AN OPEN MIND and A HARD BACK

Conversations with African Women Leaders

Health worker in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Photo Credit: Warren Zelman
The vision guiding my priorities is one where my country and the world recognize the important role women play and accord them the necessary respect and access to facilities such as health, education, and economic empowerment in order for them to play their roles with the dignity they deserve.

- Catherine Namugala, MP in Zambia

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AMPLIFYING the VOICE of WOMEN LEADERS

An Open Mind and a Hard Back: Conversations with African Women Leaders is a summary of interviews conducted with over a dozen women leaders from Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, Mauritius, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Swaziland, Uganda, and Zambia. The interviews took place from January to March 2013 by staff from the Leadership, Management & Governance (LMG) Project, which is funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), with women leaders in sub-Saharan Africa working across the fields of government, health, law, and social reform.

This brief seeks to summarize the content of the interviews, and to provide insights on ways women lead and govern in their respective communities and countries. The interviews paint a rich and complex portrait of leadership. The women interviewed are resilient and creative as they navigate and address challenges in largely patriarchal societies to reach positions of influence.

Inviting women leaders to voice their perspectives acknowledges and celebrates their contributions in promoting gender equity. Understanding the leadership roles women play also accelerates the process of bringing about gender equality and good governance by demonstrating to both men and women the qualities that women demonstrate as leaders. As role models to younger generations, it is important to document the experiences of these women leaders to inform, educate, and inspire a critical mass of new leaders who can influence the agenda for peace, development, and prosperity in sub-Saharan Africa.

The conversations shed light on the challenges women leaders face as they rise to leadership positions in diverse cultural, social, and political settings in sub-Saharan Africa. Gender inequality continues to subordinate women in all aspects of their lives. However, even where inequality is prevalent, these women leaders have found the courage and fortitude to overcome the obstacles they face and have their voices heard. They are able to tap into resources that may not be visible but are important, and too often overlooked. It is hoped that these stories inspire other women to assert their rights as women and become champions for change.

While it is difficult to generalize the experiences of women leaders, it is possible to identify certain common obstacles and opportunities. What frustrates and facilitates women’s aspirations to become leaders is part and parcel of their experiences as girls and women. Each leader we interviewed recognized that a critical mass of women leaders is necessary to bring about change to challenge the status quo and even the playing field. They recognized the role of culture in their subordination, but were loath to condemn culture unilaterally, since they acknowledged that their identity as women is derived from this very context.

Bridging this contradiction between fulfilling their gender roles (given certain cultural expectations) and their leadership responsibilities constitutes a major dilemma for women in leadership positions. The interviews revealed that their strategies are often based on accommodation, adapting to the existing environment, and negotiation, bargaining with the existing environment for a satisfactory result, rather than confrontation as they build a foundation to create alliances for a new generation of women willing and eager to take on leadership roles.
While accommodation and negotiation are key to achieving their goals, women leaders have also been uncompromising on issues that are overt manifestations of gender oppression, such as gender-based violence. Their road to leadership has oftentimes been lonely because they are few and considered the exception rather than the rule. However, during the course of these conversations, we found poignant examples of parents, relatives, and teachers who supported and encouraged them in their aspirations.

A striking feature of the women interviewed is their optimism that the future will be easier for women who will follow them. Their hopefulness is rooted in their knowledge of the harsh realities their mothers faced. They want a brighter future for girls and young women, and they feel responsible for sharing the burden of making this future a reality.

Acknowledgements: The Leadership, Management & Governance (LMG) Project would like to sincerely thank the women interviewed for this publication. We are grateful for the time they spent sharing their stories with us and continue to be inspired by the impact of their leadership.
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Introduction: The Case for Promoting Women in Leadership Roles

There is an international support system in place to promote women in leadership roles. International mandates to increase women’s participation in leadership include the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, which affirms the following:

Women’s equal participation in decision-making is not only a demand for justice or democracy but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women’s interests to be taken into account. Without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women’s perspective at all levels of decision-making, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved.1

The Beijing Platform for Action defines two strategic objectives: to ensure women’s equal access to and full participation in all power structures and decision-making; and to increase women’s capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership.2 Similarly, Article 7 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in 1979, calls upon state parties, “…to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country.”3

Furthermore, the UN Security Council’s Resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security (adopted in 2000) reaffirms the importance of equal participation and full involvement of women in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security.

Despite these numerous calls for women’s participation and engagement globally, the public sector is an arena dominated by men. Currently there are only 19 female heads of state in the world with two of those in sub-Saharan Africa leading Malawi and Liberia. On the other hand, several African countries are seeking to substantially increase female representation in their parliaments and in other public sector leadership roles.

In light of the growing evidence championing the central role women play in a country’s development, many African governments have implemented quotas to boost the number of women parliamentarians. Access to educational opportunities for girls as also increased the pool of qualified women who enter leadership positions.

These advances have made an impact in sub-Saharan Africa, which has seen women begin to assert their political rights and claims to decision-making. Since the 1990s, for example, women’s share of seats in African parliaments has steadily increased; countries such as Angola, Burundi, Mozambique, Rwanda, South

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2 Ibid. These are the two components of Strategic Objective G.1: Take measures to ensure women’s access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making. pp. 81–4.
Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda are included among the 30 countries with the highest percentage of women in parliament in the world.  

The increased number of women in parliaments has been achieved through a combination of factors, most notably the adoption of quotas paired with shifts in policy, the involvement of women in national women’s liberation movements, and the global instruments and conventions which have persistently stressed the importance of women’s equal participation in political leadership.

The figures in the table show the percentage of women in parliament in six countries in sub-Saharan Africa. It is important to note that these countries have women’s representation of over 30 percent, the widely considered critical mass mark for women’s representation. This is an encouraging sign where efforts to achieve gender equality at all levels have been difficult and slow.

In sub-Saharan Africa overall, however, women are generally newcomers in the public sector and often are not equally respected when in leadership positions.  

The challenge goes beyond ensuring the election of larger numbers of women into the legislatures. Patriarchy, subordination of women, and the deep-rooted perception that the public domain is reserved for men and that the social contract is about the relationship between men and government and not citizens and government, come together to exclude women—notwithstanding rights guaranteed in law and the political rhetoric of good governance and participatory democracy.

