

# An alternative narrative on inclusive democracy and electoral accountability

Ensuring women and young people's voices matter and their votes count

ActionAid Working Group on Civic Participation and Democratic Space  
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“ActionAid will work with rights holders and human rights defenders to enlarge democratic space, so that all people have freedom to organise. We believe that every person has the right to participate in decision-making that affects them, at every level, and we will step up efforts aimed at enhancing democracy through participation of excluded individuals and groups in decision-making. ActionAid prioritises the leadership of women and young people, especially those living in poverty and exclusion, in our efforts to achieve social justice, gender equality and poverty eradication. Guided by feminist and human rights-based principles and approaches, we seek to shift and transform power through empowerment, solidarity, campaigning and the generation of alternatives to ensure that every person can enjoy a life of dignity and freedom from all forms of oppression.”

**ActionAid’s Action for Global Justice, Strategy 2028**



# 1. Executive summary

Democracy is under threat and attack. There is a global trend of reversal of democracy as governments, political and economic elites increasingly suppress dissenting voices, crack down on human rights defenders and undermine political and civil rights. This is part of a wider struggle against contemporary neoliberalism to marketise the state, hollow-out democracy and reduce opposition by (re)defining the contours of legitimate, extra-parliamentary, political activity and redefining space for policy to protect the position of the elite 1%. New forms of repression are surfacing, and authoritarian regimes are on the rise. At a time when the digital revolution is setting new conditions on how we interact and how data is used and manipulated, as seen for instance in the rise of fake news, there is a need for reform and disruptive narratives challenging this control of the democratic narrative, processes, institutions and practices. To this end, there is a need for counter-narratives from civil society and excluded people who are increasingly denied a voice and influence.

State capture by economic and political elites (foreign and domestic), privatisation and the public-private partnership model have contributed to the undermining of trust in democracy by further unbalancing the level playing field for political participation, particularly for women, young people and other excluded groups with limited access to financing. The power and access elites now enjoy has enabled them to shape policymaking processes and the rules of the game in ways that protect their own interests, blocking policies that would seek to equalise wealth or promote concern for the wider public good.<sup>1</sup>

Elections, in theory, are important for participation as they provide a means for the voices of excluded groups to be heard and to influence the political agenda. Elections should also provide a means for different groups of women and young people to influence social outcomes by ensuring the issues of concern for them are on the agenda of those seeking electoral office. Elections further provide an important mechanism to hold leaders to account and to ensure that elected officials use the power conferred on them to benefit the electorate. Unfortunately, the experience to date, particularly for women and young people from the most marginalized and excluded communities, has been one of failed promises, dashed hope, and a need for change.

We need transformation of mindsets, practices, policies, legislation, institutions and processes to address the root causes of exclusion of women and young people informed by in-depth power analysis and feminist intersectional analysis to address the different forms of hidden, visible, and invisible power. This transformation should be informed by feminist intersectional analysis that recognizes that power and privilege in democratic and electoral processes are experienced in different ways by different groups of women and young people.

ActionAid's ***Action for Global Justice: Strategy 2028*** sets the tone and direction for our alternative narrative on inclusive democracy and electoral accountability. ActionAid believes that people living in poverty and exclusion must be central to driving social change towards more just and inclusive democracies and political equality. This alternative narrative sets forth ActionAid's vision for just and inclusive democracy and how ActionAid and partners intend to support and work with women and young people, in their diversity, as a priority to strengthen inclusive democracy and improve electoral accountability. Our alternative narrative is based on the experiences of women, young people, civil society and political parties, and their suggested alternatives to challenge and disrupt the dominant narratives on democracy that are focused on form rather than substance.

The purpose of this alternative narrative is:

1. To consolidate staff and partner experiences, and their alternative propositions for how democracy could be made inclusive, into a counter alternative narrative on inclusive democracy that responds to the needs and desires of the people, rooted in their lived experiences.
2. To challenge and disrupt dominant narratives on democracy that focus on form rather than substance. Dominant narrative/s formed by narrow private or parochial interests at the expense of the majority undermine human rights, abuse public resources, fail to deliver public services and are neither accountable nor transparent.
3. To specifically inform the design of ActionAid and partners' future advocacy strategies for joint actions on electoral accountability towards the realisation of our vision of inclusive democracy and electoral accountability.

## Methodology

This alternative narrative is based on extensive consultative groundwork, led by ActionAid's Working Group on Civic Participation and Democratic Space, to critically review the hinderances to inclusion and accountability in governance processes and devise strategies to address them. ActionAid country programmes that constitute the Working Group identified specific stakeholders to participate in the process from a range of countries<sup>2</sup>, including:

- Candidates, particularly women and young people who have vied for political office.
- Representatives of civil society organisations including women and young people engaged in advocacy for inclusion of excluded groups in democratic and electoral processes.
- Civil society organisations involved in the monitoring of elections.
- Human rights defenders working on democratic and electoral processes.
- Representatives and leaders of political parties.

The voices and perspectives of these stakeholders were captured through:

- Two surveys on the status of inclusive democracy and electoral accountability in participating countries.<sup>3</sup> One survey was focused on the experience of women in democracy and electoral processes and the other on young people.
- Participation in a three-day workshop in Arusha, Tanzania, to validate the findings from the survey, gain further insights, learn from each other, and jointly develop effective strategies for engagement. A total of 40 participants attended this workshop
- A focus group discussion, with select stakeholders, to gather deeper insights into strategies to strengthen electoral accountability.

In addition, the Consultant conducted a literature review on material relevant to inclusive democracy, women, young people and electoral accountability. This alternative narrative is ultimately a synthesis of the perspectives, opinions and joint reflections of key stakeholders of women and young people together with ActionAid staff from the Working Group on Civic Participation and Democratic Space.

## 2. Structure of the alternative narrative

Following an introduction in **Section 3**, this alternative narrative begins by exploring *why electoral accountability matters for social justice* (**Section 4**). Drawing on the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance's (IDEA's) concept of the importance of elections to promote social justice, we emphasise that the legitimacy of a political system comes from all groups – especially those traditionally excluded – having their choices and voices afforded due weight in the outcome of decision-making processes.

**Section 5**, *Applying feminist intersectional analysis to the experiences of women and young people*, offers a framework for understanding the multi-layered impact of these injustices on women and young people. Here, we describe the origins of feminist intersectional analysis, and apply it to the ways in which women and young people experience discrimination. The section also looks at how to employ the “power cube analysis” as a frame of reference, to understand the ways in which the state and the established political machinery excludes women, young people and other groups from decision-making processes using space and forms of power.

**Section 6**, *Spaces of power in electoral processes*, describes the power cube framework's description of the various forums, processes and timing within which actors in the political sphere take decisions and actions. *Closed spaces* are those that fully exclude stakeholders who do not hold official authority. *Invited spaces* are those where wider participation is welcomed by those in officialdom; and *claimed spaces* are those forums for dialogue and political activity fostered by excluded groups.

The three uses of power in **Section 7**, *The different forms of power within electoral processes*, describe the spectrum of tangible and intangible forces that influence political thought and behaviour, often to the detriment of excluded groups: *visible power*, *hidden power* and *invisible power*. Here we explore the layered experiences of women and young people in relation to the various forms of political power.

**Section 8**, *Electoral accountability today: gains made*, highlights the progress participating countries have made to strengthen governance structures generally and render them more inclusive. The heavy task ahead is to strengthen the institutional ecosystem and render it more effective in delivering social justice. In **Section 9**, *Existing challenges with electoral accountability*, we outline the critical challenges women and young people face in engaging with electoral institutions and in the democratic process.

**Section 10**, *Barriers to women and young people's inclusion*, delves deeper into findings of the specific challenges facing the two excluded groups. We lay out in **Section 11** *ActionAid's vision for inclusive democracy and electoral accountability*. We describe our approach to fulfilling this vision in **Section 12**, *Strategies to strengthen inclusion in electoral processes*. This includes a seven-pronged approach to fulfilling our vision: organising and mobilising women and youth, capacity building, civic education, getting people out to vote, strengthening leadership accountability, election observation, and legal and institutional reform.

