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WOMEN IN POLITICS AND DECISION-MAKING IN ALBANIA: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

In the last decades, women and gender issues have been climbing up the political and media agendas in Albania, like in many other countries. Regardless of reasons behind this trend, considerable changes in the Albanian legal framework regarding gender equality and women's participation in politics and decision-making has currently drawn the attention towards this specific area of gender equality. Media and civil society have been important shaping factors in this context, especially in terms of recent legal provisions like the introduction of gender quotas in politics and decision-making. This paper maps their role by utilizing qualitative research methods to explore the opinion of specialist and successful women who have managed to become part of the political or decision-making life, or even those who have contributed through their activities in promoting women in this sphere.

This paper finds that the issue of women's representation and participation in politics and decision-making in Albania is no longer new. Media and civil society have played very important roles in encouraging and taking the debate forward. However, acknowledging the advancement in this respect, this paper also identifies that knowledge and awareness on this issue together with expectations about the future remains still superficial, sometimes even among experts. Although, the underrepresentation of women in this sphere is attributed to the difficulty in combining family with other responsibilities (including those related to politics and decision-making), the aggressiveness of the political arena in Albania, and the lack of support and strong ties that women experience within political structures and out of them, in the opinion of experts and women activists, the introduction of quotas along with the implementation of other measures to ensure a critical mass of women representation in politics and decision-making will help drastically in improving the situation of gender equality in this area.

Key Words: Politics, Albania, Women.

Background and Rational

omen and gender issues have entered and re-entered the scholarly and media agendas with increasing pace in the recent years. In Albania as well, this has been a trend due to many international and local Wdevelopments and other influencing actors and factors. Some of the times the attention has been focused on specific areas; others on women and gender issues as 'fancy' issues in general. No matter what the underlying reasons have been, considerable changes in the Albanian legal framework regarding gender equality and women's participation in politics and decision-making has currently drawn the attention towards this specific area of gender and women issues. Media and civil society have been important shaping factors in this context, whose role needs to be analyzed and determined in this respect.

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Gender and Politics and Decision-Making in Albania

Politics and decision-making are areas where deep and obvious gender differences exist, being at the highest political levels or at local and community level. In Parliament, women hold only 10 seats out of 140, amounting to just 7%. There are only two women ministers (heading the Ministry of Integration and the Ministry of Health). Quite unlike the socialist era, during which women were much better represented in quantitative terms in the political arena and in the parliament itself; although in practice, men continued to be the main decision-makers (Gjermeni, *et al.*, 2003).

Several factors have contributed to the decline in women's representation since the early 1990s, including socio-cultural bias, the aggressive nature of politics which puts many women off engaging in politics, the masculine culture of society, and low self-esteem among women and so on (Anastasi, *et al.*, 2006). Inequalities in terms of respecting women's rights grew due to their poor level of representation in the decision-making process (Dhembo, 2007a), as well as the fact that Albanian society has not yet succeeded in paying appropriate attention to eliminating the transmission of gender-based stereotypes in education, regarding the position they should enjoy both inside the family and in public life (Gjermeni & Kalaja, 2006). Regardless of the continuous downward trend of women's representation in the post-communist era, it is important to note that there have been steps forward. For instance, for the first time in Albanian history, the Parliament has been headed by a woman since Parliamentary Elections in July 2005.

As assessed in the national strategy for gender equality 2007-2010, the low representation of women in politics and decision-making is not a result of their lack of interest to be involved in politics, neither is it an indication of women's inabilities in this regard. It is actually claimed that the results so far concerns the difficulties that women are faced with in adjusting themselves to the current reality surrounding Albanian politics or even in combining family responsibilities to others (Danaj, *et al.*, 2008). The constantly non-positive situation has been a reflection of inefficient standards and mechanisms to promote women's participation and representation in politics and decision-making.

Nevertheless, such a picture has not been placed in a legal vacuum regarding gender equality. Albania has ratified and made part of its national legislation, all international conventions related to gender equality and women's empowerment (see for instance Dhembo, Tahsini & Qirjo, 2007). Since the 1995 Beijing Conference, women's issues have had more visibility on the political agenda in Albania (UNFPA, 2001). In this context, specific responsibilities stem for Albanian governments. Institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women in Albania have evolved since 1995, and different governments have attempted to address women's concerns, through various policies and processes (OSCE, 2002).