Women have also been transformational leaders. According to a qualitative study of women in decision-making positions in South Africa, women make a marked difference to governance where they are represented in politics in significant numbers, and when they work in enabling environments.

The key findings of the study showed that the significant presence of women in politics combined with a range of enabling factors—background and history of struggle, living and working in a democracy, and dynamic links with civil society—had a positive impact on institutional culture, attitudes, laws, policies, and health service delivery.

In Rwanda, not only does the country have the highest proportion of women parliamentarians in the world, it also has the only parliament in the world to possess a functionally even gender split of the seats in its Chamber of Deputies.

These women representatives consider themselves to have a greater concern with grassroots politics than their male counterparts and, in terms of political agenda, women’s issues are now raised more easily and more often than before.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Quota Type</th>
<th>Results Last Election</th>
<th>Percentage of Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rwanda</td>
<td>Reserved Seats</td>
<td>45 of 80 (2008)</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>Voluntary Political Party Quotas</td>
<td>169 of 400 (2009)</td>
<td>42%</td>
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<td>Mozambique</td>
<td>Voluntary Political Party Quotas</td>
<td>98 of 250 (2009)</td>
<td>39%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tanzania</td>
<td>Reserved Seats</td>
<td>126 of 350 (2010)</td>
<td>36%</td>
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<td>Uganda</td>
<td>Reserved Seats</td>
<td>135 of 386 (2011)</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burundi</td>
<td>Reserved Seats</td>
<td>34 of 106 (2010)</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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6 Africa and the Millennium Development Goals—2013 Update, United Nations
Summary of Interviews

Interviews were conducted with over a dozen women leaders from Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, Mauritius, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Swaziland, Uganda, and Zambia in order to understand the common features that unite women leaders, what women gained or lost by aspiring to become a leader, and the ways in which women leaders contribute to peace, prosperity, social welfare, and good governance. The composite portrait of women interviewed is a glimpse into the perspectives of women in their journey to leadership. Along this journey they have faced obstacles and setbacks, but also encouragement and support. Their specific situations vary, but they have similar concerns and constraints, and have faced them with courage and determination. They cite numerous examples where it was necessary to prove themselves not only as leaders, but also as women in a more traditional sense by combining and reconciling their traditional roles with their leadership roles.

The context in each of these countries differs, so a uniform model of leadership applicable to all cannot be established. The interviews do, however, provide a basis for understanding the principles of leadership from an African woman’s perspective, and celebrate voices of African women who lead. The interviewers asked the following questions (elaborating, as needed, to guide the interview):

1. What is your background in terms of education and prior to your role in leadership?
2. What is your role in parliament or as a leader in your country or community?
3. What do you believe are the major skills and competencies required for you to be successful in your role as a leader?
4. What has helped you become a leader?
5. What are the major obstacles you have faced as a woman leader?
6. As a woman leader, have you focused significant energy on issues that affect women and children or gender issues?
7. What international conventions on gender equality, and reproductive and sexual rights have helped support your work?
8. Have you had any type of mentoring in your career as a leader?
9. What do you see as the most important attributes of a great mentor for women leaders?
10. What are your recommendations for future women leaders?

The interviews were conducted in English and French in coordination with the participants’ national language. The questions were open-ended and covered a wide range of issues; this report summarizes them in the following categories:

- Factors constraining women’s leadership
- Factors facilitating women’s rise to leadership roles
- Women leaders deliver results: focus areas for women
- Leadership skills vital for women
Factors Constraining Women’s Leadership

1. Socio-Cultural Constraints and Their Impact on the Leadership of Women

Along the journey to the position of leadership, a woman faces many obstacles. In my case these have included doubts from even the closest family and friends as to whether, as a woman, I could compete with men. Especially when aspiring to be a member of parliament, I have been discouraged every time because generally politics are rough for women. They include leaving your children for many days while you campaign and visit your constituency, the financial resources required for one to run a campaign, and of course the abuse that I have faced at the hands of male competitors who want to entrench the retrogressive view that women are better at being mothers than politicians. I have continued to remind them every time they stand against me that I can be good at both.

Catherine Namugala, MP in Zambia

The majority of women interviewed are members of parliament (MPs) and some benefited from affirmative action plans. While this has increased the number of women in leadership positions, the women we interviewed cautioned that the perception of men towards this group of women is not always positive. The respondents felt that some male parliamentarians viewed them as beneficiaries of affirmative action and not truly qualified to be leaders. There is a deep-seated resentment and sentiment from some men that that the women MPs did not earn their positions. Even the most capable women are viewed with suspicion.

Some say, “How can a woman represent us?” Even if there is no good male candidate they still ask the question. Even when they see how I am a good parliamentarian bringing about change, males are still doubtful of women leaders. No matter how bad a man is, he is still better than a woman.

Saudatu Sani, MP in Nigeria

Overall, Uganda is a patriarchal society, and there are many stereotypes about women. Women are not supposed to be leaders, and therefore the attitude towards supporting women to become leaders is not very good. This is a “NO GO” area for women, according to males. I had a male challenger whom I defeated, but it was very difficult.

Sarah Nyombi, MP in Uganda

As a woman leader, I had to face challenges pertaining to males’ attitude towards women that females are considered as second-class citizens and in whatever position we occupy, we should remain subservient.

Vidya B. Charan, executive director, Mauritius Family Planning and Welfare Association
The fact that I am a woman among men in the field of leadership is a challenge. Being a single woman, sometimes people do not take you seriously when you are serious about an issue. They disrespect you because you are a woman.

Miatta Karen Kiawu, executive director, Planned Parenthood Association of Liberia

Despite negative attitudes from some male colleagues, many of the women who benefited from a quota system now see their position in the public sector as a right rather than a given privilege. They also maintain that the lack of women in leadership positions infringes on the rights of women and does not allow them to be adequately heard and represented.

Because of the political will, we are now able to represent our constituents equally with men.

Therese Bishagara, MP in Rwanda

Women need courage to go into leadership positions and look at themselves differently than the way society looks at them.

