exports leave through here. As in many growing cities, people are migrating from rural areas faster than infrastructure to support them can be built. There are dormitories along the factory-lined streets for the women who work in the garment industry. Women crowd into rooms to save money, sleeping together on pallets. Those who do not live within walking distance travel to work packed shoulder to shoulder in

Figure 3.4 Change in the Share of Manufacturing Contribution to GDP, 1980-2011

the back of open trucks. In 2013, 69 workers riding in the backs of trucks were killed in road accidents.88

The main reason garment workers leave their villages for the urban factories is to support their families and ensure that younger siblings get an education.89 Some begin work in the factories at 15 years old or younger and most are single. They leave their families behind in rural villages, sometimes including young children that they may only get to see once or twice a year. The culture shock is significant, and they must rely on each other for support as they adapt. The money they send home helps millions of people in rural areas, but the women working in the factories keep barely enough to survive.

The wages paid by the garment industry in Cambodia are some of the lowest in the world. Of the major garment-producing countries, only factories in Bangladesh pay less.90 The real value of wages (purchasing power) fell by 19.1 percent between 2001 and 2011.91 In addition to the poverty that the workers endure in the city, they face stigma attached to being a factory worker. 

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**Figure 3.5  Change in the Share of Working Poor (<US $2 per day), 1991-2013**

worker. “City residents look down on the garment factory workers,” according to Ly Phearak, a former garment worker and labor leader. “They are being accused of destroying the culture of Cambodian women.”92 It is true that the garment workers do not always behave like traditional Cambodian women. Rather than being shy and deferential, they wave signs saying “WE ARE WOMEN NOT SLAVES.”93

Temperatures inside the cavernous halls, where up to 2,000 sewing machines are operating at once, soar as high as 100 degrees Fahrenheit.94 In 2010, 50 separate incidents of mass fainting occurred, affecting 4,000 workers.95 Workers faint not only because of the oppressive conditions inside the factories, but also because they are malnourished. On days off, workers forage for food, searching for small animals and insects to eat.96 In 2011, Ken Loo, representing factory owners as the General Secretary of the Garment Manufacturers Association of Cambodia, said that while the minimum wage “provides enough nutrients to survive... it doesn’t mean you won’t feel hungry.”97

The actual number of workers fainting because of malnutrition is probably underreported,98 since this would be bad publicity for factory owners and their customers, many of them multinational brands. After the January 2014 demonstration where protesters were killed, some of the brands most widely recognized in the West—such as Adidas, Gap Inc., H&M, and Levi Strauss & Co.—signed a joint letter to the Cambodian government expressing their concern about the violence.99 That is all well and good, says Liana Foxvog of the International Labor Rights Forum, but it is the multinationals that are driving the “race to the bottom” on wages that force workers to take to the streets. The garment industry in Cambodia is virtually 100 percent foreign-owned. Foxvog argues there should be “a system that is different from the current business-as-usual model where brands and retailers will shop around to different factories and say who will make this shirt for two dollars. If a factory won’t, they can find one that will.”100

Corporate social responsibility is not a system. The only existing mechanism for change is the right of workers to bargain collectively. This is threatened in Cambodia. Despite the legal right to form unions, workers face threats and intimidation from factory owners at the slightest hint of union organizing. Instead, women take their organizing off site to the dormitories and neighborhoods where workers live. The Workers Information Center (WIC) is run by and for women in the garment factories, educating them about labor laws and their rights. WIC is not a union but identifies itself as part of the Cambodian workers’ movement to mobilize collective action for workers’ rights. Through its Drop-In Centers on the outskirts of Phnom Penh, WIC provides a safe space for women to gather and get information and helps them build the confidence to speak out about conditions in the factories.
WIC works in partnership with other women’s organizations in the United Sisterhood Alliance, composed of grassroots women’s groups ranging from garment workers and other low-wage workers to self-employed women, farmers, students, and artists. Through its collective strength, the alliance is strengthening Cambodia’s civil society and enabling women to better represent themselves so that they can hold the state accountable.

On May 25, 2014, the United Sisterhood Alliance staged a fashion show, “Beautiful Clothes, Ugly Reality,” at the WIC headquarters, where garment workers wore the name-brand clothes they make in the factories. The only difference between the lovely young women on the catwalk that evening and the fashion models they were mimicking were their pointed messages on the exploitive nature of the garment industry. At one point, men dressed in riot gear reenacted the repression of the protests in January of 2014 and the killing of a worker. Meanwhile, outside the venue, organizers had to negotiate with police not to stop the show.