Despite these, in Albanian reality, CEDAW and BPfA¹ are not very well known or/and understood, and have just started to be translated into clear legislation and mechanisms to address them. The National Strategy and the recent Gender Equality Law (first approved in 2004 but the last updated version dates in 2008) are the first attempts to establish state structures tasked with taking appropriate measures to enforce non-discrimination laws (Dhembo, 2007).

Even though a quota had been introduced in terms of women's representation in party leadership structures, no quota was on place concerning elected women's representation (National Strategy, 2007-2010). Irrespective of the efforts made by the Women's Movement to incorporate this quota into the Electoral Code this was not made possible till 2008 with the new legal provisions foreseeing a minimum of 30% women candidates in the electoral lists of the political parties.

Quota system comes in a context where Albanian political parties are still laggards in producing specific gender equality policies which clearly identify women's needs and priorities concerning political participation (Anastasi *et al.*, 2006). Though debated, quotas are believed to be an effective means to meet the end of more equal and fair representation of both genders in politics.

¹ CEDAW stands for Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women and BPfA for Beijing Plan for Action.

The highest indicators of women representation in today's European parliaments have been achieved by those countries who apply the quota system for the political parties, such as: Sweden 45.3%; Austria 40%; Denmark 36% etc (see for instance Anastasi, *et al.*, 2006). The gender quota systems aim at ensuring at least a critical minority for women, from 20, 30, or 40%, up to guaranteeing a real gender balance of 50% men-50% women. The gender quotas certainly are a very important aspect of the quotation systems because of the fact that in all states women constitute almost 50% of the population, while their representation in decision-making remains far below that.

In a context where figures demonstrate disparities, and new approaches are introduced to address them, it is of high interest to know the success they will have. At this stage, what can be done is to see and try to measure how their potential effects are perceived and expected to be by those who are directly benefiting or encouraging such changes in particular.

Hence, this research, aims at exploring and mapping the perceptions and reasoning of active women regarding issues related to women's representation and current and future efforts in this respect, along with the role that media and civil society in particular have been playing in the arena of such endeavours.

Research Methodology

This research utilizes qualitative research methodology to address the research topic and objectives. It aims to explore the opinion of specialist and successful women who had managed to become part of the political or decision-making life, or even those who had contributed through their activities in promoting women in this sphere. Qualitative methods offer the best alternative to go deep into exploration of perceptions, attitudes, approaches and routes followed in meeting certain standards. Hence, structured in-depth interviews were employed to gather data to meet the research goal.

Ten structured interviews were conducted with women involved in politics or decision-making along with those representatives of GOs and NGOs which have been active, and have contributed in various initiatives for a broader participation of women in country's political and decision-making life. The participants were selected such that state structures, NGOs and media representatives could have their say in terms of how the situation of women in political and decision-making is perceived by each of them, how the new developments are perceived and what the expectations related to them would be, as well as the remarks for the role of each of the important actors in latest achievements in the area such as introduction of quotas and other legal provisions.

Research findings and analysis:

Perceptions and attitudes on women's participation in politics and decision making.

The general perception of all interviewees regarding the current situation of women's representation in politics and decision-making in Albania had similar colours. Although certain improvements are not to be ignored, still women's representation in both politics and decision-making remains extremely low and unsatisfactory to our interviewees. The most obvious low rates are those of the political arena. However, the interviewees were careful in spotting the low representation of women in decision-making structures as well.

"So far, women's participation in politics and decision-making has been very low. In the Albanian parliament, out of 140 only 10 parliamentarians are women. We can't be satisfied just because the speaker of the parliament is a woman, that the general prosecutor is a woman, one or two ministers or even few general directors of institutions. Even when summed up, they're still very few in comparison to what it should be."

(Academia Representative)

"Till now, without having the new electoral code in place, women's participation in politics and decision-making has been minimal. Seems like it has been enough to have few women in parliament, one minister and very few women in decision-making position within the public administration...."

(Media Representative)

According to the perceptions of the interviewees the growing trend has a very slow pace and its outcomes are far from what our society should aim. This huge gap between reality and what we expect our reality to be is even more disappointing when looking at the enormous discrepancy between women's capacities in the country and the level to which our society benefits from them.