Thandi Shongwe, MP in Swaziland

Leadership development requires self-confidence to compete more effectively with men, and the women interviewed see a correlation between self-confidence and effective leadership. Emma Boona, an MP in Uganda, cited building confidence as a major competency that young women who aspire to be leaders must develop, saying, “Communication, advocacy skills, and confidence-building skills are critical to good leadership.” More importantly, the women leaders interviewed stressed the need to change the mind-set of women to seek the support they need to develop their self-confidence and self-esteem at an early age. They find themselves continually questioning themselves while developing and nurturing their leadership skills to compensate for the lack of encouragement they have had throughout their lives.

A leader should be able to speak because people expect you to speak. We need a lot of confidence. If you lack confidence, everyone looks at you like you are inferior.

Emma Boona, MP in Uganda

Many of the leaders spoke about transforming themselves and their communities as part of this leadership journey.

As a female leader, I have continued to face challenges simply because I am a woman. Every time I stand as a candidate for parliament, the community has to be faced with the decision whether or not to continue with a woman as their MP.
Fortunately, they have shown for the last 12 years that they want a woman in spite of the many negative things said against me by male competitors.

Catherine Namugala, MP in Zambia

3. Lack of Resources

Women who have the requisite experiences, skills, and passion to run for office are often frustrated because they lack financial resources to seek leadership positions, particularly in the political sphere.

*To enter politics, you must have money.*

Saudatu Sani, MP in Nigeria

Upon taking office, women leaders also noted that they are expected to contribute the limited resources they have to the community at various occasions. Lacking support from the resource-rich networks men have access to, women are less likely to be prominent in labor unions, political parties, and other professional associations where men receive funds and resources.

For example only a few members interviewed came from a political party representing the women’s interest and were able to compete in parliament and win a seat.

4. Higher Expectations of Women Leaders

It is ironic that while women are not considered equal to men, the standards of accountability are much higher for women than for men. Respondents to our interviews were acutely aware that communities expect more from women and evaluate their work against higher standards. This scrutiny relates both to their personal and professional conduct.

They were also expected to engage with the community more frequently than men, causing women to travel to visit their constituents at regular intervals outside of the electoral season.

They are also held accountable for the community’s needs for public goods and services, and to responding to grievances.
Women are going to an area reserved for men. The community might see them as someone who is not in the right place. Women have to prove it is not a man’s area by responding to the needs of communities. We work doubly hard to show the community [that we are capable].

Emma Boona, MP in Uganda

Gains made by women are not acknowledged. Women usually face cynicism from men and women alike, even when they are a capable leader. Often when we go the community, if their complaints are not heard, they are more likely to blame us than the men in power.

Bernadette Lahai, MP in Sierra Leone

5. The Challenge of Creating Work-Life Balance

In their interviews, women leaders felt that they were characterized as child bearers and caregivers, and this was thought to be incompatible with holding a decision-making position. Women who step out of the traditional roles assigned to them are regarded as neglecting what are considered their proper roles.

The need to balance between being a mother and a leader—especially now that I have school-going children—is a problem. I am continuously reminded by those close to me that I am providing public service at the expense of my children and family.

Catherine Namugala, MP in Zambia

Women leaders expressed frustration in balancing their personal and professional lives since they are expected to undertake the bulk of domestic and child-care work, in addition to performing their responsibilities as women leaders.

The long hours in parliament are not compatible with their duties and responsibilities in the home. Many of the respondents felt that it was unfair for them to carry the burden of outside work as well as care for children and families without the help of men work timetables, places of meeting, lack of child-care provisions, working hours, travel logistics, and safety issues were cited as obstacles that must be overcome by women leaders.

You have family issues that can be a hindrance. Men can move at any time they want, but women can be impeded by their family. I cannot travel as much as a man.

Liliane Luwaga, Ministry of Health, Uganda

With work, family, and children, we are really busy. It is a challenge, but it is a challenge worth all the work.

Therese Bishagara, MP in Rwanda
Factors Facilitating Women’s Rise to Leadership Roles

1. Education

Almost all the women leaders interviewed credit their rise to leadership to the educational opportunities they were given. Each of the interviewees completed secondary school, with the majority of them having a post-secondary education. This education acted as an entry point to leadership roles, and they see it as a primary route for women who aspire to leadership positions. From their perspective, investing in female education has the highest returns for bringing women into leadership positions.

I am passionate about the need to educate women and girls and to empower them economically by making opportunities available to them. I believe that once educated, the women can look after themselves and will stay in relationships because they want to, and not because they have to.

Catherine Namugala, MP in Zambia

Education was instrumental in helping the women leaders interviewed gain legitimacy and credibility among their counterparts. For educated women, the ascent to power is easier and faster than it is for those who do not have a formal education. Interviewees noted that in many instances women without a formal education are ridiculed and looked down upon, even after they have established themselves as leaders of the community. If the language used in parliament is not their native language, women expressed greater intimidation with regard to speaking in public.

The official language in parliament is English, and therefore if you cannot communicate well, you are looked upon as being inferior.

Emma Boona, MP in Uganda

In some countries, the constitutional requirement to have a certain level of education denies women who are not educated the possibility of taking on leadership positions.

There is a constitutional requirement in Uganda that members of parliament have an advanced level of certificate. So my experience has been in midwifery. I underwent midwifery training for three years and had to have some practical experience before I was certified.

Sylvia Ssinabulya, MP in Uganda

Because they are personally aware of the difference education makes in their lives, women leaders
expressed the need to spend significant energy on extending educational opportunities for girls in their communities; they understand that education empowers women in all aspects of their lives.

Parliament was discussing the issue of extending the educational opportunities for women. The legislation read that education should be given to women, subject to money being available. This would have given an excuse not to extend educational opportunities to women for the reason that resources were not available. Women in parliament argued, and this condition was removed.