Better Factories and Better Trade Deals

In July 2012, then-Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton met with 12 female union leaders in Cambodia and heard their grievances. Clinton was in the country for a “gender equality, women’s empowerment policy dialogue” with women leaders as part of a larger tour of several countries in the region. “The international community and international law recognize that workers everywhere, regardless of income or status, are entitled to certain universal rights, including the right to form and join a union and to bargain collectively,” she said at the end of the meeting. “So defending these labor rights and improving working conditions is a smart economic investment, but it’s also a very important value.”

Few in the international community would question the idea that workers’ right to organize for fair wages and decent working conditions is an important value. But in Cambodia, as well as in other countries in the region whose economies depend on exports to the United States, it is safe to say the concept of workers’ rights is often forgotten. What can the United States and other large importers do to prod governments to respect workers’ rights? The U.S. government should have a considerable amount of leverage since half of Cambodia’s garment exports go to the United States.

An earlier U.S.-Cambodia textile trade agreement, in effect from 1998 to 2004, was linked to improvements in working conditions. In exchange for Cambodian government guarantees to improve working conditions and respect labor rights, the U.S. government agreed to increase quotas on textile imports from Cambodia. By all accounts, the agreement was hailed as a best practice in the regulation of international labor standards. Jason Judd of the AFL-CIO called it “more beneficial to [Cambodian] workers than any anti-sweatshop campaign.” When the garment workers had grievances about low wages and unsafe working conditions,
conditions, they could use this agreement as a means of holding the Cambodian government accountable for meeting its responsibilities.

The agreement expired in 2005 when the textiles sector was brought under the aegis of the World Trade Organization. One of its unique features is still in effect—Better Factories Cambodia (BFC), under which the International Labor Organization monitors working conditions. But since the expiration of the U.S.-Cambodia agreement, the U.S. government no longer reviews BFC reports. In fact, since the agreement expired, BFC reports go instead to firms doing business in Cambodia. These companies have no incentive to protest deteriorating working conditions, except after a tragedy such as the collapse of the Rana Plaza Building in Bangladesh. According to a 2013 report by Stanford University Law School and the Worker Rights Consortium, “BFC has been increasingly powerless to address longstanding labor rights problems in the Cambodian garment industry or to prevent a slow backward slide in certain conditions for workers.”

The United States still has bargaining chips to prod trading partners to improve working conditions and respect labor rights. One of these is the Generalized Systems of Preferences (GSP), under which the U.S. government exempts hundreds of articles produced in low-income countries from import tariffs. In the aftermath of the Rana Plaza tragedy, the Obama administration suspended Bangladesh’s benefits under GSP. But this was little more than an empty gesture, because GSP does not apply to articles of clothing. More than 90 percent of the products exported from Bangladesh and Cambodia are textiles and apparel that are subject to a 15 percent tariff.

The United States could offer trade incentives, such as abolishing the tariff on textiles and apparel, to encourage countries to improve factory conditions and respect labor rights. Low-income African countries and Haiti might be concerned about this, since they are granted duty-free, quota-free access to U.S. markets on textiles and apparel. Five of the very poorest countries in Asia are excluded from such preferences. They are Cambodia, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Nepal. The increased competition from Asia could reduce market share for African countries and Haiti, but these countries would not be significantly harmed because textiles and apparel products make up such a small share of their exports to the United States. Abolishing the tariff for Cambodia should be contingent on resumption of Better Factories reporting directly to the U.S. government. Other Asian low-income countries that stand to benefit should be required to establish their own Better Factories program. It is in the interest of firms that do business in these countries to support this policy change, since it would effectively reduce production costs by 15 percent. Given the large volume of exports that would be affected, companies would be getting enough additional revenue to cover a generous wage increase for the garment workers.
Cutting off trade with these countries is not the solution. As we mentioned earlier, neither the crackdown on workers in Phnom Penh nor the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Dhaka have done much to discourage young women from leaving rural areas for the jobs and independence they find in the factory cities. “They’re taking these jobs by choice—this is not forced labor—because it’s better than any other alternative they have,” explains Kimberly Elliott of the Center for Global Development. “The alternative is getting married at 14 or 15 and starting to have kids at a very young age.”