"... Women's and girl's participation in politics and decision-making is absolutely far from high... Even though there has been a growth in women's participation in decision-making, again, this number is very small in comparison to the merits and abilities that a huge number of women possess in reality. It is still a fact that regardless of changes and improvements, the leading and decision-making role-model remains and is still perceived from a good part of the society as a men's attribute."

(NGO Representative)

"I think that women's level of participation in decision-making is very low as compared to level of education and the abilities of women and girls in Albania, the percentage of the total population they account for and the position they deserve to hold."

(NGO Representative)

To several of the interviewees the introduction of quotas will be an effective way to narrow this existing gap. However, doubts accompany these new developments especially with regards to quality. Rather than an immediate and to certain degree 'artificial' quantitative growth of women's representation, credit is given to the option of a step-by step approach which according to the interviewees will ensure that women's representation in politics and decision-making is not only a matter of numbers but also a matter of quality.

"In my opinion it is good we're starting with this quota, not going straight to 50%. This because I think that if women are catapulted in an artificial way, the result would be nothing else but women that behave like men. If they will grow gradually, naturally, they will meet the aim of why they entered politics."

(NGO Representative)

Media and Its Role

The role media had been playing lately, during the recent developments, leading to the introduction of quotas in politics and decision-making has been addressed in the qualitative part of the research. Mainly the focus was put on assessing media's role as an informative channel, an awareness raising and lobbying actor as well as a domain where women's issues in general, and particularly women in politics and decision-making could be represented at different scales.

a. The informative role

It should be pointed out that overall the research finds, a common agreement on media's informative role regarding the topic is at stake. According to the interviewees, media has been playing an important informative role. The interviewees highlight the fact that many printed and/or visual media have not been indifferent to the developments in the area of women and politics/decision-making. Various articles and programs have been dedicated to this topic, especially the ones focusing on affirmative actions, such as quotas.

This informative role is confirmed also by the data gathered from interviewees when asked about their source of information regarding new developments in the area of women and politics such as quotas. Apart from those research participants who were actively involved with NGOs, the rest confirmed to have come to know such initiatives and provisions through media alone.

b. Awareness raising and lobbying

Shared perceptions on media's role do not persist when it comes to the potential role media can play as a crucial awareness raising and lobbying actor. For some, even this component of media's role should not be underestimated. However, the majority of the interviewees see little or sometimes even a misleading role that media has been playing in this respect.

"Media had influenced in this respect, however I believe that it should have hold a much better position ... Not always the best experts have been chosen, this has led to the reinforcement of stereotypes which in fact have been a barrier for women's participation in decision - making. Of course, the cases in which the debate has been appropriately focused and led by proper experts are not to be excluded."

(NGO Representative)

The diversity in opinions depends also from the position from which the respondent stands. Generally the NGO's representatives were reluctant on the role media has been playing, looking at it more as sporadic attempts and sometimes not very professional. However, other interviewees whose main information source has been the media appreciate its role as very important in raising awareness and lobbying towards greater participation of women in politics and decision-making, even when speaking about introductory quotas.

"I think that media, in general, has played an important role in initiating the public debate regarding gender issues in general. Special programs and shows have been dedicated to this issue particularly, mainly to raise awareness among the general public opinion."

(NGO Representative)

"I believe it has played a minor role. On the contrary, in some respects, its role might have been inhibitory to the promotion of the idea for more women in politics and decision-making."

(NGO Representative)

"Media might have not played a huge role in achieving goals such as the introduction of quotas; nevertheless, it has helped dramatically in making it visible to all Albanians. For instance, media has followed and made present each step of the initiative which led to the introduction of 30% quota of women in politics..."

When referring exclusively to quotas, there is a general trend of not giving any considerable credits to the media. For some of the interviews this achievement is a result of the pressure put either by the Albanian civil society or by the international organisms. To them, media has just made present the debate when everything was already on track. Rather, media should have anticipated the debate much earlier.

"I don't think media should get any special credit; the only credit that goes to it is that of making the debate public. I got the impression that such a debate was more a fruit of the EU policy pressure. Such a quota is also implemented in many European countries; that's why I don't believe media has affected in any way this percentage."