In **Section 13**, *Conclusion*, we express our commitment to support the reimagination of political structures such that all citizens, regardless of their position in the spectrum of intersectional identity and experience, can have equal and due influence on the decisions that affect them. Annexes 1 and 2 provide the list of survey respondents, the survey questionnaire, respectively.

### 3. Introduction

Electoral processes with widespread barriers to civil and political rights are becoming the norm in many countries. This has taken many forms, such as unlimited bans on protests against election results and economic and political models that maintain and deepen inequalities such as in Zimbabwe; internet and social media shutdowns during elections for instance in Uganda; media concentration in the hands of the elite to propagate conservative and pro *status quo* narratives over politics in Kenya; arbitrary detention and long prison terms after unfair trials of activists. All of this has happened in a context in which neoliberal economic systems, coupled with the consolidation of power by military and economic elites, including multinational corporations, have resulted in unacceptable levels of inequality.

Several countries are also witnessing democratic ‘backsliding’, where authoritarian leaders and elected despots increasingly seek to use or manipulate the law (rather than violate or ignore it) to pursue their ends within the boundaries of the constitution. This includes: extensions of constitutional term limits for political leaders such as Uganda in 2017; increased concentration of power in executive branches; curtailing the independence of the judiciary and the media; reducing legislative oversight; and tight control of democratic competition by passing legislation restricting constitutionally guaranteed rights, which is often targeted at reducing political opposition and dissent.

These realities disproportionately affect women and young people – although, as we will explain later, not all women and young people experience these realities either at all or in a similar manner, because they are not homogenous groups and experience differing, intersecting systems of identity-based oppression. Overarching disadvantages for these excluded groups are expressed through their lack of opportunities for political participation; the absence of spaces to voice their concerns; and under-representation in influential government positions. Other forms of systemic neglect of women and young people involve their exclusion from electoral processes through the absence or poor enforcement of relevant laws and policies; ineffective working of electoral management bodies; and the discriminatory attitudes of those who dominate those processes, institutions and systems.

Such barriers limit the great promises of democracy that women and young people hope to realise, including improved livelihoods, citizen participation, gender equality, empowerment of young people and the creation of an environment that upholds human and people’s rights.

The COVID-19 pandemic will disproportionately affect excluded groups, especially those that continue to face multiple intersecting forms of discrimination based on gender, age, ethnicity, class, caste, occupation, migrant status, religion etc. Globally, many election management bodies and political leaders have decided to postpone elections. The exclusion of women and young people from electoral and democratic processes will be exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Restrictions on freedoms of assembly, movement and association during the pandemic have restricted mobility and voters’ ability to gather for rallies or participate in decision-making. Young people who reach voting age cannot obtain identity cards or register for newly scheduled elections, violating their right to political participation. Women, facing increasing burdens of unpaid and domestic work and rising gender-based violence during the pandemic, will continue to be excluded from democratic processes. If these challenges are not addressed, they will further erode the integrity and inclusiveness of democracy and electoral accountability.

As the cornerstone of democratic governance, elections offer moments of hope, renewal and affirmation. Unfortunately, the experience to date in the 14 countries participating in this research has been of failed promises, dashed hopes and a need for change. Elections also make visible all the manifestations of underlying hidden and invisible power in a nation’s social and cultural sphere including misogyny, racism, homophobia, class, ethnicity, generational



or geographic divides, as well as values and beliefs commonly held by the people. They can, therefore, provide an opportunity to entrench and exacerbate these divisions, or provide the space to question, challenge and reverse them – depending on the process and outcomes.<sup>4</sup> This has been attributed to the current crisis of democracy, the rise of right-wing populism, dashed hopes, inequalities, unilateralism, nationalism, isolationism, authoritarianism, gender injustice, conflict, militarisation and protectionism around the world.

Zambian activist at the climate March in New York

Photo credit: Brandon Wu, ActionAid



## 4. Why electoral accountability matters for social justice

States are obligated to ensure citizens, civil society organisations and people's movements are able to engage politically, demand accountability from governments, corporations and other non-state actors, and play a substantial role in shaping economic, political and social policies and outcomes that drive protection of human rights, gender equality, redistributive development and progressive transformation. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights tells us that, "everyone has the right to take part in the government of his/her country, directly or through freely chosen representatives".<sup>5</sup> The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights also states that:

"Every citizen shall have the right and opportunity... (a) To take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives; (b) To vote and be elected at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors; (c) To have access, on general terms of equality, to public service in his [or her] country."<sup>6</sup>

According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), elections play four principle functions that are critical for social justice.<sup>7</sup> Elections provide a means for:

- **Legitimising** ruling elites.
- **Exercising accountability** over leaders for promises made on the provision of goods and services, or a stable economy for economic development.
- **Choosing representatives** through the nomination of candidates and lists of political parties.
- **Exercising voice** in which citizens set common agendas, define issues, articulate alternatives and options, engage in competition with others, influence government priorities and encourage consensus-building on key issues of national concern.

Indeed, for women and young people, elections are important for **participation** as they provide a means for the voice of excluded groups to be heard and to influence the political agenda. Elections also provide a means for women and young people to **influence social outcomes** by ensuring the issues of concern for them are on the agenda of those seeking electoral office. Finally, elections provide an important mechanism to **hold leaders to account** and to ensure that elected officials use the power conferred on them to benefit the electorate, including excluded groups.

## 5. Applying feminist intersectional analysis to the experiences of women and young people

Constraints faced by women and young people may give a misleading impression that one's gender or one's age alone determines the level of exclusion from electoral processes and decision-making. The reality is more complex. One cannot therefore apply a 'gender only' or an 'age only' lens to understand the experience of women and young people, as power and privilege are experienced in different ways by different groups of women at different points in their history and in varying contexts. Consequently, ActionAid draws on a feminist intersectional analysis framework, which recognises that the intersection of many identities and factors results in overlaps of discrimination and exclusion. 'Intersectionality' was coined by an American law professor and woman of colour, Kimberlé Crenshaw,<sup>8</sup> although its roots go back to postcolonial and African American feminist histories, as well as liberation movements in developing countries. Ultimately, intersectional analysis allows us to understand how different inequalities are constructed and sustained.

NS is a young woman politician in Zambia. As the 2016 general elections were approaching, this 23-year-old graduate in Electrical Engineering told her parents she wanted to contest the parliamentary seat so that she could make a difference in her community, particularly for young people. Her father was supportive and said he would support her financially, but her mother expressed concerns about the challenges her daughter was going to face. Indeed, NS faced many challenges because she was young, inexperienced, and female. In many instances, she was accused of using her beauty as an entry to politics. But, to NS's surprise, she won the primaries and was just waiting for the nomination certificate, referred to as an adoption certificate in Zambia. She ascribed her success in the primaries to the support of other young people. Despite NS's winning the primaries, the adoption certificate was given to an older male contestant. Though disappointed, NS has not given up on politics. She says she will contest again in 2021 as a member of parliament. In the meantime, she will continue to build her capacity and mobilise support on the ground by working with young people.

In the case of electoral processes and inclusive democracy, stakeholders in this research identified several identities and factors that affect a person's exclusion:

- Age
- Religion
- Sexual orientation
- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Income status
- Disability
- Education



While the list of identities and factors is not exhaustive and will vary by context, what is important to keep in mind is their intersectionality. Women represent an important cross-section of marginalised groups. Young people all over the world are also confronted with intersecting forms of systemic discrimination and are thus particularly vulnerable. Clearly, young people and women are not homogeneous groups, and certain young people and women are more affected by inequality and exclusion than others. For example, a young woman from a marginalised ethnic group may have a very different experience in standing for elected office than an older, educated woman from the same ethnic group as the President.