Thandi Shongwe, MP in Swaziland

While many of the parliamentarians focus on extending access to education for girls, some are also engaged in various activities and organizations designed specifically to address parity for women, such as the Forum for African Women Educationalists. Their focus on education goes beyond increasing enrollment rates to establishing a safe environment for girls in schools. Women leaders view education as a lifelong process, and many of the parliamentarians seek increased knowledge and skills for themselves. They spoke of the need to continue their education through acquiring new skills and knowledge to be relevant in their competitive environment.

Women must continuously upgrade their knowledge and fight for a cause.

Vidya B. Charan, executive director, Mauritius Family Planning and Welfare Association

A study shows that women in sub-Saharan Africa have had more opportunities to enter the education and health sectors than other sectors. The profile of the women leaders we interviewed show that these sectors attract many women who later move into leadership positions. Because of their experience has teachers, midwives, nurses, doctors, and dieticians help the women leaders to understand the needs and priorities of their communities and involve connections with the population, this group is an ideal pool for leadership positions.

2. Role Models and Networks That Support Women in Leadership

Numerous factors contributed to the rise to leadership of the women we interviewed: individual commitment, skills, passion, and compassion. Yet these were not considered to be the sole contributors that propelled women to leadership; they are insufficient to counteract many of the social and cultural constraints women face. From immediate and extended families to the community at large, women leaders credited the many people who encouraged them. They cited the support of family, friends, spouses, colleagues, and grassroots community organizations.

My mentors are the community themselves. They are the only ones who support me when I need it and criticize me when I make a mistake. And my mother always encouraged me and made sure I was educated. She was not educated but made sure that I was, and she ran a business despite her lack of education.

Thandi Shongwe, MP in Swaziland

As a student I was inspired by role models who were teachers in the schools I attended and supported me to excel.

Emma Boona, MP in Uganda

I believe the support of my husband was a very important aspect of my becoming a leader. In the contest for parliament, the district where my husband was from supported my candidacy. Being a leader is difficult without such support from the family.

Sarah Nyombi, MP in Uganda

11 Go to www.fawe.org for more information.
After my father died my uncle took care of us, and he was proactive. We were five boys and one girl, and my uncle made sure we all finished our secondary school education. He did not make an exception because I was a girl.

Saudatu Sani, MP in Nigeria

A majority of the women leaders have also been intimately associated with organizations focusing on gender equity and the empowerment of women. Persistence in seeking, receiving, and maintaining such support is essential for women leaders. Because power takes years to cultivate, many younger women have a more difficult time becoming leaders. Many initiated and continued this relationship as leaders with communities at the grassroots level. Their association with civil society served as a stepping-stone for leadership at the national level. In particular, women’s networks, whether formal or informal, are vehicles for women to access power, status, and resources, and the respondents said they are inspired by and feel accountable to these groups.

I had been the chairperson of Profemmes TWENSE HAMWE, an umbrella sector of the women’s organization, before I sought a leadership position in parliament. The community and organizations supported me. Profemmes TWENSE HAMWE helped me learn to communicate, built my leadership skills, and above all built my confidence. I had institutional mentorship, and the general society advocated for me.

Therese Bishagara, MP in Rwanda

We have extensive relations with the women’s association in Senegal, women’s networks that are fighting for women’s rights and nonviolence against women. Before the legislative election, they were mentoring us. After the election, they are helping us—how to speak, public speaking at the parliament. Sometimes, though, they are not united.

Mame Mbayame Dione, MP in Senegal

Women leaders also utilize these organizations as a powerful lobby to get their messages heard. This helps them in responding consistently to demands made by their constituents. They help create a consensus to move their agenda forward with all civil society because they have a healthy skepticism about parliament and the government’s ability or willingness to promote their agenda. Hence, they value collaboration with other organizations to achieve their objectives. They realize that they cannot work in isolation from the communities and networks to which they belong.

My work in the community shaped my professional development and led to the position I hold now, which helps me serve communities throughout Mauritius.

Vidya B. Charan, executive director, Mauritius Family Planning and Welfare Association

The ability of the women leaders interviewed to be assertive and articulate women’s concerns was shaped by their association, and sometimes by their leadership, within women’s networks. These networks provide important resources women can draw upon both before running for office and while in office by helping them think of new ways to sharpen their vision. However, at times conflicts between women’s groups and a lack of cohesiveness among these groups can erode their power base.
Leadership is not only to remain at the helm, but also to accept defeat and to overcome. Women should be transformational rather than transactional leaders, and remain innovative.

Vidya B. Charan, executive director, Mauritius Family Planning and Welfare Association

1. Women Leaders and Accountability to Communities

Women consistently spoke about their ability to advocate, lobby, mobilize, and create consensus as part of their strategy to be accountable to their communities’ need to access basic goods and services to improve their quality of life. Many respondents understand that because they identify with women on a personal level, they believe their destiny is tied to those they serve. In the tradition of their mothers and grandmothers, they see a future that will be better for their daughters and are willing to fight for it.

I pay special attention to gender matters because being blind to them is tantamount to not being a representative of the people who need to be represented the most. As a female, I decided to assume this role because I believe that issues affecting women are better presented and articulated by women, because they are also affected by the same issues. I also believe that if other women see that I can do it, they too will do it. I believe that women can be good role models for other women.

Catherine Namugala, MP in Zambia

As a representative, I am affected by all issues affecting my constituency. Girls’ education and women’s health and maternal health—this is what I focus on.

Sylvia Ssinabulya, MP in Uganda

As women leaders, they represent the needs and interests of other women and have different policy priorities from men.

Women and children are my first constituency. I have tackled war issues, social exclusion, and gender disparities, and joined parliament to fill the vacuum created by these ills.

Bernadette Lahai, MP in Sierra Leone

[My priority is] a world where no woman or young girl suffers abuse simply because of her gender. A world where no woman dies in childbirth because those in decision-making positions have not accorded women’s health the attention it deserves.

Catherine Namugala, MP in Zambia
The women leaders also draw from their own experiences growing up, lending legitimacy to what they have to say.

When I was a child, my father would take us to the village. It was exciting for children to fetch water. But the village daily life is not fun. Girls cannot go to school because they have to fetch water. So as a parliamentarian, I focus on providing water, health, and education as the major issues I lobby for.