(GO Representative)

"I think that media's work is absolutely minor as regard the quota introduction. This issue should have been raised much earlier."

(Academia Representative)

"Nonetheless, the interviewees do not categorize all media the same. They do differentiate, for instance, between different media with a national or local level coverage. It appears that local media are still lacking information and not in tune with national/central media. The recognized role of the media played so far goes more to the central, national ones.

"Media has build a positive partnership with the NGO sector, supporting legal initiatives such as the 30% quota. However, this is a consideration I have for the central Medias; meanwhile the local ones remain still less informed."

(Researcher)

c. Representation of women and their issues in media

The appreciation of media's role continues to decline when it comes to how it is contributing with the representation of women's issues in politics and decision-making as well as the promotion of those women who are already involved in this area. The interviewees share the common view that media is generally not very supportive of women's activity in politics and decision-making. According to them, media is quite hesitant in promoting women's success stories.

Generally, women get less visibility in comparison to men. This not only due to the fact that women are outnumbered many times by men when it comes to participation in politics and decision making, but also because of the lack of attention that media pays to them. One reason for this is the general gender prejudices to which even media is not immune. Another one is proposed by one of the interviewees, according to whom this is conditioned also by the fact that media are owned and /or directed mainly by men. This makes media less flexible and less open to women and issues related to them.

"I haven't noticed any special attention of media towards elected women, or even any commitment to promote those women."

(NGO Representative)

"... Media has all the possible space to represent women's activity in politics or decision-making, however, due to the fact that Albanian media is led by men makes it not flexible towards them."

(Media Representative)

"I think that media is in general skimpy in promoting women's positive models. Women occupy less space being still few in numbers. Women's electoral activity is transmitted much less than that of men."

(NGO Representative)

Regardless of the differences in opinions, or low marks given to media in being an exclusive promoter of women in politics and decision-making all participants do recognize that at least medias has been improving in term of sensitivity towards the issue and pointing more and more on the quality rather than solely on the quantity of representation.

"In many TV channels new rubrics have been introduced, having as protagonists women aiming to be part of political life or the upcoming parliament, parliamentary women, women representatives of political forces and so on..., stories of successful women in their communities have been presented in order to improve women's image aiming to reach a representation that is not just quantitative but also qualitative"

(Researcher)

The Civil Society: NGOs' Role

Slightly different from the diverging perceptions to the extend media has played an important role in the recent achievements in the area of study, the perceptions on the civil society's role in general and that of the most active NGOs is quite convergent to a positive pole. Most of the answers responding to questions on the role of the civil society in the developments promoting a greater participation of women in politics and decision-making appreciate civil society's role as one of the most important ones.

Some believe that the results achieved so far are nothing else but an outcome of the continuous pressure of the civil society. Others dedicate the achievement of introducing the quota of 30% as an achievement of the civil society. Even in those cases that such an attribution is not with this degree of exclusivity, still civil society is considered as the most important actor which has pushed directly or indirectly for better representation of women in politics and decision-making.

"I think that this is one of the achievements of the civil society and should be dedicated to its continuous work."

(NGO Representative)

"...the major part of the initiatives and steps taken in this direction have been initiated and followed to its implementation by the civil society."

(NGO Representative)

"... it was the pressure of the women's NGOs that made the approval of quota possible..."

(GO Representative)

The civil society has played a very important role also in raising the awareness of the public opinion either through media channels or campaigns, which then has contributed to the whole case. One of the interviewees brings to our attention the initiative taken by the civil society in initiating the first draft law on gender equality in the country with the support of twenty thousand citizens.

"I'm not aware of any initiative of the civil society or even an agreement that any of them has with a political party in this respect. However, I've heard several representatives of the civil society have raised this issue in the media"...

(GO Representative)

"The civil society has affected considerably because in the first law on gender equality has been signed by 20.000 Albanian citizens for its drafting, nonetheless it latter was improved and extended..."

(GO Representative)

Nevertheless, the strong appreciation on the role that the civil society has been playing in this domain is not always perceived as the best possible performance. Perceptions of those that see themselves out of the civil society have a narrower spectre regarding its role. To them, the role of the civil society has been quite important, however they see that the political and decision-making domain are less of a domain where they can best give their contributions.

