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# WOMEN IN LOCAL DECISION MAKING:

## Leading global change

### Summary of Key Issues

Communities where all citizens are empowered to participate in social, economic and political opportunities are instrumental in the eradication of poverty.

Although only two of the eight **Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)** explicitly mention women, it is clear that every goal has a direct impact on the lives of women. Poverty has a female face, as does HIV, child-care and education. Women are consequently key actors for the achievement of these goals.

*“Local government is in a unique position to contribute to the global struggle for gender equality...The systematic integration of women augments the democratic basis, the efficiency and the quality of the activities of local government<sup>1</sup>”.*

The role of women in the advancement of communities, which is broadly recognized by practitioners working in the field, is not sufficiently reflected in international and national policies. By working on the advancement of women it is the whole community, which is impacted, to the benefit of all men women and children. Awareness raising campaigns need to be more targeted to men, boys and girls if the necessary social change is to be achieved.

Local governments, through the responsibilities they assume have a key role to play in empowering women:

1. In many countries local authorities are major employers through their responsibilities in public schools, hospitals, environment and transport;
2. Local authorities have the capacity to create services allowing women further engage in their communities, such as day-care and/or elderly care facilities;
3. They also have responsibilities for basic education, basic health-care and crucial services such as public transportation, drinking water, sanitation and the planning of cities where women and girls live.

### Women participation in Political life

If true change is to be achieved in development the demonstrated capacity of women to take care of their families and communities must be translated **into political participation**. As such, the promotion of women's participation in local decision-making processes must play a pivotal role in the global development strategy for the next ten years.

The equal representation of women and men in elected posts at all levels of government is a priority objective, due to the impact this has on other spheres of activity. Increased participation of women in political life contributes to women friendly services, greater employment of women and policy development based on the specific needs of women and girls.

In every countries of the world, women remain under-represented in elected positions. However, contrary to the stagnation seen at the national level<sup>2</sup>, the numbers of women in

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<sup>1</sup> Paragraphs 10 and 11, IULA Worldwide Declaration on Women in Local Government, 1998

<sup>2</sup> See [www.uclg.org](http://www.uclg.org)

decision-making positions at the local level are gradually increasing, often thanks to the introduction of quota systems, as in the new democracies in Africa, and to increased decentralization, particularly in Latin America. It is notable that the percentage of women councilors is higher in almost all countries around the world than the percentage of women parliamentarians. The application of quotas is highlighted as a key instrument.

Another key tool are networks of elected women, not only in ensuring continuity in political participation but also in promoting the development of gender sensitive policies. Local elected women networks supported by the associations of local authorities, have promoted the creation of women caucuses within their respective political parties to lobby for the inclusion of advancement mechanisms. Those need to be applied in political parties to ensure an increase in the number of women candidates for eligible positions, but also to create changes in existing political cultures that make it difficult for women to participate in politics, such as meeting at late hours and lack of funding.

Strong partnerships between grassroots women and Local Government Associations is essential to increase participation in politics but also to support elected women while in office and to ensure gender sensitive policies.

## Inclusive local governments

The involvement and commitment of local governments are crucial to achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women.

The Council of European Municipalities and Regions have launched in May 2006 a Charter for equality of women and men in local life, inciting local and regional governments in Europe to commit themselves to concrete measures for gender equality at all levels of local life. It has been adopted so far by 1278 of them.

Involvement and commitments can especially be found in the following fields:

**Poverty:** The lack of drinking water, electricity or sanitation infrastructures are expressions of poverty and are areas where local governments have a direct responsibility. Urban planning and slum upgrading have direct impact on the living conditions of women, who form the majority of the poor, and are often the first to be negatively impacted by lack of services.

**Education and training:** The lack of proper resources to invest in schools and ensure the schooling of girls determines the disadvantaged position of the women of the future.

**Human rights and avoiding discrimination:** Inclusive governance structures can promote respect for human rights and facilitate the kind of positive social change necessary to support the advancement of women. For instance, local legal frameworks and municipal policies have provided encouraging reports of increased employment opportunities and more equal conditions.

**Violence:** Local governments have vast experience in developing services for the protection of women such as municipal centers for women victims of domestic violence. Millions of women around the world have started a better life, with their children, with the support of these centers, which offer them refuge until they can support themselves.

**Health:** Water points in slum areas, public toilets and even family hospitals are the responsibility of local governments without resources in poor countries. Investing in the capacity of local government to provide universal basic services is investing in healthier women and families.

**Economy:** The promotion of private-public partnerships and creating an adequate environment for development, for example through City Development Strategies, are important local government responsibilities, which influence the opportunities of women and communities.