Saudatu Sani, MP in Nigeria

2. Gender-Based Violence

Early in life as young students, teachers, midwives, nurses, and doctors, women leaders had ties to the communities they serve and had often encountered cases of gender-based violence. Those from countries with a history of conflict have witnessed gender-based violence firsthand. The women interviewed consistently speak out against gender-based violence and champion legislation to address it.

Within the civil society, I campaign for the promotion of women’s rights; fight against impunity for violent gender-based crimes, especially sexual violence; promote reproductive health by offering women quality services in our women’s health care center; advocate for peace to improve the environment for women so they can live a life without violence; and mobilize resources to support the efforts of women through the Funds for Congolese Women, which I initiated in collaboration with other women.

Julienne Lusenge, President, Women’s Solidarity for Peace and Integrated Development (Solidarité féminine pour la paix et le développement integral), Democratic Republic of Congo

Child and woman collecting water, Democratic Republic of Congo. Photo Credit: Warren Zelman
3. Women’s Health: Maternal Mortality, Reproductive Health, and Family Planning

The inconsistent progress in the reduction of maternal mortality in sub-Saharan Africa and the unmet need for family planning services have galvanized women leaders. The respondents believe that no woman should die while giving life, and they have been at the forefront of advocating for extending services for women. They view maternal mortality and lack of access to reproductive health care as a symptom of many of the social ills resulting from gender inequality.

As a woman leader and a head of an organization, I have advocated for the rights of women, especially when it has to do with safe abortion and issues such as adolescent AIDS, and holistic sexual and reproductive health and rights. I have also focused on improving access to high-quality family planning information services and facilitating attitudinal and behavioral changes in favor of improved sexual and reproductive health for young people and others—all of which determine the quality of life and well-being.

Miatta Karen Kiawu, executive director, Planned Parenthood Association of Liberia

Some districts didn’t have specific budgets for reproductive health. In parliament and in the Mama Alive Initiative, this is one of our main goals.

Ruth Nvumetta Kavuma, former MP, Uganda, chairperson, Mama Alive Initiative

Some of the women leaders have taken on other reproductive health issues, such as prevention of cervical cancer.

Because the rates of maternal mortality in Uganda were high, we felt that this was a priority for us to work on advocating and getting resources to address the issue. We formed a group and invited some male parliamentarians who joined the group, and we expanded the framework to address reproductive health, contraceptives, and obstetric emergencies. We also started addressing cervical cancer because we found that many hospital wards were filled with women who had cervical cancer. We advocated for the screening of women for cervical cancer and also advocated for the HPV vaccine to be given to women to prevent cervical cancer cases.

Sarah Nyombi, MP in Uganda

We have a caucus of women whose main priorities are maternal health. We work to promote and provide cancer screenings for breast and cervical cancer.

Emma Boona, MP in Uganda
Leadership Skills Vital for Women

A major concern for women leaders is access to leadership skills for women aspiring to go into influential roles. They had a clear sense of what competencies are required for women to enter leadership positions and compete with men. The women interviewed explained that to rise to leadership roles and then maintain them, a broad set of competencies is required. These competencies include: communication, information scanning, diverse stakeholders engagement, resource mobilization, and time management.

**Have an open mind and a hard back.**
Know your subject matter well, conduct adequate research, be hardworking. Respect comes from knowledge—so become as knowledgeable as you can. Find time, sacrifice time—make your presence felt in what you say or do. Value personal contact, learn from peers.

Bernadette Lahai, MP in Sierra Leone

**Master the different steps of working in commissions and in plenary. Be in contact with different actors in public life, especially the public; be a good communicator, understand informational tools/technologies; have confidence in yourself; engage yourself in a political party and take an active role in the life of the party; develop and reinforce your skills and capacity in diverse areas. Work with communities from the beginning, and equip yourself with resources (human, material, and financial) that permit you to accomplish your goals.**

Fatimata Legma, former MP in Burkina Faso

Women consider building their leadership skills as vital in allowing them to compete with their male counterparts. Once women are elevated to leadership positions, their struggles are not over; they must maintain leadership. Rules of engagement in the public sector are established, organized, and dominated by men, acting in their own interest and convenience.

This creates a fundamental problem for all the women leaders we interviewed: exercising leadership within the framework of patriarchal structures. Men, many of whom do not automatically support women's participation outside the home, dominate the majority of governing institutions.

As simply put by Sylvia Ssinabulya, MP in Uganda: “Men are so good at the game.”

**Women need skills in governance, legislation, and the role of establishing an adequate gender budget in making sure that resources are targeted to women and children.**
They require advocacy skills, and also confidence. This is particularly true in public speaking, where women are not very good as they are socialized differently than men.

Sarah Nyombi, MP in Uganda

**Future women leaders should know their subject matter. They should respect human dignity and remain consistent in their approach, actions, and messages, and remain accountable to their partners with whom they are working. They should have succession plans and coach others. They should create space for others and remain assertive.**

Vidya B. Charan, executive director, Mauritius Family Planning and Welfare Association

Coaching and Mentoring Is Key

Women currently in leadership positions are paving the way for a new generation of women who will, they hope, have more opportunities to move into decision-
making roles. Because this generation of women leaders felt that they often didn’t have mentors, they are keenly aware of their responsibility to provide such support for the coming generation. The interviewees expressed the belief that if leadership fails to invest in developing younger leaders, it risks losing the gains made. All of the women leaders we interviewed believed that developing the capacity of the next generation of women leaders through mentorship is an important step for sustaining the momentum they have built.

It is helpful to have mentors for the younger generation of women leaders. We have a women’s caucus where we meet girls in higher education and help them build their professional capacity as leaders. They are learning academics in schools, but they need to acquire leadership skills. I am a founding member of Forum of African Women Educationalists, and we train and mentor young people.

Therese Bishagara, MP in Rwanda

However, they caution that it is important that mentorship programs are carefully conducted:

Mentoring is a skill which women leaders have to develop. Mentors should be knowledgeable about the subject area to make sure that the messages and the education they provide to those they mentor is accurate and does not misguide them. Secondly, mentors must be committed, since it is not easy to provide mentoring to women on a continual basis.