The people most likely to be left behind by development are those who face multiple overlapping or ‘intersecting inequalities’ that reinforce and exacerbate each other and endure.<sup>9</sup> Inequality and exclusion profoundly undermine young people and women’s opportunities to engage economically, socially and politically, and to exercise (or even secure) full citizenship. These trends are even more pronounced among young women, who face additional barriers such as social norms, conventions and stereotypes (child marriage, parenthood, machismo) that limit their access to education and the labour market, truncate their ability to claim and exercise their rights, and constrain their possibilities to engage and participate in political processes.

The lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, gender diverse, intersex, queer, asexual and questioning (LGBTIQA+) community already face extreme stigma, violence, economic inequality and limited or no access to justice in many countries.<sup>10</sup> Homophobic and transphobic violence in the context of electoral processes harms LGBTIQA+ people and negatively affects the realisation of their political rights, including the right to vote and to stand for election. Inflammatory and hate speech used by candidates that oppose the human rights of LGBTIQA+ people can result in an increase in attacks against this community at different stages of the electoral cycle. Furthermore, openly LGBTI candidates, public officers and political activists often suffer from harassment and attacks around the world.<sup>11</sup>

For this reason, laws, policies and strategies to increase electoral accountability should recognise and address the intersectionality of these identities and how they affect the enjoyment of rights. Ultimately, ActionAid focuses on the experiences and rights of those who are most excluded and interrogates why inequalities occur. This helps support programming and practice that breaks down the power systems and structures that sustain them.

Young people advocating for the African Charter for Democracy, Elections and Governance on international Youth day in Ghana



Photo credit: Africa We Want Initiative funded by the European Union, DANIDA, ActionAid



## 6. Spaces of power in electoral processes

Intersectionality, then, is a framework or lens that can be deployed when undertaking analysis or applying different methodologies. So here it might prompt us to ask, “which women and which young people are able to access which spaces?” Another methodology used to better understand the barriers or opportunities that women and young people face is analysing the spaces of power in electoral processes using the power cube that emerged from the work by members of the Power, Participation and Social Change (PPSC) team at Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, on understanding differing arenas for participation on poverty issues in Nigeria and Uganda. According to the power cube approach,<sup>12</sup> the term “spaces” refers to decision-making arenas and forums for action. The term can also refer to “opportunities, moments and channels where citizens can act to potentially affect policies, discourses, decisions and relationships which affect their lives and interests.”<sup>13</sup> There are three types of spaces: closed, invited and claimed.

*Closed spaces* are forums where power holders make decisions without any consultation or engagement from others. Women and young people are often excluded from such spaces but are impacted by the decisions made in them. *Invited spaces* are spaces where the authorities extend invitations to citizens/civil society to participate in specific processes. *Claimed spaces* are those which have been created by disempowered or excluded groups to, among other things, share, learn and strategise for action. Stakeholders shared examples of closed, invited and claimed spaces within electoral processes in their respective countries, which we replicate below.

### Examples of closed, invited and claimed spaces in electoral processes

Closed spaces	Invited spaces	Claimed spaces
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Decision-making structures within political parties.</li> <li>Judicial adjudication of contested election results.</li> <li>Corporate boardrooms where decisions are made to fund political campaigns.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Election observation: civil society provided with the legal space to observe and monitor elections.</li> <li>National stakeholders’ forums convened by electoral commissions prior to elections to clarify issues around electoral process.</li> <li>Inter-party advisory committees of political parties advising the electoral management bodies.</li> <li>Citizens invited to input into electoral reforms.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Debates for candidates and contestants.</li> <li>Civic education conducted by CSOs.</li> <li>Shadow monitoring of elections by youth and women’s groups.</li> <li>Citizen manifestos/ score cards.</li> </ul>

Strategies to open closed spaces in electoral systems should be aimed at claiming rights to information and creating greater transparency and disclosure around what happens behind closed doors. This enables citizens to hold key actors to account. On the other hand, strategies on invited spaces should be aimed at strengthening the skills of women and young people to use these spaces more effectively. Strategies may also include transforming these spaces to make them more accessible and inclusive of excluded voices and groups. Finally, strategies on claimed spaces will include strengthening them to be more effective in influencing what happens in the closed and invited spaces.

## 7. The different forms of power within electoral processes

Strategies to strengthen inclusive democracy should not only address the different ‘spaces’ of power, but also the different dimensions of power present in electoral processes. As well as defining the three spaces discussed above, power cube analysis sets out three different forms of power.<sup>14</sup> These different forms of power are manifested in democratic and electoral processes.

### 1. Visible forms of power in electoral processes

Visible forms of power are open articulations of contests over interests in public spaces or formal decision-making bodies. Examples of visible power in the context of electoral processes may be political parties, electoral management bodies, parliament, the judiciary, the executive, regional and continental bodies such as the African Union or the UN, traditional leaders, security agencies and local authorities. The assumption when you focus on visible power is that access to these decision-making arenas is open to all. Another assumption is that, by looking at who wins and who loses in these arenas, you can tell who has power. And yet, the reality is always more complex. Thus, strategies to strengthen inclusive democracy and electoral accountability cannot focus only on visible forms of power.

### 2. Hidden forms of power in electoral processes

Hidden forms of power are used by different groups and individuals to maintain their power by creating barriers to participation, by excluding key issues from the public arena or controlling politics backstage. Through hidden forms of power, alternative choices are limited, and the rules of the game are set to exclude disempowered people such as women and young people and/or their issues. Hidden power is exercised in electoral processes through the provision of financial support to candidates from wealthy elites and large corporations. It is also exercised through financial and technical aid from governments from developed countries acting through their aid agencies and diplomatic missions. Hidden power operates through framing issues in a way that benefits powerful groups and their vested interests. It also works through the use or threat of sanctions and discrediting the legitimacy of those challenging the status quo. For example, women who stand for elections are discredited and subjected to smear campaigns to undermine their legitimacy.

### 3. Invisible power in electoral processes

Invisible power is exercised through the indoctrination and socialisation of groups to the point that awareness of one’s rights and interests are hidden behind dominating ideologies. Sometimes this is referred to as the internalisation of powerlessness, affecting women and young people’s awareness and consciousness of potential issues and conflicts, even where they are directly affected. In electoral processes, such socialisation is often perpetuated through the control of institutions that shape and create meaning: family, religious institutions, the media, schools, television, mass consumer culture, tradition, etc. The idea that women and young people are not suitable for leadership positions is often perpetuated through invisible power. The increasing trend toward *datafication* in which the internet, often through social media, is used by far-right groups and authoritarian governments to weaponise fake news in elections, can be a form of hidden power.

## 8. Electoral accountability today: gains made

A few countries in which ActionAid works, such as Kenya, Ghana, Myanmar and Bangladesh, have made progress in improving electoral accountability. The following sets out the key areas where gains have been made.

