

The Role of the United Nations in Promoting Political Participation: A Personal Journey

As an Ethiopian-born woman, I did not always fully understand the significance of political participation and self-determination. Growing up in Ethiopia, institutional and cultural barriers hindered access to information about elections and the importance of voting, which downplayed the significance of having our political voices heard. It wasn't until I became an American citizen thirteen years ago that I truly began to appreciate the value of democracy. As I educated myself on the electoral process in the United States, I made voting and politics a priority and understood its role in shaping the future of a nation. This reformation allowed me to reflect on the barriers women in my homeland face when it comes to political engagement, amplifying my admiration for the United Nations' efforts to promote gender equality in politics globally.

In Ethiopia, women have long encountered structural and cultural challenges that hinder their participation in politics. Deeply entrenched gender norms in Ethiopian society often lead to aggressive reactions toward women who dare to express their views. Discriminatory laws and limited resources have made it difficult for qualified women to compete equally with men in the political arena. However, the United Nations programs led by UN Women and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), have played a critical role in weakening these unnecessary barriers.

Projects like the Governance and Democratic Participation Programme (GDPP) and the Supporting Election for Ethiopia's Democratic Strengthening (SEEDS), which ran from 2017 to 2022, have played a key role in advocating for Temporary Special Measures (TSMs), to ensure greater female representation in elected roles (UN Ethiopia 2021) (UN WOMEN). With the UN support, necessary training programs were provided, resulting in more than 381 women being

ahead in Ethiopia's 6th General Election. These training programs the women received included political leadership, campaign strategy, public speaking, and fundraising—all crucial skills needed to overcome societal challenges and compete in a male-dominated political environment.

“Since I do not have much experience in politics, I was afraid of the challenges and obstacles of becoming a political candidate and people not wanting to vote for me only because of my gender,” said Manothulunesh Sorsa, an Ethiopian woman who initially lacked the confidence to run for office. Though she had a passion for politics, she lacked the opportunity and training to overcome her self-doubt about leadership. She expressed her gratitude for the UN Women-led training program, which changed her perception of her leadership potential and strength. Mulunesh is now an example to women in Ethiopia that if she can do it, they can too (UN Women 2021). The United Nations efforts in Ethiopia also led to the formation of the Consortium of Ethiopian Women Political Party Members, a cross-party alliance aimed at advancing women's political participation and leadership.

Having grown up in Ethiopia, I became keenly aware of the cultural barriers that limit women's access to leadership roles, often reinforced by the saying, “That's a MAN'S Job”. Societal expectations often reinforce the belief that politics is only for men, discouraging women from seeking leadership roles. UN Women's efforts to provide women with the skills and confidence to challenge these norms are transformative. By collaborating with local organizations such as the Network of Ethiopian Women's Association (NEWA), UN Women has built a sustainable framework for female political participation in Ethiopia (UNDP 2021).

UN Women has guided efforts to advocate for legislative reforms that promote women's access to politics as voters, candidates, and elected officials. Although there are no mandatory gender quotas in Ethiopia's election law, the UN's advocacy for voluntary gender quotas has

yielded progress. Women now make up over 41% of the seats in Ethiopia's House of Peoples' Representatives (UNDP 2021).

While UN Women has made significant strides, there is always room for improvement. Coming from a rural area in Ethiopia, I have witnessed firsthand the positive effects of UN programs on my community. However, I believe more public education campaigns are needed in rural areas, where traditional gender norms remain deeply ingrained and many voices remain unheard. These campaigns could help transform societal attitudes and encourage more women to run for office and participate in voting for local and state policies; ensuring that political participation is seen as a right and responsibility for all citizens- not just the men in their lives. With continued support, I am confident more Ethiopian women will be able to exercise their right to self-determination, just as I have learned to do in the United States.

The United Nations has been an essential force in promoting gender equality in political participation, both globally and in Ethiopia. As an Ethiopian woman who has witnessed the challenges of political exclusion firsthand, I am grateful for the UN's efforts to empower women in my homeland. I hope the UN continues to broaden its advocacy for gender quotas and education campaigns, ensuring that all women, regardless of their background, can participate equally in shaping the future of their nations.

Citing

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Thank you for your consideration. Last year, I wrote a similar paper about my experience with the United Nations in celebration of the 75th anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights. I ended up sharing that paper on my social media, and I received wonderful feedback from many people. I want to extend my heartfelt thanks to everyone for taking the time to read my work; I am truly passionate about sharing my experiences. Receiving that scholarship lifted a significant burden from me and my family, so to everyone who reviews these scholarship applications, thank you.