There are many paths to take to help remove obstacles to women’s empowerment. Trade is one. As we’ll see in the next section, supporting civil society groups in their efforts to help more women get elected to public office is another.

**Malawi: Yearning to Be Heard**

When Bread for the World Institute staff came by to visit, smallholder farmers Alec and Lucy Banda received us in a field behind their modest home. We came to talk about extension services but we couldn’t resist questions about their family. Alec and Lucy, ages 28 and 26, have three children, including a baby girl whom Alec was holding as we spoke. When asked what kind of future he thinks is possible for his daughter, Alec smiled and said he believes she could be the president of the country someday.

Since there are many more positions available in national parliaments than as Heads of State, the number of women who have ever served as a Head of State is very limited in comparison. As 2014 opened, there were 18 female Heads of State—leading less than 10 percent of all countries. In May 2014, President Joyce Banda of Malawi (no relation to Alec and Lucy Banda) was voted out of office. The number of women Heads of State in low-income countries is so few and their ascent so recent that we are not used to talking about them as losers of elections rather than winners. When a woman is elected Head of State, it is generally celebrated as a triumph for all women in society. Does the loss of an election also have implications for all women, or is it simply the outcome for an individual?

The National Democratic Institute (NDI) is a U.S. NGO that promotes democracy and civic engagement in developing countries around the world. In Malawi, NDI is administering a grant for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). On the eve of the 2014 national election, NDI conducted focus groups across 24 of Malawi’s 28 districts. Although the focus groups included less than 500 of Malawi’s 16 million people, NDI found something interesting about public attitudes on gender and politics.

The focus groups were broken up into age categories of 18-25, 26-35, and 36 and older. Few people in any of the focus groups admitted that gender would determine their choice of candidate. But when the results of the election were tallied, it turned out that not only
Malawi was the first country to join the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement at its founding in 2011. SUN is a global initiative led by national governments of countries with the highest burden of maternal/child malnutrition—53 member countries at last count.

Child stunting remains a significant problem in Malawi, with four in 10 children under the age of 5 stunted in 2010. But this is progress from the 48 percent rate of 2000. The children who are stunted will not grow to their full physical or intellectual potential. They will do more poorly in school, be more susceptible to illness for the rest of their lives, and earn less in their lifetimes. Clearly, malnutrition on this scale reduces the whole country’s long-term development prospects.

Each SUN country has identified a government “focal point,” usually a senior official, who is responsible for coordinating a multi-stakeholder network of donors, UN agencies, technical experts, civil society, and private business. In Malawi, the Permanent Secretary in the Office of the President and Cabinet, where actions across various ministries are coordinated, serves as the nutritional focal point. This helps in the effort to integrate nutrition into a number of development sectors, such as agriculture, health, education, women’s empowerment, and social protection.

Malawi’s civil society is active on nutrition issues. The National Nutrition Education and Communication Strategy (NECS) aims to strengthen the position of civil society and community-based organizations in advocating for a national nutrition agenda. The Civil Society Organization Nutrition Alliance (CSONA), consisting of 26 nutrition stakeholder groups, promotes nutrition education across the country. The CSONA was an active voice in Malawi’s Civil Society National Budget Consultation Advocacy Meeting in March 2014, noting that nutrition was being treated primarily as a health issue and championing the idea of separate analyses for nutrition funding. As a result, CSONA was invited to work with government officials to plan nutrition-sensitive activities in sectors other than health.

In May 2014, civil society groups in SUN countries participated in a Global Day of Action, right on the eve of Malawi’s national elections. Civil society exhorted candidates to make a commitment to strengthening the government’s role in supporting nutrition. This laid a foundation for holding the next set of elected officials accountable for progress against childhood malnutrition.

Scott Bleggi is the senior policy analyst for maternal/child nutrition in Bread for the World Institute.
did Banda fare poorly, but so did most of the other female candidates competing in local and national races. Women’s representation in Parliament fell from 22 percent to 16 percent. At the local level, the results were even worse: women made up just 12 percent of the government councilors elected. One positive outcome of the election is that the Malawi Electoral Support Network, a coalition of 75 civil society organizations that assisted NDI in organizing the focus groups, is now calling for legislation to mandate that a quarter of parliamentary seats be reserved for women. But for the near future, the election certainly means that women have a less powerful voice in electoral politics.