Sarah Nyombi, MP in Uganda

The support women leaders have received has instilled the importance of supporting new leaders through mentorship and coaching networks.

Youth are a target that we should focus on. Mentoring these youth is important to get them interested in leadership positions and to groom new leaders with the skills they need.

Emma Boona, MP in Uganda

We need to share our experiences and encourage young women. Young women need to take our positions over and gain more exposure to leadership roles.

Ruth Nvumetta Kavuma, former MP, Uganda, chairperson, Mama Alive Initiative

We need to mentor young women. If we don’t mentor, we lose out on the leadership later.

Saudatu Sani, MP in Nigeria
Conclusion: The Next Generation; an Unfinished Agenda

My advice to future women leaders is to believe in themselves and not be discouraged by those who think that because they are born women, they cannot aspire to positions of leadership. I also would advise that they be humble and work with the people they represent, especially at the community level. With society’s support, women can be anything they want to be. They just need to believe in themselves.

Catherine Namugala, MP in Zambia

These interviews give voice to the recognition that women are heterogeneous and influenced by the specific ethnic, cultural, economic, geographic, and social experiences that inform the way they lead and govern. However, they often find common points in representing the interests of women and children, and in seeking fairness, justice, and equality. Women are often pragmatic and strategic in selecting issues where they can make a tangible difference; they are often those who bring issues affecting women and children into the policy arena, and hold governments accountable for improving the quality of the lives of women and children. They stand on the shoulders of women from previous generations who struggled to give them opportunities they were denied, and their experiences provide insight on how to support the next generation of women leaders. The following strategies are a composite of interviewees’ experiences and create a framework for promoting women into leadership positions.

1. Strengthen Collaboration between Men and Women to Promote Gender Equity

A major obstacle that many women in leadership positions face is that men do not automatically support women’s participation in leadership positions outside the home. This can make things more difficult for women since men dominate the majority of governing institutions in which the interviewed women leaders function.

Many of the women interviewed shared anecdotes illustrating hostile attitudes towards women leaders from their male counterparts. Some interviewees addressed this obstacle through creating alliances with...
male counterparts in support of women's initiatives and movements that promote greater equality. By working side-by-side on issues of common concern, men and women can decrease the gender divide.

As more women ascend leadership roles and demonstrate their capacity to lead, unfavorable views of women in decision-making roles often decrease, and gender becomes less of a challenge. In addition, programs that increase men's awareness of the positive gains that can be achieved by putting women in leadership roles can accelerate positive change. Women leaders should also encourage men's participation in alliances that champion issues related to women and children. Having men and women collaborate across all realms of decision-making can help ensure the emergence of governance structures that are more inclusive, democratic, transparent, and responsive to the needs of communities.

2. Provide a Forum for Increased Involvement in the Global Movement for Change

The interviews showed how women leaders in sub-Saharan Africa are an integral part of the global movement for gender equality. They have benefited from the principles of global mandates and frameworks for gender equity by utilizing international agreements that frame their debates and provide justifications for their work. Referring to these global frameworks, they are quick to point out the relevancy of CEDAW, the Maputo Plan of Action, the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), and the MDGs to hold their governments accountable for the promises they have made but are reluctant to keep.

The interviewees’ work on maternal and child health and gender equality refers to these instruments to offer support, but there are limitations to the extent to which these are deemed successful. The post-MDG agenda provides another mechanism to involve women leaders to define and own new goals which are linked to empowering women and girls in their countries. Including women leaders from sub-Saharan Africa in these efforts will allow them to hold meaningful positions and create powerful alliances with global movements.

3. Invest in Early Support for Young Girl Leaders

During the interviews with the women, many described leadership as a lifelong journey that begins early in life. As a skill that starts to form in childhood, the interviewees expressed the pivotal effect of the early support and education they received. However, support of a girl’s education is often the exception, not the rule, in sub-Saharan Africa.

Through socialization processes in the home and in schools, young girls must be valued and encouraged to become leaders. Efforts which seek to achieve parity in school enrollment must be accompanied by programs that cultivate leadership skills in young girls to encourage them into decision-making roles.

4. Role Models and Mentors Matter

Role models play an important role in inspiring and encouraging women to take on leadership roles. In the interviews, women leaders expressed the importance of mentors and role models on their journey into leadership positions. Not only did the interviewees learn important skills from their mentors, but they could relate to someone with a similar story, and were encouraged by knowing that the challenges they faced could be overcome. The support these women received demonstrates the importance of supporting new leaders through mentorship and coaching networks.

Women mentors can often demonstrate specific actions and behaviors that address gender-specific challenges, and help break down stereotypes about women in leadership roles. The interviewees called for greater mentoring of aspiring women leaders, and were passionate about the creation of a strong mentorship network to support young women. Mentoring was seen as a way to capitalize on the gains made by current women leaders. Mentors can serve as positive role models for young women in sub-Saharan Africa, and help develop the capacity of the next generation of women leaders.
Appendix 1: Women Interviewed

Therese Kagoyire Bishagara
Therese Kagoyire Bishagara is a senator in the Republic of Rwanda Parliament. She serves as chairperson of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs, Human Rights, and Petitions. In addition, she is also the Chairperson of Parliamentary Friendship Group on Americans and Rwanda, and Focal Point of InterParliament Union (IPU). She is a member of the Forum of Rwandan Women Parliamentarians and the Rwanda Parliamentarians’ Network on Population and Development.

Bishagara has strong experience in leadership as she served as the Head of the Kigali Health Institute and worked with various institutions at both national and international agencies, principally in developing policies and implementing programs around education, health, orphans and vulnerable children, gender-based violence, and peace and reconciliation. She has been Chairperson of Profemmes TWES TWESE HAMWE, an NGO with Consultative Status with Economic and Social Council of United Nations that is an umbrella organization of 55 women associations involved in promoting gender equality, peace, and economic empowerment of women.