### Laws and policies exist to promote inclusive democracy and electoral accountability

A wide range of constitutional provisions, laws and policies are in place to promote inclusive democracy. These include:

- The constitution
- Election acts
- Legislation on political financing
- Legislation on political parties
- Legislation on electoral bodies
- Local government laws

In the survey conducted<sup>15</sup> to inform and support the development of this alternative narrative, more than 60% of respondents stated that their country's constitution includes provisions that guarantee women's representation and participation in politics and decision-making. Examples are:

- Kenya's constitution provides for the creation of special seats for women that resulted in the election of forty-seven (47) women representatives into the National Assembly, nomination of women by political parties and one woman representing the youth and persons with disabilities in the Senate and County Governments and appointment of women into other decision-making bodies.<sup>16</sup>
- The Constitution of Uganda Article 33 (4 & 5), provides women's right to equal treatment with men including equal opportunities in political, economic and social activities and the right to affirmative action for the purpose of redressing the imbalances created by history, tradition or custom.<sup>17</sup>
- The Zimbabwean Constitution speaks to the rights of women and their representation. Section 80(1) provides, "Every woman has full and equal dignity of the person with men and this includes equal opportunities in political, economic and social activities". The women's quota is provided for under section 124 (1)(b) "Composition of National Assembly"...(1.b)"For the life of the two Parliaments after effective date, an additional sixty women members, six from each of the provinces into which Zimbabwe is divided, elected under a party-list system of proportional representation based on votes cast for candidates representing political parties in a general election for constituency members in the provinces".
- Article 65 (3a) of the Constitution of Bangladesh reserves 50 seats exclusively for women members elected based on procedure of proportional representation in the Parliament.<sup>18</sup> At the local government level, 3 directly elected seats are reserved for women in the union parishads (1 from each of the 3 wards), the lowest level of councils in the sub-national administration.<sup>19</sup>
- The Constitution of Zambia in its preamble confirms the "equal worth of women and men and their right to freely participate in, determine and build a sustainable political, legal, economic and social order"

The percentage was slightly less for young people. More than 50% of respondents said their country has constitutional and legal provisions that provide for the participation of young people in politics and decision-making:

- In Bangladesh, Article 55 of the constitution focuses on the rights of young people and directs the state to take measures to protect them, including affirmative action programmes.
- In Uganda, Article 78 (C) of the constitution provides for youth MPs as part of the composition of parliament. There are five youth MPs: Northern, Eastern, Central, Western and National (female).
- Article 55 of the Kenya constitution elaborates on the rights of youth and places an obligation on the state to take measures, including affirmative action programmes to ensure that young people have access to education, training and opportunities for association, representation and participation in political, social, economic and other spheres of life. Article 100 further charges Parliament with an obligation of enacting legislation to promote the representation of women, persons with disabilities, youth, ethnic and other minorities, and marginalized communities in Parliament.
- Section 39 of the Myanmar constitution provides that, “the Union shall enact necessary law to systematically form political parties for flourishing of a genuine, disciplined multi-party democratic system”. The provisions of the Myanmar Youth Policy, Section 33 (g) include acknowledgement “of the capabilities of young people and allow meaningful participation in political and development process of the nation and civil society organizations” and supports “formation of independent youth union or group to participate in national level actions”.

While there are challenges with enforcement and implementation of these laws and policies, their very existence is important as they provide the basis on which women, young people and other excluded groups can advocate for increased accountability and inclusion in democratic processes.

### **Institutions exist to ensure effective management of electoral processes and the meaningful participation of all citizens**

In countries such as Ghana, Bangladesh, Kenya, and Zimbabwe there is progress in the establishment and/or strengthening of electoral management bodies and other institutions. Examples of institutions cited include:

- The electoral commission
- The judiciary
- The national commission on civic education
- The human rights commission.
- The office of the registrar of political parties.

As with the constitutional provisions and legislation, there are undoubtedly challenges with the operations of these institutions. Their existence, however, is critical because it provides a platform and space for women and young people to advocate for increased inclusion and strengthened electoral accountability.

For example, the constitution of Kenya, adopted in 2010, contains a provision that no elective body shall have more than two thirds of its members from the same gender. Unfortunately, this critical legal standard of gender equity and equality has not been completely met. The constitution makes no specific provisions to ensure that the two-thirds rule is respected. Instead, it obligates parliament to enact legislation promoting the representation of women, people with disabilities, young people, ethnic and other minorities and marginalised communities in the national legislature. Parliament has yet to pass legislation that would bring the two houses of parliament – the national assembly and the senate – in line with the constitution. Compliance among political parties and parliament continues to be problematic, despite supreme court rulings mandating implementation of the two-thirds rule. Consequently, women still make up less than 33% of parliament.<sup>20</sup>



## 9. Existing challenges with electoral accountability

Many respondents noted that several challenges diminish these gains in electoral accountability. The following section sets out some of the issues that governments must address to strengthen electoral accountability.

### Ineffective, weak and arbitrary enforcement of laws and policies

In the context of democracy and electoral processes, policies and laws are a double-edged sword. In some countries, there are progressive laws that women and young people are using to advocate for their increased participation. In other countries, government and ruling political parties have also used laws and policies as a tool against women and young people. Examples include laws that limit freedom of assembly such as the *Public Order and Management Act* in Zimbabwe. Even policies that promote equal representation or affirmative action have been manipulated. This happens by giving official positions to women and young people who do not represent the agendas and lived experience of these groups.

In some of the countries surveyed what is needed is not more legislation but enforcement of existing laws and implementation of current policies. For example, Kenya's affirmative action provision is yet to be implemented since the constitution was promulgated in 2010.

Gaps also exist in some countries' legislative and policy frameworks. For example, some constitutions lack affirmative action provisions to guarantee parliamentary seats for women or young people. Other gaps include the absence of laws and policies to:

- Provide for increased transparency in financing of political parties.
- Establish safeguards on term and age limits.
- Regulate involvement of the military in elections.
- Provide for effective sanctions on electoral fraud.
- Reduce nomination fees and other financial costs associated with running for political office for excluded groups.
- Address election-related violence; and
- Sanction hate speech and sexual harassment against women during election campaigns.

### Limitations of freedom of speech, association, and assembly

The ability of women and young people to stand for and participate in elections is not only determined by what happens on election day, or even the election year. It is also influenced by the general ability of these groups to enjoy all civil and political rights such as freedom of speech, association, and assembly. There is a wide range of limitations on excluded groups enjoying these rights. Examples include:

- Use of public order management, the maintenance of peace and order, or other such laws to limit freedom of assembly.
- Government censorship of the media.
- Arrest and detention of activists and members of the opposition.
- Control of social media through legislation, in the case of Bangladesh. Bangladesh enacted the *Digital Security Act* in September 2018. Passed with the objective of curbing cyber-crime and ensuring digital security, the *Digital Security Act* creates a wide range of cyber-crime offences.<sup>21</sup> Or through taxation of social media, in the case of Uganda through the *Over-the-Top Tax* in July 2018 rendering avenues of communication inaccessible for low-income earners thereby robbing many people of their right to freedom of expression.
- Proposed introduction of the cybersecurity and cybercrimes bills in Zambia
- Use of social media to spread false information.

## Lack of independence and weakness of electoral management bodies and relevant institutions

Respondents noted that while the establishment of different electoral management bodies reflects progress in strengthening electoral accountability, these institutions lack the independence from the executive that would render them legitimate in the eyes of excluded groups. For example, in Uganda, the commissioners of the electoral commission are appointed by the president with the approval of parliament. They can be removed from office by the President for inability to perform the functions of the office arising out of physical and mental incapacity, misbehaviour or misconduct or incompetence<sup>22</sup>. Many Political groups strongly believe the commission is not independent and does not reflect diversity as expected in a multiparty system. There are concerns relating to the system of appointments to the electoral commission,<sup>23</sup> credibility and security of tenure, among others<sup>24</sup>.

The following challenges further hamper the effectiveness of these institutions:

- Lack of transparency and accountability.
- Lack of funding.
- Weak coordination among the different electoral management bodies.
- Their approach to elections is an event not a process.
- Limited number of women in leadership roles.
- The use of cumbersome and bureaucratic processes.
- Their inability to resolve electoral disputes in a timely manner.

## Ineffective civic education

Civic education is the provision of relevant information to strengthen citizens' participation in democratic processes. In this respect, it has the potential to increase participation of women and young people in electoral processes. However, too often civic education is general and does not address discriminatory attitudes towards women and young people. This is compounded by poor access to civic education for women and young people from the most excluded groups due to low levels of literacy, lack of access to the internet, television or phone, language barriers, disabilities etc. In this respect, civic education does little to change mindsets that adversely affect the participation of women and young people.

Another challenge is that the delivery of civic education tends not to be systematic and continuous but limited to elections periods only. The relevance of civic education to the daily challenges faced by citizens is also in question for many excluded groups. For example, citizens face difficulties in accessing key public services such as health, water and education. Civic education in most countries however has not linked elections to these issues but has been primarily focused on voting. A more effective approach is that adopted by the National Commission on Civic Education (NCCE) in Ghana. The NCCE has put in place a social auditing project, which enables the public to assess the performance of public policies and programmes against the corresponding budgetary allocations for their implementation thereby assisting voters to link leadership to delivery of services.