At this writing it is too early to tell what the effects of the election will be on the government’s commitment to fighting hunger and malnutrition. In 2013, Malawi was ranked second out of 45 low-income countries on its government’s commitment to fighting hunger and malnutrition. The Hunger and Nutrition Commitment Index (HANCI), produced by the U.K.-based Institute of Development Studies, ranked Malawi high again in 2014, at third out of 45. The significant steps taken in recent years by Joyce Banda and her predecessors are not likely to be reversed, however. These include Malawi’s participation in the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement (see Box 3.2) and the government’s work with the U.S. Feed the Future program (Chapter 1 has more information on Feed the Future).

A Younger Generation of Female Leaders

From an early age, Patience Chifundo saw no reason a Malawian woman should be denied the same opportunities as a Malawian man. Her mother embodied this principle. She owned and drove a minibus, an unusual occupation for a woman in this country.

Patience’s mother eventually sold the minibus and took a job as assistant to a Member of Parliament, a woman later chosen to be Joyce Banda’s Minister of Environment and Climate Change. One of her mother’s tasks was to meet with constituents who stood outside the MP’s home and pleaded for help—they didn’t have any food, or the clinic was out of medicine, or they couldn’t afford school fees for their children. These constituents were always women, and the faces changed but the needs were the same. This made a strong impression on Patience, who was incensed by the fact that government debates rarely mentioned these women and their concerns—until politicians wanted their votes.

Patience saw the discrimination women faced in Malawi but had experienced little of it herself until she was a student at the elite Chancellor College and ran for student president. She had always been a precocious student and started college at the age of 15. Tradition is held in high regard at Chancellor College, and no woman had ever run for student body president. Patience did not win the election, but the discrimination she experienced as a candidate was a life-changing experience. When it became clear to her opponents—all of them male—that she had a formidable intellect, they agreed to all support one of their number who had the best chance of winning against “the girl.”
After graduation, Patience worked as a program officer for the German NGO Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) managing a grant to the Young Politicians Union, an organization of people from her own generation as passionate as she was to invigorate political debate in Malawi. Seventy percent of Malawi’s population is under the age of 30. See Figure 3.6. One of the first things she did at KAS was to produce a radio talk show for which she was also the host. She invited parliamentarians and political party officials to come on the show to speak directly with Malawian youth about political issues. Callers were passionate, informed, and not about to settle for canned answers. This caused many of the show’s guests, who had imagined that they would be asked “softball” questions, great anxiety. The German Ambassador to Malawi was forced to contact KAS and advise the organization to pull the show off the air. But there was such an outcry from listeners that the station agreed to sponsor the show. It continues to air, although Patience has moved on.

**Figure 3.6 Malawi’s Population By Age and Sex, 2010**

Source: youthpolicy.org, based on 2012 data from United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs–Population Division.
Patience describes her experience with the Young Politicians Union as the practicum to her classroom education in political theory at Chancellor College. Most of the other women affiliated with the organization had none of the background in political theory that she did. But they inspired her so much, she said. Through them she learned how politics actually works at the grassroots level. These women came to meetings with nursing babies and little else besides bus fare home.

One such woman is Annis Luka, a subsistence farmer from the Phalombe district in the southern region of the country, who ran for a seat on her local council in 2014 but lost. When Annis finished secondary school, she could not find a job and was forced to return home to farm with family members. She lives with 12 family members, including her parents, siblings, and a 7-year-old daughter. They grow maize, rice, sugar cane, and groundnuts, but do not earn enough to provide a buffer against the annual hungry season.

When students at Chancellor College needed to raise money for an event, they invited political leaders, candidates, intellectuals, and artists to speak or perform, and they could count on a paying crowd. Annis funds her activities by dedicating a share of her maize production to pay the expenses, but first ensures that no one else in the household has to go hungry to support her political work. The intergovernmental agency Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance recommends: “Invest in leadership development and mentoring, especially for young women. Strive to make politics an accessible arena for low-income women and women from rural areas, whose representation has been constrained by the high cost of campaigning.”

Annis Luka of the Young Politicians Union typifies the women this statement has in mind.

**Strengthening Democracy and Governance**

In spite of being only the second African country with a female president, Malawi struggles to make progress against so-called harmful traditional practices, such as child marriage. The nation has one of the highest such rates in the world, with half of all girls married before they turn 18. Where child marriage is common, so are high rates of maternal mortality. Many births take place in the home without skilled attendants.