Emma Boona, Uganda
Emma Boona is a parliamentarian of the Mbarara District in Uganda. She has a Bachelors of Arts from Makerere University and a Masters in Education, Planning & Management from Mbarara University of Science and Technology. Prior to joining parliament, Boona served as Vice Chairman of Mbarara District and Deputy Mayor of Mbarara Municipality. Boona was Head Teacher at the Mbarara School System and has taught at numerous schools in Uganda. Currently she is a member of the Committee on Finance, Planning, and Economic Development, and a member of the Public Accounts Committee.

Vidya B. Charan
Vidya B. Charan is the executive director of the Mauritius Family Planning and Welfare Association (MFPWA). She has served in this position since 2007 and prior was the Acting Director of MFPWA. In this role, Charan is responsible for overall programme conceptualization, implementation, supervision and coordination of all the services and strategic planning. Before joining MFPWA, Charan led the implementation of a Women and Development Community Project for the Agence Intergouvernementale de La Francophonie.

Charan served the local authorities as Member and Chairperson of the Village Council of Mared’Albert between 1988-2005 and is currently the Chairperson of ACEMAAR. Charan received her diploma in Development Studies and her Masters Degree in Social Development from the University of Mauritius. She has received an Award Certificate from the Ministry of Local Government for community work for youth and women affairs.
Mame Mbayame Gueye Dione

Dr. Mame Mbayame Gueye Dione, chief of the child survival bureau from June 2003 to December 2010 and chief of the food and nutrition department of the Ministry of Health from December 2010 to August 2012, is a parliamentarian with nine years’ experience in the field of nutrition. Previously, Dione used to give mass media communication training in the field of nutrition in Senegal and additional West African Countries.

Dione is a member of the Senegalese Women Doctors Association which provides free health care to Senegalese people and is involved in other philanthropic actions such as refugee sanitation during conflicts and working with vulnerable children. She joined a political party “Mouvement de la Réforme pour le Développement Social” (MRDS) at its inception in November 2000 and is currently responsible for its women’s national commission. Through this political party, Dione ran in all elections which occurred from 2002 to 2012. From 2002 to 2007, she was a member of the “Dakar Regional Council” one of the most important local collectives at a regional level.

During the legislative elections of 2007, she was at the third position of the MRDS list but only the President of MRDS was elected as a parliamentarian. In 2012, with the enactment of the parity law, MRDS was able to have two parliamentarians and Dione was elected. In Parliament, Dione is engaged in health and nutrition issues including anti-tobacco activities, maternal and child mortality, immunization, breastfeeding, and reproductive health improvement.

Ruth Nvumetta Kavuma

Honorable Ruth Nvumetta Kavuma is a Ugandan and married with four children. She is a former Member of Parliament (2001-2011) representing the people of Kalangala District, Ssesse Islands on Lake Victoria.

Hon. Kavuma was the first Ugandan headmistress of one of Uganda’s premier secondary schools for girls, Gayaza High School, from the 1980’s into the 1990’s. At that time, she noticed that the Millennium Development Goals were being established and one of them was “Universal Primary Education” (UPE). Concurrent with her thought patterns, were several women Ministers’ of Education thinking the same thing: UPE didn’t have a chance at succeeding unless the girl child was uplifted at the same time. Out of the eventual dialogue came the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) in 1997 which has focused on creating bursaries for girls at the secondary level. To date, 40,215 girls have benefited from FAWE. Hon. Kavuma also has served on a team that initiated the Female Scholarship Initiative (FSI) at Makerere University funded by Carnegie Foundation in 2000.

Her endless energy has led her to band with a couple of other ladies in parliament to establish a small non-profit (RESS) Reactivate Elevate Support Sustain Community Initiatives with a focus on education (especially young girls), community development, women’s leadership, and women’s health. Hon. Kavuma is a mentor for girls in science, mathematics, leadership and politics, the founder Jjaja Ruth Child Care Centre, and a member of the Steering Committee of the African Women Leadership Network (AWLN) for reproductive health and family planning. She also serves as a member of the Network of Women Ministers and Parliamentarians (NAWMP), focusing on reproductive health, maternal health, and family planning and is a member of the Board of Biotechnology and Biosafety Committee.
Miatta Karen Kiawu

Miatta Karen Kiawu is the Executive Director at the Planned Parenthood Association of Liberia. She joined the association in 2004 as the Finance and Administration Manager. As the Executive Director, she manages and leads the association towards meeting its vision and mission. Kiawu is the Treasurer for the Association of Chief Executives of the Members Associations of the IPPF, Africa Region. She was also the Chairperson of the Board of Directors of The New African Research Development Agency in Liberia and a member of the Advisory Board of Plan Liberia. She is a Member of the Board of Trustee of the Bethel Cathedral of Hope, a Member Church of the Bethel World Outreach Ministries International. She also has 15 years’ of experience as a Bank Teller then an Authorized Signer/Cash Officer at the Agricultural and Cooperative Development Bank in Liberia. Kiawu holds a Bachelor of Business Administration Degree in Accounting and a Masters of Arts Degree in Economic Policy Management, a program sponsor by the African Capacity Building Foundation.

Bernadette Lahai

Hon. Dr. Bernadette Lahai is the Minority Leader of the Sierra Leone Parliament. Lahai holds a PhD in agricultural extension and rural development from the University of Reading, an Msc in agriculture from Njala University, and a postgraduate diploma in education and BA in geography and rural sociology from Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone. She has worked as a research assistant and research officer at the Njala Agricultural Research Centre in the gender and socioeconomic division. Her research examined the gender and social dimensions of the technologies developed. She later worked as a national consultant for the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and as a social and gender expert for the Sierra Leone Vision 2025. In 2002, Lahai entered parliament and chaired the committee of agriculture, forestry, and food security. Currently, she is a member of the pan-African parliament and chairs the committee for energy, transport, information and communication technology, science and technology, and infrastructure.