## Limited transparency and exclusionary practices within political parties

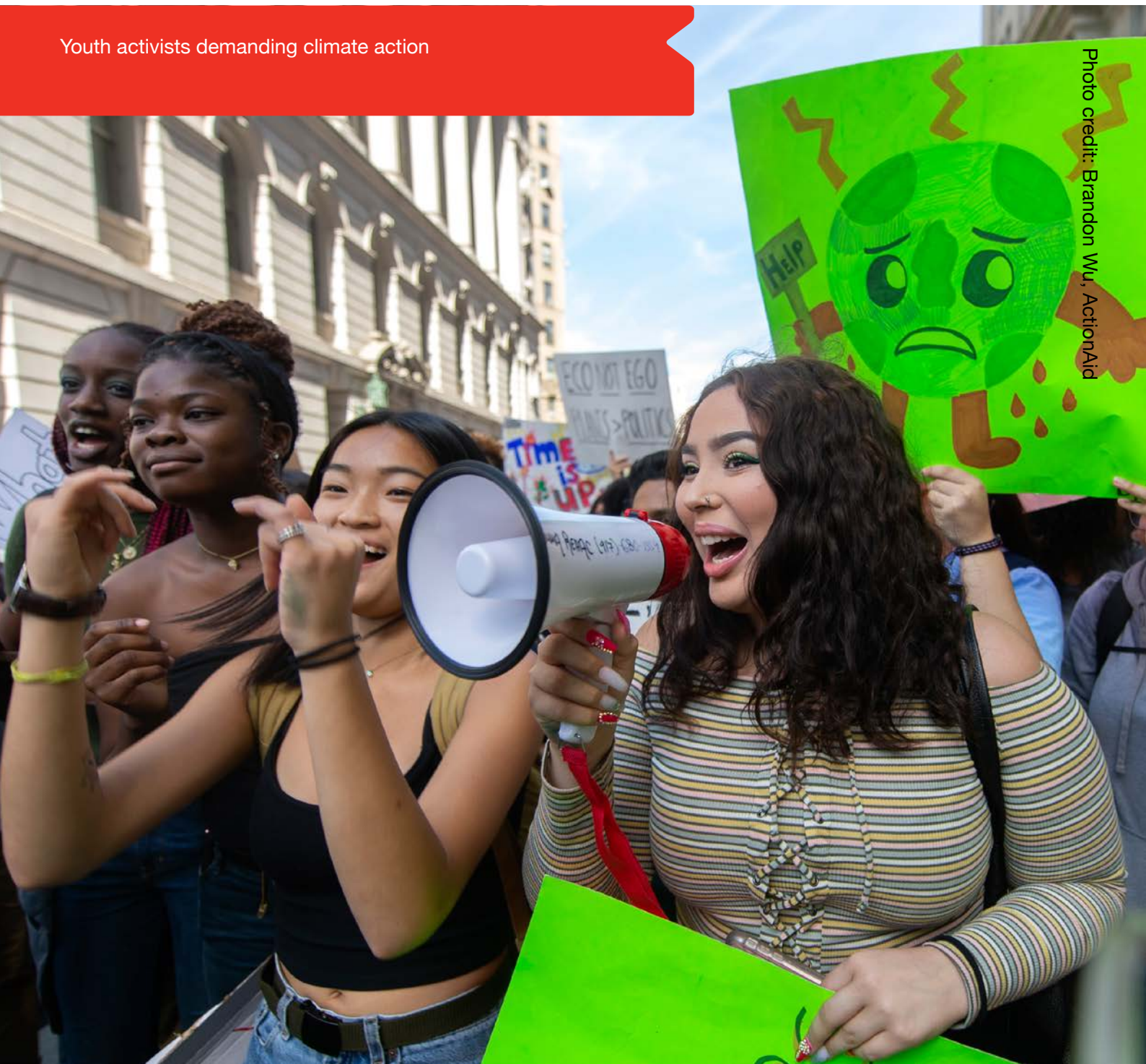
For many women and young people, political parties serve as gatekeepers during elections. Fortunately, a few political parties are adopting strategies to increase the participation of these groups. For example, some parties have 'youth wings' that elect their leaders to represent them from the grassroots to national level. Others reduce filing fees for women contestants for positions at the constituency, regional and national levels. Unfortunately, many political parties do not have strategies to ensure equal participation of marginalised and excluded groups.

On the contrary, women and young aspirants have faced unfair treatment and exclusionary practices at the hands of political parties. For example, irregularities arise in the way parties conduct primaries, so that male candidates are favoured over women candidates. Political parties, therefore, tend to be highly patriarchal spaces with significant barriers to the progression of women. Women potential candidates are exposed to personal attacks and smear campaigns by competitors even within their own political party.

Furthermore, parties largely exclude young people from decision-making, instead employing the common practice of using them as instruments of violence. For example, the high number of young people in Africa is used to champion the interests of dominant elites with no or little response to youth issues. Many young Africans are exploited by older political elites who use them as a climbing ladder to attain their own political ambitions.<sup>25</sup>

The lack of transparency in party financing is yet another point of frustration. In some instances, corruption may be the source of illicit campaign financing for incumbents and their parties. In addition, the lack of information renders it easier for vested interests to influence election outcomes without any accountability.

Youth activists demanding climate action





## 10. Barriers to women and young people's inclusion

This section looks at the specific challenges that women and young people face in participating in electoral processes and democratic decision-making at national and local levels as pointed out by the respondents.

Some of the barriers faced by **women aspirants** and voters are set out below:

### Gender discrimination based on cultural, religious and social norms

In many countries where ActionAid works, culture and religion socialise people to believe that women and young people are not suited for leadership roles and decision-making positions. These norms and beliefs legitimise patriarchal behaviour that discriminates against women standing for political office and participating in decision-making. These norms also foster social stereotypes and prejudice against women in electoral processes. For example, the belief that women are more emotional than men has unique potential to unfairly bias the selection and assessment of women leaders. Compared to men, women are often viewed as less able to control whether their emotions influence their thoughts and behaviour,<sup>26</sup> and as displaying either too much – or not enough – emotion.<sup>27</sup> Women are also more likely than men to be penalised for expressing emotions that convey power (e.g. anger and pride).<sup>28</sup>

### Hate speech and name-calling

The morality of women standing for election is often called into question, and it is not unusual for them to be referred to as 'loose women'. Their bodies are objectified with a focus on how they look rather than on the content of their policy platforms. In addition, women are subject to personal attacks based on their marital status and family background (see box).

RA is a Ghanaian woman passionate about the development of her community. Consequently, her community asked her to stand during the general elections. She was hesitant at first, because the opposition was well resourced and sponsored by the political party. She finally decided to stand while openly talking about the barriers and challenges she faced. For example, she was not married at the time, so she was subject to a smear campaign focused on her marital status. She was labelled a prostitute and concubine. She was also accused of offering sexual favours to get support. Despite these challenges, the community, particularly women, rallied behind her and she won. She attributed her election to her track record in the community and her advocacy for service provision. Her participation in capacity building programmes also empowered her to gain confidence to campaign, appear in the media and contest elections.

### Violence and sexual harassment

Women candidates can be threatened, abused, harassed sexually and physically, and intimidated to stop campaigning. In some instances, they are subject to violence such as assault or domestic abuse to prevent or undermine their political participation.

### High cost of elections

Many women may not have the financial muscle to afford the significant resources required to run a campaign or have access to the type of 'godfathers'/sponsors who have money. This, coupled with a lack of financial autonomy to spend available resources at household level, is a major barrier to their participation.