The Malawian government has been struggling to reduce maternal mortality since before Joyce Banda became president. Banda tried some astute ways of tackling the problem. One strategy was to work with chiefs, who are predominantly male. In 2012, Kwataine, a chief in central Malawi, was named head of Banda’s Presidential Initiative on Maternal Health and Safe Motherhood. A charismatic leader, he has been a critical factor in gaining the support of other chiefs for the Safe Motherhood initiative. Kwataine hosts a radio show where he scolds men for not being more attentive to their partner’s needs during pregnancy.

Banda also introduced a program called “secret mothers.” The secret mothers are older women who monitor pregnancies within their village, ensuring that pregnant women receive...
prenatal care and go to a health facility for the birth. Secret mothers are important because in Malawi, it is considered inappropriate for women to share information about their pregnancy with anyone but their immediate family, who may not have the knowledge to advise them on health and safe motherhood. Women were being discouraged from seeking out prenatal care. The “secret mothers” program dramatically improved the quality of prenatal care in the rural areas while preserving, at least to some extent, the tradition of secrecy. The NDI report highlighted widespread support for Banda’s programs to reduce maternal mortality.

The election outcome and Banda’s loss had far less to do with maternal mortality rates than it did a corruption scandal that dogged her from the time it surfaced in late 2013 and cast doubt over her ability to lead the government. See Figure 3.7. The scandal was serious enough to cause donors such as the International Monetary Fund and the U.K. government to suspend support temporarily—a significant blow to a country where 37 percent of the government’s budget comes from foreign aid. Although Banda was not tied to the scandal directly, the suspension of aid just months before the election reminded Malawians of how dependent on donors the country remains.

Elections rarely go smoothly in Malawi, and the 2014 national election was no exception. Election day began and ended in chaos. Irregularities were recorded at 42 stations. The BBC reported that in one constituency, more than 184,000 votes were counted but there were only 38,000 registered voters. Two days later, as voting was still taking place in some parts of the country and as reports of irregularities continued, Banda tried to nullify the election but did not have the constitutional authority to do so. It would not have made a difference to the final outcome. Once all the irregularities were sorted out, the winner was clear and Banda finished a distant third.

Figure 3.7  **Malawian Public Opinion Regarding Overall Direction of the Country, 2012-2014**

![Figure 3.7](chart.png)

Participants were asked: ‘Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?’

Source: Carolyn Logan, Michael Bratton, and Boniface Dulani (May 2014), “Malawi’s 2014 Elections: Amid Concerns About Fairness, Outcome is Too Close to Call,” Afrobarometer.
Danielle Resnick of the International Food Policy Research Institute has analyzed donor funding for governance in Malawi and found it to be concentrated almost exclusively in electoral periods. This focus on elections has had little lasting impact on building the capacity of civil society to hold the government accountable between election cycles. Resnick quotes a frustrated official with Malawi’s Center for Multiparty Democracy (CMD): “Some civil society organizations only operate during [the election cycle].”

The Obama administration’s 2012 Presidential Policy Directive for sub-Saharan Africa calls for strengthening democratic institutions, especially at the local level, by working with civil society organizations. This requires identifying local partners that are “known quantities” already operating in communities. Practicing nondiscrimination should be a prerequisite for civil society groups seeking to work with U.S. development programs. Young women face discrimination because of both gender and youth, so enabling them to participate fully requires a specific focus on ending discrimination.

With its agenda of enhancing the role of women and youth in leadership and decision-making, the Young Politician’s Union of Malawi and similar groups in other sub-Saharan countries would seem to epitomize the kinds of partnerships called for in the policy directive. These groups are not hard to find. Shortly before Malawi’s 2014 presidential election, Patience Chifundo received a call from the Vice Chancellor of the University of Malawi asking her to take a job with the European Union Election Observation Mission for Malawi. The EU had requested the names of 15 Malawians to represent the country on its observer team. When the Vice Chancellor contacted his advisors, Patience’s name was mentioned repeatedly because of her affiliation with the Young Politician’s Union.

In the summer of 2014, the U.S. government hosted 500 Washington Mandela Fellows as part of the Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI). These are some of the best and brightest people between the ages of 25 and 35 on the African continent, and it is an express purpose of the initiative to “strengthen democratic governance.” In their biographies, all posted on the YALI website, dozens of Mandela Fellows identified working to improve democracy and governance in their countries as part of their current and future plans. Among this talent pool will be many women and men committed to working together to ensure that all voices are heard.