Fatimata Legma

Fatimata Legma is a health adviser and holds a diploma in Nursing and a degree in Public Health from the University of Coutonou, Benin. She also holds a Master’s Certificate in Management from Columbia University, NY. Legma has headed Medical and Public Health Departments in Universities and Health Centres from 1978 -2002. Legma is a former Member of Parliament and Deputy Mayor. She has served as a Governor in the Central North and Stunts (Waterfalls) regions of Burkina Faso from 2004 - 2009. She brings technical expertise to the discussion on African women’s sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Julienne Lusenge

Julienne Lusenge is a native of Eastern Congo and a staunch fighter for justice, peace, and human rights and a fervent women rights activist. In 2001, Lusenge became the President of the Board of Directors and co-founder of SOFEPADI (Women's Solidarity for Peace and Integrated Development), an NGO that promotes women’s and girls’ rights in Beni (North-Kivu) and in Bunia. Since 2003, SOFEPADI has focused more specifically on sexual violence and socio-cultural crimes providing comprehensive, support to women victims of sexual violence and promote their access to justice.
Lusenge is a special advisor to the Nobel Women’s Initiative’s STOP RAPE campaign and she leads the campaign’s implementation in the DRC. She is Vice President of the DRC chapter of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom and she coordinates the Congolese Women’s National Campaign against Sexual Acts of Violence, created in November 2007 in Montreal. This led to the launch of the Fonds pour les Femmes Congolaises, or Congolese Women’s Fund, in July 2010, where Lusenge is the director. The fund mobilises resources to support grass roots women’s organisations and enables their collective action to make a real and visible impact in Eastern Congo.

Lusenge has also been central to raising international awareness of the staggeringly high rates of sexual violence in DRC. She has testified at the United Nations Security Council and led a delegation of women from Eastern Congo to advocate with the government to protect their rights and to find a political solution to the conflict, and attended the Human Rights Council where she advocated for the creation of a Special Rapporteur on the DRC. Lusenge is the recipient of the Knight of the Legion of Honour by the French government.

Lilane Christine Luwaga

Lilane Luwaga is a senior Health Promotion Specialist at the Ministry of Health in Uganda. As a health promotion specialist, Luwaga leads advocacy and partnership building for health promotion activities. Luwaga trains and supervises public health and community health promotion students at multiple national institutions. Luwaga has substantial experience in planning and implementing health promotion strategies in Uganda. She has both national and international exposure to Health Promotion.

Catherine Namugala

Catherine Namugala is a member of parliament for the Mafinga Constituency in Zambia. She is the former Minister of Tourism, Environment, and Natural Resources. Previously she served as the deputy minister of foreign affairs, and the deputy minister for community development and social services. In 2010, Namugala was awarded the African Tourism Minister of the Year Award. She has advocated for more awareness of climate changes effect on subsistence farmers.

Sarah Nyombi

Sarah Nyombi is a member of Parliament for the Ntenjeru North Constituency in Uganda. Nyombi is a trained midwife and an experienced women’s health advocate. In parliament, Nyombi has worked with Reproductive Health Uganda to advocate for the government to increase expenditures on reproductive health supplies, particularly family planning supplies.
Saudatu Sani

Hon. Sani is the CEO of Nigerian Parliamentary Advocates for Population and Development. She was also named one of 100 most inspiring people delivering for women and girls. Following this, she was further singled out for an additional honor as one of the seven women who have redefined, revolutionized and reawakened the spirit of women in politics. Sani convinced the Nigerian government that investing in women pays. She led the fight to make women’s health a priority, and inspired the government to create a budget line dedicated to “reducing the maternal mortality rate,” a critical first step in increasing funding. She opened a Youth and Women Development Centre, which trained many of its students to open their own businesses. And as chair of Advocacy Nigeria, she works to expand free emergency obstetric care and fund reproductive health services.

Thandi Faith Shongwe

Senator Thandi Faith Shongwe is a Senator in the Kingdom of Swaziland where she is the Chairperson of the Portfolio Committee of the Justice and Constitutional Affairs Ministry. Shongwe is trained as a medical and surgical nurse and has worked in the area of sexual and reproductive health for several years alongside the Family Life Association of Swaziland. She has over the years intensified her work around improving maternal health and particularly in advocacy for reproductive health commodity security. Senator Shongwe served as Minister for Tourism, Environment, and Communication in the Kingdom of Swaziland, between 2003–2008. Since 2008 she has served as a Senator in the 9th Parliament in the Kingdom of Swaziland. Shongwe has in the past worked keenly on issues surrounding organizations orphans and vulnerable children in Swaziland. Her work resulted to the development of the framework of the programme for orphans and vulnerable children (OVCs). She has also keenly engaged in education for girl’s campaign and was one of founding members of FAWE Swaziland (FAWESWA) and the first FAWESWA National Coordinator.

Sylvia Ssinabulya

Hon. Sylvia Ssinabulya is a Member of Parliament for Mityana district, Uganda and chairperson of the Network of Women Ministers and Parliamentarians, a Network that advocates for women’s reproductive health and family planning. In December 2006, she introduced new maternal care legislation, which makes registration of maternal deaths compulsory, with the aim of targeting remedial action, such as establishing blood banks or obstetrical care, where it is most needed. She also initiated new legislation in Uganda to get maternal care on Uganda’s budget for the first time.

Hon. Ssinabulya has been featured in among others, a film documentary entitled ‘Saving Mothers; A Labour of Love’, produced by Denise Lodge of 100 Huntley Street, Canada’s longest running daily talk show. Hon. Ssinabulya firmly believes that African women’s access to contraceptives is not an issue of morality but rather of survival. She is currently serving as the Chairperson of the Network of African Ministers and Parliamentarians, NAWMP- Uganda Chapter. NAWMP was instrumental in ensuring that part of the loan obtained from the World Bank was specifically allocated to Family Planning and Reproductive Health commodities and supplies. She has served in parliament for 15 years.
The Leadership, Management & Governance (LMG) Project (2011-2016) is collaborating with health leaders, managers and policy-makers at all levels to show that investments in leadership, management, and governance lead to stronger health systems and improved health. The LMG Project embraces the principles of country ownership, gender equity, and evidence-driven approaches. Emphasis is also placed on good governance in the health sector – the ultimate commitment to improving service delivery, and fostering sustainability through accountability, engagement, transparency, and stewardship. Led by Management Sciences for Health (MSH), the LMG consortium includes the African Medical and Research Foundation (AMREF); International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF); Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health (JHSPH); Medic Mobile; and Yale University Global Health Leadership Institute (GHLI).