"... I don't think that the civil society gets a lot of credits in this case. I think that civil society, especially women organizations, should deal more with women's participation within the household, rather than in politics. I mean that women's organizations that deal with abused women, family issues, child education etc. are more valid than that the 'non-political' organizations that deal with women in politics. I see no relevance."

(GO Representative)

Expectations

The recent developments in the area of women's participations in politics and decision-making, mainly referring to the new legislation and introduction of the quota system, are expected to have considerable impact and outcomes in the arena of politics and decision-making but also for women at large. The expectations are high among all interviewees. They range from effects in the general public opinion to concrete, increasing rates of women's participation in politics and decision-making.

However, the interviewees believe that in order to have the expectations met awareness needs to be raised at higher levels. According to them, although quota system is currently in place, little is known about it. There is a general lack of awareness in the public opinion regarding the issue. This is even more relevant in the rural areas.

"....a good part of the public opinion and even of women themselves are not aware of the fact. (meaning: quota system). It should be this part of the society with which it should be worked continuously and much more."

(Media Representative)

"(Public opinion) is not aware, especially when referring of the new, very positive steps in the new legislation. The rural population, where family voting phenomenon still exists, ignores women candidates. In urban areas one can sense a greater degree of sensibility".

(Researcher)

Yet, awareness has improved considerably if compared to the past. For this credits are given especially to the media and women's NGOs. In addition, according to the participants in this research,

that part of the public opinion which is actually up-to-date with the recent developments is believed to be positive about them. Especially the introduction of quotas system is thought to be welcomed as an immediate measure to start fixing the problem of women's under-representation in politics and decision-making.

"I think that the public opinion has welcomed the introduction of 30% quota for women in politics..."

(GO Representative)

"I think that mass media has played a huge role and the public opinion is quite aware...for the importance of women's representation..."

(NGO Representative)

On the other hand, expectations rise when it comes to concrete and directly related outcomes regarding women's rates of participation in politics and decision-making. The recent measures are expected to have immediate and thorough outcomes.

"It will bring about several changes: first of all, the human right of women to elect and be elected will be fully respected; upcoming legislation, programs and policies will take into consideration the gender perspective; interests and needs will be better addressed; and the model these women will offer for other women will be encouraging."

(NGO Representative)

"The increase of women's participation in politics and decision-making, I hope, will reduce the conflictuality which is present in the Albanian political climate and will bring to focus many social problems which need to be addressed."

(Media Representative)

"... a more democratic society, respect for human rights...development perspective and breaking down of gender stereotypes in the area..."

(Researcher)

Quota introduction with the aim of raising women's participation in politics and decision-making is also perceived as a means which will ensure steps forwards in the further democratization and integration of our country. Along with this, the interviewees claim that a guarantee for a greater participation of women in politics and decision-making is also a guarantee for better use of valid resources; thus a more efficient and effective approach in using human capital of the country.

"This will make possible an efficient use of all Albanian social capacities and we'll have more tolerance, transparency and social awareness."

(Researcher)

However, all these expectations are not unaffected from gender stereotypes and prejudice. Apparently the standards to measure women's contribution in politics and decision-making will be different and higher ones. Women are expected to be more sensitive, less corruptible, hard workers, devoted and so on.

"Not just in politics, but even in any other leading or collaborative aspect, I think that women's participation will bring greater seriousness in fulfilling the tasks. They are more tolerant, less corruptible, more systematic and demanding and they pay more attention to the slightest details. Being more sensitive women are more careful towards social problems or ways of intervention".

(GO Representative)

"It will decrease the level of conflictuality and violence in the current Albanian politics. I hope it will grow the attention on social issues and problems due to the more tender nature the women have which makes them more sensitive towards such issues."

(GO Representative)

"A huge impact! I base this on the fact that females are more sensitive towards problems which have to deal with family, community and so on."

(Academia Representative)

The impact of the recent changes regarding women's representation in politics and decision-making are expected to affect not just those women that have an interest in politics and decision-making, or these two spheres in particular. On the contrary, it is expected that women as a large group of the society will benefit in many aspects by being better represented and prioritizing their issues and problems in the main agenda.

However, it goes not end here. Other minority groups are expected to benefit indirectly. With a greater presence of women and their issues in politics and decision-making it is believed that politics in general will become more inclusive and more oriented and attentive towards minority groups and people in need.