## Unfair treatment and discrimination within political parties

There are instances where a woman has won the party primaries, but the party picked a male candidate who lost to her to represent the party. Another instance is when a party is seeking to appear gender-sensitive, but instead of supporting strong women candidates, they select women who they believe they can more easily manipulate. Most parties are not required to hold elections for positions within the party. As a result, these positions end up being dominated by those who wield economic power, which is often older men.

FM is an elected member of the Country Assembly in Mombasa, the second largest city in Kenya. She won the seat on an independent ticket. No one, not even herself, believed she could win – all the tides that women politicians face were against her. FM got married early and had five children in rapid succession. She worked as a domestic worker to support her family. She then started her community involvement and development when her friends invited her to a women's forum organised by ActionAid Kenya. This forum built her capacity and empowered her to become a community-based leader. As the 2017 elections approached, the women requested her to run for office. At the political party primaries in her ward she won. However, her certificate was issued to another male candidate. The party claimed that the man was a long serving member. This annoyed the electorate, who requested her to run as an independent candidate. With the support of the community, FM won her seat.

## Inequitable gender roles

Women still have a heavy workload of unpaid care and domestic work, which leaves them little time for political activities. Coupled with political campaign schedules that require candidates to be outside of the home and on the road for long periods of time, this leaves women with a difficult choice between engaging in political activities or unpaid care and domestic work.

## Lack of access to information

Women do not have enough information about the laws, policies, institutions and structures that govern their lives. In addition, they have limited access to accurate information on electoral processes and procedures. For example, they may not have access to information on rules governing party primaries, procedures for standing for elections, availability of complaint mechanisms and laws protecting them from violence and abuse due to low literacy levels.

**Young aspirants** in electoral processes face the following barriers:

- **Cultural, religious and social norms** that equate age with wisdom and experience. These intersect with the multiple identities of women and young people, disadvantaging some more than others. These norms devalue the ability of young people to stand for elected office and participate in decision-making at the national and local levels.
- **Discriminatory laws:** in some countries the law allows young people to vote at the age of 18 but does not allow them to become parliamentary and/or presidential candidates before they are 21 or older. For example, in Bangladesh, a parliamentary candidate must be at least 25 years old, while in Sierra Leone they must be 21. It is unjust that young people are considered old enough to vote, but age limits bar them from running for political office, particularly in contexts where they constitute most of the population. Young people around the world have adopted the hashtag #NotTooYoungToRun on social media to raise awareness of the need to lift age limits. Nigeria's constitutional amendment is the campaign's first significant success. In 2018, the Nigerian government ratified a constitutional amendment that reduced the age

limit for state legislators and those in the federal house of representatives from 30 to 25, for senators and governors from 35 to 30, and for the president from 40 to 35.<sup>29</sup>

- **Absence of laws and policies to promote young people's participation:** in some countries there are no constitutional provisions or laws that either set aside seats for young people or promote the election of young people into leadership positions.
- **High cost of elections:** some of the high costs of running for elections include fees to join political parties, filing fees to run in the election and campaign costs such as transport, security, t-shirts, venue hire, posters, flyers etc. Accessing the volume of resources to meet these needs is difficult for young people, unless they are connected to political elites or well-resourced sponsors.
- **Violence by the state:** young people can find themselves assaulted and/or detained when they participate in political processes. For example, a pressure group of young people in Uganda called the Members of the Jobless Brotherhood are routinely beaten and arrested when they hold peaceful anti-corruption protests. Journalists are assaulted by police while filming their gatherings. In Zambia, activists who gather for peaceful demonstrations calling for improved accountability are sometimes harassed and beaten up by cadres suspected to be from the ruling party
- **Use of young people as instruments of violence:** young people are manipulated to participate in electoral violence. For example, in Ghana, political parties have been accused of creating political vigilante groups, often made up of young people, who use violence against political opponents.
- **Reluctance of political parties** to provide space for young people to take up leadership within parties
- **Lack of information** about the functioning of electoral processes and spaces, including how to influence these spaces. This is compounded by young people's poor knowledge of civil and political rights and duties.
- **Lack of self-confidence:** young people often feel they lack the skills and knowledge to stand for office and play a leadership role. This is partly a result of a lack of capacity building and mentorship by political parties, among others.

BAM's political life began after he completed university in Ghana in 2004. He has unsuccessfully stood in three general elections since 2012. The first time he stood, his opponents were 50 years old and above. He was dismissed because of his age and told that he could not get nominated, even if he won in party primaries, because there were political stalwarts who had been in the party long before him. His biggest challenge, like other young aspirants, was a lack of resources to campaign. He did not have a job or any other source of income. He soon learnt that he was running in a constituency in the capital city, Accra, yet he came from a minority ethnic community, and voters in the city voted along tribal lines. Political party leaders would intentionally decline to offer capacity building opportunities to young people. They were afraid that young people like him, if equipped with skills, would surpass, and eventually take over the party. BAM currently serves as the Chairman of one of the smaller political parties and intends to run in future elections in Ghana.

# 11. Defining our vision of inclusive democracy and electoral accountability

Our vision of inclusive democracy and electoral accountability is one that shifts power from political and economic elites to citizens, particularly women and young people. It also extends the public realm beyond the traditional political domain, to the economic, ecological and social realms, providing opportunities for citizens to be involved in the process of governance beyond the periodic right to vote. Underpinning inclusive democracy is the idea that every citizen, regardless of class, age, gender, sexual orientation, ability, group, culture and ethnic or religious background, should have an equal right and opportunity to engage with, and contribute to, political decision-making, institutions and processes.<sup>30</sup>

Inclusive democracy encourages an active sense of ownership and pride rather than a passive feeling of helpless acceptance of whatever is decided by the government. Citizens engage political action to realise the principles intrinsic to political life, such as service delivery financed through progressive taxation, sustainable socio-economic development, and respect for basic freedoms and responsibilities including the rule of law, orderly succession, equality, justice, solidarity, peace and dignity.<sup>31</sup> Ultimately, it is a vision in which the belief in elections as a road to democracy and social change can be restored. This is critical to the realisation of ActionAid's mission – social justice, gender equality and poverty eradication.

Our vision of inclusive democracy and electoral accountability includes the following:

- ✓ **Inclusive laws and policies are enacted, enforced and implemented.**  
Examples include laws that:
  - Provide for affirmative action for excluded groups such as women, young people, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, etc.
  - Reduce political nomination fees, especially for parliament seats.
  - Stipulate zero tolerance for violence and stiff sanctions for violence against women in elections.
  - Provide for severe sanctions on electoral fraud.
  - Control and regulate campaign financing through disclosure requirements, contribution limits, spending caps and public subsidies.<sup>32</sup>
  - Establish safeguards on term limits.
  - Remove age limits for young people to stand for elected office.
  - Provide for strict prohibitions and sanctions on the spreading of fake news and the use of data analytics to skew electoral outcomes.

All related legislation such as the constitution, civil and criminal codes, nationality and citizenship laws, laws relating to the media etc. need to be consulted on and analysed to ensure that they do not conflict with one another and that they meet international standards.

Other documents that provide guidelines on actions that governments could take to improve electoral accountability include:

- Final reports of various election observation missions (international and domestic) where they are available.
- The requirements of any international instruments to which the country is a party, which impact on the election law.
- Model codes of conduct addressing election issues developed by international, governmental or non-governmental organisations.