Looking Forward

We’ve been looking at women in developing countries who are working to have a greater say in politics and policies—but it is notable that women in high-income countries have little representation or influence either. Higher incomes don’t necessarily mean much in this case—developed countries will also fail to meet the MDG target of 30 percent female representation in national parliaments. In fact, women in wealthy nations have only slightly higher levels of political representation than those in developing countries. The next chapter is about the United States. Although it is the richest country in the world, women’s decision-making power in government is low by developed-country standards. Within its focus on women’s empowerment in the United States, Chapter 4 will cover politics, unpaid care work, bargaining power, and other issues we have raised in the context of developing countries.
Between October 2013 and August 2014, 63,000 unaccompanied child migrants (UACs) arrived at the U.S. southern border. During roughly the same time, 22,000 children travelling with at least one parent also arrived from Central America. Mothers traveling alone with small children, mostly from Honduras, were the fastest growing number of immigrants detained at the border.

United Nations (UN) interviews with child migrants found that they are typically fleeing a combination of poverty and violence, sometimes combined with a desire to reach family or friends in the United States. Among Honduran UACs, the UN found that 44 percent included violence as a reason for migration. Reports from the Northern Triangle—a region comprised of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala—indicate societies overcome with poverty, fear, and violence.

With the highest number of homicides per capita, Honduras is considered the “murder capital of the world.” Between 2005 and 2013, Honduras experienced a 263 percent increase in the number of violent deaths of women. With an estimated 95 percent impunity rate for sexual violence and femicide crimes in Honduras, it shouldn’t be surprising that Honduran women are compelled to flee the country. “The climate of fear, in both the public and private spheres, and the lack of accountability for violations of human rights of women, is the norm rather than the exception,” said Rashida Manjoo, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on violence against women, during a trip to Honduras.

The particular threat facing women and girls is fueling an increasing numbers of girl UACs within the overall surge of child migrants. During FY 2014 there was a 77 percent increase in unaccompanied girls going to the United States compared to an 8 percent increase for boys. See Figure 3.8. During FY2014 more than 13,000 Honduras girls under 18 traveled unaccompanied to the United States compared with just over 7,000 in FY 2013. For girls 12 and younger the increase was even greater—140 percent.

A Dangerous Transit

Even if women and girls are able to escape violence in their country-of-origin, their migration to the United States brings a new set of risks. Unauthorized migrations also make women vulnerable to human trafficking. More than 20,000 people are trafficked every year in Mexico—80 percent of them women, typically Central Americans undocumented migrants between 8 and 22-years old. Trafficked women are often sold to organized crime groups that force them into prostitution or domestic work. Because of their strong incentive to enter the United States, female unauthorized migrants are often at the mercy of traffickers who promise them an easy way into the country.
From the moment that Central Americans leave their hometown they are vulnerable to human trafficking. “They enter into a shadowy world,” as a United Nations (UN) report states. While some women and girls may see this as a temporary situation to help them continue their journey to the United States, many find it difficult to extricate themselves. They are threatened when they want to leave and if the traffickers know the victim’s hometown and family, they have more power over the victims.12

In response to the surge of UACs, the Obama Administration began “fast tracking” deportations of families during the summer—mostly women with children—back to the Northern Triangle.13 To stay in the United States, migrants generally have to convince a judge that they qualify for asylum based on a well-founded fear of persecution on account of their race, religion, ethnicity, political opinion, or social group. Despite horrific tales of gang intimidation and violence coming out of Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, migrants usually can’t prove they were targeted because of membership in one of these groups.14

**Back Home**

In July 2014, a planeload full of deported mothers and children arrived in Honduras. Forty people—18 mothers, 13 girls and 9 boys were scheduled to be on the flight, but two didn’t travel because they were ill.15 There were camera crews and aid workers handing out suckers and balloons to toddlers.16 But the women were clearly not happy to be back. “We could see on their faces that this is a defeat,” a UNICEF spokesman said.17

According to a *Los Angeles Times* report on the deported mothers, Angelica Galvez said she expected little from the government. “They haven’t helped me before,” said Galvez, who returned with her 6-year-old daughter, Abigail. “Why should I believe them now?”18

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**Figure 3.8  More Unaccompanied Girls Caught at the Border**

Apprehension of unaccompanied minors on the U.S.-Mexico border, by gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Boys</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>7,339</td>
<td>31,420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014*</td>
<td>13,008</td>
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