"...not just women, an inclusive governing approach will no doubt lead to an all-inclusive policy out of which will benefit not only certain groups but the society at large."

(NGO Representative)

"In a few words, politics will become all-inclusive and more oriented towards groups in need."

(Media Representative)

In order for all these expectations to be fulfilled the interviewees stress the importance of reaching a critical mass of women in politics and decision-making. Few women are easily assimilated,

while if their position is well established and not a small minority the chances for a new culture of politics and decision-making with all the above mentioned characteristics is possible. In addition, it is important to stay with feet on the ground and not to expect immediate huge changes or miracles. This is just the beginning of an enormous work which needs to be carried further.

"Given that women's numbers in politics so far have been small, women have taken the minority position and have been obliged to suborder to the mannish situations. On the other hand, if women's numbers will increase considerably, then it would be men that would need to adapt to new situations..."

(Academia Representative)

"It is very important to work continuously with all groups with the aim of making the leading and decision-making role of women not to be seen as a favor or a faraway reality but be accepted and supported so that the situation can change in a positive way. On the other hand, it should be dealt with the expectations of the public opinion and even those of women in regards to the measurement of change which might not come in the blink of an eye."

(NGO Representative)

Best Ways to Carry the Work Forward.

Recognizing all the achievements made possible so far, participants in this research are aware that the way to the desirable final results is long and needs more efforts. The followings are the ways and approaches that they propose and believe would be the best ones to follow and implement for better and stable results in tandem with the quota system

- The implementation of the legislation and various international documents ratified by our governments;

"Measures should be taken in accordance to international obligations. These should not be just formal and superficial but real, effective ones that help women in their efforts to reconcile both their family and carrier obligations".

(NGO Representative)

- Support and encouragement of women's and girls' capacities and abilities;
- Promotion of best practices and positive models;
- Support and encouragement of those women who have succeeded to enter politics and decision-making;
- Leadership training and capacity-building of women and girls;
- Creating a stable and non-aggressive political atmosphere where women can contribute;

"Many women would have been part of the political life only if there was a bit of ethics in it!"

(Media Representative)

- Supporting women within the political parties (i.e. financial support for their campaigns, technical support, public support etc);
- Promotion of women politicians successes through media;
- Participation of women and girls in all organisative levels of the political parties so their representation in higher levels will have a sure follow-up.

Conclusions

The issue of women's representation and participation in politics and decision-making is not anymore an unknown or un-discussed issue in Albanian. Media and civil society have played a very important role in encouraging and taking the debate forward. However, acknowledging the advancement in this respect, this study also identifies that knowledge on this issue and expectations about the future remains still superficial, sometimes even among experts.

Nevertheless, experts and successful women could identify the reasons underpinning women's representation in politics and decision-making. Among the reasons for this underrepresentation are: the difficulty in combining family and other responsibilities (including those related to politics and decision-making), the aggressiveness of the political arena in Albania, and the lack of support and strong ties that women experience within political structures and out of them.

However, in the opinion of experts and women activists, the introduction of quotas along with the implementation of other measures to ensure a critical mass of women representation in politics and decision-making will help drastically in improving the situation in this respect. More women in politics and decision-making will not only help in making real the human right of women to be properly represented and be active in politics and decision-making, but will also have other positive effects. The political and decision-making atmosphere in the country will benefit from women's higher participation, as will benefit other social groups which share similar problems, or even women and the society at large from a new approach, more democratic and close to the social problems that women are expected to follow once as part of politics and decision-making.

For larger representation and participation of women in politics and decision-making, quotas are a very good step forward, but not the only one. They should be accompanied with several other measures which aim at supporting and promoting women continuously. This would help to also address one of the concerns that accompany women's participation, that of ensuring quality along the quantity. Media and civil society should continue to be important actors in this respect, as they have been acting so far (although their role might be sometimes contradicted).

Nonetheless, the enthusiasm at this stage of developments although totally justified, should be restrained. The expectations and standards, with which women's work and contribution are expected to be measured, are also prone of gender stereotypes and prejudice, even among experts and women themselves. It remains to be seen how the expected future higher rates of participation of women and their work and contribution in politics and decision-making will compare to these higher or at least different expectations and standards put for women as compared to those for men.

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