- ✓ **Independent electoral management bodies are responsive to the needs of women and young people.**  
Examples include institutions that:
  - Can act independently of the executive.
  - Have security of tenure and clear and transparent procedures for appointments.
  - Have adequate resources allocated from the government budget to fulfil their mandate effectively.
  - Provide for the continuous registration of persons for national identification purposes and for voting; this ensures that women and young people, particularly migrants, including rural/urban migrants, are not disenfranchised at election time because of the absence of national or voter identity cards.
- ✓ **Independent judiciary and tribunals effectively adjudicate electoral disputes.**  
Examples include courts and tribunals that:
  - Adjudicate electoral disputes in a swift manner.
  - Adjudicate disputes in a fair and impartial manner.
  - Ensure protection of fundamental human rights, particularly for excluded groups such as women and young people.
- ✓ **Law enforcement bodies safeguard electoral integrity and security.**  
Examples include police and other law enforcement agencies that:
  - Protect women, young people, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and other excluded groups from electoral violence including online harassment and abuse.
  - Do not use force or violate the rights of citizens holding peaceful demonstrations.
  - Maintain professional, impartial and non-intimidating conduct before, during and after elections.
- ✓ **Open and inclusive political parties.**  
Examples include political parties that:
  - Establish women and young people's wings and committees to strengthen their representation within the party, and in the political process in general.
  - Create space for the genuine voices of young people to be heard rather than just using them as instruments to perpetuate the agendas of powerful actors within the party.
  - Provide financial and logistics support to women and young people during campaigns and while they hold public office.
  - Are committed to a policy of parity in all their activities and functions and, therefore, provide for affirmative action in all party structures to ensure the participation of women and young people.
  - Reserve special seats for women and young people to contest.
  - Provide skills-based training and mentoring to women and young people on elections and democracy.
  - Reform the regulations, policies and procedures governing their operations to strengthen transparency and integrity in the management of party primaries.
  - Reform regulations and policies to increase transparency in party financing.
  - Uphold inclusive democracy in internal party processes.
- ✓ **Respect for and protection of freedoms of speech, assembly and association.**  
Examples include:
  - Freedom of speech and assembly of opposition and civil society without unfair limitation.
  - Equal and fair availability of the issuance of permits to exercise freedom of assembly; provisions should only require notification of relevant agencies to provide security.
  - Granting permission to media to cover key briefings with leaders, and not allowing the ruling party to pick and choose who they will talk to.

✓ **Accountable elected leaders.**

Examples include leaders that:

- Create space and time to listen to the concerns of women and young people and then reflect these issues in their manifestos.
- Once elected, work arduously to deliver on their campaign promises and give regular feedback to the relevant constituencies.
- Create platforms for citizens to give feedback and ask questions.
- Engage with social accountability mechanisms of women and young people's groups to respond to issues raised.

✓ **Responsive civic education.**

Examples include civic education that:

- Explicitly addresses discriminatory and patriarchal mindsets and behaviours towards women and young people.
- Is provided continuously and not just around elections.
- Raises awareness and strengthens the capacity of women and young people to stand for elections.
- Is provided by a wide range of actors including civil society and the media.
- Makes a connection between the lived realities of citizens and the electoral process.

**How to ensure young people's and women's participation in democratic processes during the COVID-19 pandemic**

Several organisations have proposed ways in which this could be achieved, including The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES)<sup>33</sup> and the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA).<sup>34</sup> Their recommendations are summarised below:

- Electoral management bodies should build trust and meaningful relationships through activities such as outreach surveys and regular quizzes or polls and incorporate young people's feedback into election strategies to better tailor them to women and young voters. Where low internet penetration creates an engagement barrier, electoral management bodies could connect with traditional media outlets to share key election information – television, text messaging, newspapers and radio spots to motivate other women and young voters to participate in upcoming elections. It is important to understand how women access information during the pandemic, and target voter education to ensure they have equal access to that information.
- Electoral management bodies should postpone elections in consultation with all stakeholders and in accordance with the law in situations of emergencies.
- Electoral management bodies could explore special/alternative voting arrangements such as postal, internet and mobile voting that allow citizens to remotely cast their votes, to reduce possible health or security hazards connected to voting in-person. However, these arrangements should not be used to disenfranchise sections of the populations that have no access to the internet or mobile phones. If alternative methods for remote voting are adopted, voters will need to be informed and educated about how and when to use them, discourage intimidation, and clearly promote voting as a secret, individual right.
- Where COVID-19 is prevalent, electoral management bodies should be prepared for online campaigns. Women – particularly candidates – are often targeted with online abuse and hate speech. With the internet likely playing a more visible role during a pandemic, electoral management bodies, officials and stakeholders should ensure that there are mechanisms in place to counter hate speech and gender-based online violence.
- As campaigns move online, women candidates – who are more likely to have less campaign experience and resources – should be provided with information and assistance on how to effectively campaign using online platforms and outreach.



- Electoral management bodies should connect with young activists who are mobilising their peers online to coordinate voter education, conduct get-out-the-vote campaigns and increase understanding of new voting procedures, which is especially important for voters casting a ballot for the first time during a pandemic.
- Electoral management bodies should consider options to extend the voter registration period within the legal framework to ensure that all young voters who have reached voting age during the delayed timeframe and women are able to participate when the election date is set.
- Electoral management bodies should also work with the agencies responsible for processing ID cards needed for the registration of voters to ensure young voters can cast ballots on election day.
- In all contexts, electoral management bodies must take preventative, decisive measures to mitigate the health and safety risks for polling station workers and voters, keeping in mind women poll workers' unique needs.

Youth in Palestine peacefully protesting against plastic waste and demanding government action and accountability



Photo credit: ActionAid

# 12. Strategies to strengthen inclusion in democracy and electoral processes

In many countries where ActionAid works, electoral processes have excluded women and young people. To achieve our vision, we need transformation to address the root causes of this exclusion of women and young people. In each country where we work, the strategies we use will be informed by an in-depth power analysis and feminist intersectional analysis to ultimately address the different forms of **hidden, visible and invisible power**.

While we will continue to address the visible forms of power, we will pay attention to the hidden and invisible forms of power. This includes: undue influence over electoral management bodies by the executive; the hidden influence of economic elites over governments through illicit campaign financing; the use of social media to spread fake news; and the socialisation of citizens through family, schools, religion and culture to change attitudes and support women and young people to occupy decision-making positions. These are the types of hidden and invisible forms of power that we must focus on going forward if we are to achieve our vision. We will also use strategies that seek to open **closed spaces of power** and strengthen **invited and claimed spaces of power**.

Going forward, our strategies will continue to be informed by **feminist intersectional analysis**. This analysis recognises that power and privilege in democratic and electoral processes are experienced in different ways by different groups of women and young people.

Ultimately, our approach will focus attention on supporting women and young people from the poorest and most marginalised communities and groups in line with our intersectional commitment. Our approach will involve working with partners and allies in wider civil society and social movements, including women's rights organisations and feminist and youth movements, in line with our global strategy, *Action for Global Justice*, and our human rights-based approach. Our approach will be grouped into seven major strategies:

## 1. Organising and mobilising women and young people

Pre-elections

- Mobilise women and young people to define their agenda in politics.

During elections

- Mobilise women and young people to vote.

Post-elections

- Organise women and young people to provide a collective voice in strengthening electoral accountability and holding elected leaders to account.

## 2. Capacity building

Pre-elections

- Capacity building of women and young contenders in campaign-related issues.
- Train women and young people's groups to track election financing and political party funding.

Post-elections

- Train elected representatives to translate their manifestos into a parliamentary agenda.

### **3. Civic education**

#### Pre-elections

- Sensitise voters to discuss and challenge existing mindsets about women and young people standing for elected office.
- Work with opinion leaders, traditional and religious leaders to educate their followers on the value of inclusive democracy.

#### During elections

- Voter education for women and young people.

#### Post-elections

- Continuous and comprehensive civic education on the key tenets of inclusive democracy.

### **4. Get people out to vote**

#### Pre-elections

- Use social media and arts to encourage young people to get out and vote.

#### During elections

- Provide transport for people to get out and vote safely.

#### Post-elections

- Provide disaggregated data on the number of women and young voters.

### **5. Strengthening leadership accountability**

#### Pre-elections

- Work with women's rights organisations and young people's groups to influence party manifestos.
- Create platforms for engagement between candidates and women and young voters.
- Engage with political parties to stop the mobilisation of young people for violence.

#### During elections

- Monitor how political leaders are using young people, for example for electoral violence and harassment.

#### Post-elections

- Use social accountability tools to hold leaders to account on manifesto promises.
- Use the media to monitor electoral promises.

### **6. Election observation**

#### Pre-elections

- Train women and young people to serve as election observers.

#### During elections

- Establish situation rooms with women and young people.
- Gather vital data and compile election monitoring reports.
- Collect data on the incidence of violence against women and young people, including online abuse and harassment.



#### Post-elections

- Track implementation of any recommendations from observer missions.

### 7. Legal and institutional reform

#### Pre-elections

- Advocate for laws and policies to strengthen democratic inclusion such as quotas or affirmative action for women and young people.
- Advocate for legal reform such as the removal of age limits for young people to stand for elected office.
- Advocate for the reform of laws on electoral management bodies to enable them to be independent of the executive.
- Advocate for laws to increase transparency in campaign and political party financing.

#### During elections

- Monitor implementation of laws and policies.
- Monitor operations of electoral management bodies.

#### Post-elections

- Monitor judicial resolution of electoral disputes.

Promoting civic participation and awareness



Photo credit: ActionAid



## 13. Conclusion

Public participation requires that people be at the centre of decision-making processes. This is a distinguishing feature of democratic societies – ‘rule by the people’ is the underlying and founding principle of democracy. Participatory (inclusive) democracy, therefore, requires active and meaningful engagement of citizens in public affairs. It is a principle universally accepted as requisite for a just society.<sup>35</sup>

In practice, however, it is often more challenging for women and young people to access and exercise civil and political rights during elections. As illustrated in the previous sections, the connection between electoral accountability and social justice is powerfully evident. Sustained momentum and potential for engagement of key stakeholders and actors in alliances to push power and organise and engage a critical citizen mass can be used to advocate for an inclusive democracy. Women and young people must be in the forefront of bringing about that change.

As we have committed to in ActionAid’s strategy **Action for Global Justice – Strategy 2028** ([https://actionaid.org/sites/default/files/strategy\\_2028\\_lr.pdf](https://actionaid.org/sites/default/files/strategy_2028_lr.pdf)), together with our partners and allies we will challenge and democratise the visible power of states and regional and international institutions. We will work to claim the role of the state as primary duty bearer at all levels, and hold states accountable for respecting, protecting and fulfilling human rights in ways that are democratic, transparent and effective. We will work with rights holders and human rights defenders to enlarge democratic spaces, so that all people have the freedom to organise. We will propose alternatives to the systems and practices we criticise and ensure that the people we work with are central in defining and building these solutions. This alternative narrative provides a platform from which ActionAid and partners can work more strategically to support the participation of women and young people to achieve inclusive democracy and electoral accountability.

Young women demanding gender equality



Photo credit: ActionAid

## Appendix 1: respondents

1. Abdul Fatawu Tambro, ActionAid Ghana
2. Alhagie S. Nyang, Activista The Gambia
3. Alvim Cossa, CTO-Maputo, Mozambique
4. Arsélia Micas Macuácuá, Conselho Cristão de Mozambique
5. Aminata Kelly-Lamin, ActionAid Sierra Leone
6. Andrew Itai Chikowore, ActionAid Zimbabwe
7. Asgar Ali Sabri, ActionAid Bangladesh
8. Austine Ogunleye, Justice Development and Peace Centre Nigeria
9. Beldine Otieno, Sauti Ya Wanawake Organization Pwani Kenya
10. Bernard Mornah, People's National Convention Ghana
11. Celestine Okwudili Odo, ActionAid Nigeria
12. Claver Ndayishimiye, CAFOB, Collectif des Associations et ONGS Féminines de Burundi
13. David Mwanamambo, ActionAid Zambia
14. Fernando Augusto, Mozambican Association for Active Citizenship Mozambique
15. Foday Kanyi, ActionAid The Gambia
16. Filipe Sambo, ActionAid Mozambique
17. Janet Zhou, Zimbabwe Coalition on Debt and Development
18. Jannatul Mouwa, BINDU - Nari Unnayan Shonghoton Bangladesh
19. Jessie Kabwira, Women in Politics Malawi
20. Kaddijatou Jabbie, Activista the Gambia
21. Khin Lay Nge, Phan Tee Eain (Creative Home) Myanmar
22. Luis Cuambe, ActionAid Mozambique
23. Man Bahadur Dangi, Kamaiya Mahila Jagaran Samaj Nepal
24. Mary Wandia, ActionAid International Kenya
25. Mcdonald Chipenzi, GEARS Initiative Zambia
26. Mohammed Yussif, Transforming Rural Women and Youth Lives Foundation Ghana
27. Norman Tumuhimbise, The Alternative Social Movement Uganda
28. Rita Biswas, ActionAid Nepal
29. Rosina Zenabu Abdul-Rahman, Transforming Rural Women and Youth Lives Foundation Ghana
30. Salmat Abdulwaheed, Centre for Information technology and development Nigeria
31. Sarah Bireete, Center for Constitutional Governance Uganda
32. Siatwiko Nancy Mudenda, United Party for National Development Zambia
33. Sihle Moyo, Women in Politics Support Unit Zimbabwe
34. Shiv Narayan Chaudhary, ActionAid Nepal
35. Dr William Ahadzie, Ghana Institute of Social Democracy

## Appendix 2: survey

### Questions in the surveys on women and young people in electoral processes

#### Laws and policies

1. Does your country's constitution include provisions that guarantee minority groups' representation and participation in politics and decision-making? *E.g. affirmative actions, special seats etc.*
2. Please provide examples of laws and policies in place in your country to set rules and regulations to ensure free, fair and inclusive elections. *Examples may include Elections Act, Political Parties, Codes of Conduct, (political parties, electoral), Regulation on Campaign Financing, Violence against Women, Equality etc.*
3. Please assess the enforcement of laws in place to ensure free, fair and inclusive elections?
4. What changes are needed to law and policies to ensure free, fair and inclusive elections?

#### Freedom of speech, association and assembly

5. Please assess the extent to which freedoms of speech, association and assembly are guaranteed for all groups before, during and after elections in your country.
  - If you scored poor or fair, what are some of the challenges and barriers?

#### Relevant institutions

6. Are there institutions established to ensure effective management of electoral processes and meaningful participation of all citizens?
  - If Yes, please provide examples.
7. Please assess the extent to which mandated institutions (e.g. electoral management bodies, law enforcement, judiciary, dispute tribunals, registrar of political parties, equality commissions) have enhanced participation of excluded groups such as young people and women?
8. Please assess the extent to which democratic institutions (e.g. parliament, ministries, departments and agencies, local government) have established processes and mechanisms for effective and inclusive participation in decision-making processes?
9. Please assess the extent to which leaders are held to account on commitments made during electoral processes.
10. Provide examples of the strategies used to hold leaders to account on commitments made during electoral processes.

**Impact on social justice**

11. Have democratic and electoral processes in your country impacted achievement of social justice in the following areas:
- economic, political and social policies and outcomes
  - equal opportunities,
  - access to productive resources,
  - equitable share of natural resources,
  - decent work and respect for labour rights
  - other?

**Political parties**

12. Do political parties have systems and procedures to ensure equal participation of excluded and marginalised groups such as women and young people?

**Participation of excluded groups**

13. How would you rate the extent to which women, young people and other excluded groups access and participate in electoral processes and democratic decision-making spaces?
14. Please provide examples of the types of challenges that excluded groups face in accessing and participating in electoral processes and democratic decision-making.
15. What changes are needed to allow equal access and full participation of women, young people and other excluded groups?
16. Is civic education provided to women, young people and other excluded groups?
17. How would you rate the extent to which civic education addresses cultural, religious, patriarchal and other practices and beliefs that hinder full participation of women and young people in electoral processes and decision-making?
18. Please provide examples of participatory approaches you or others have used in electoral processes to enhance participation of excluded groups?
19. Please provide examples of strategies you and others have used to demand increased transparency and accountability in electoral processes?



## Endnotes

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