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# WOMEN'S WORLD

WOMEN AND ELECTIONS  
IN EAST AFRICA



Women's  
International  
Peace Centre

Amplifying Women's Voice and Power

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## WOMEN AND ELECTIONS IN EAST AFRICA



## Writers



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**Christella Niyonzima** is a Transitional Justice and Peacebuilding Practitioner with gender as transversal expertise and a Researcher on topics related to fragile peace contexts. She has initiated and led various research projects for diverse structures engaged in the field of post-conflict reconstruction the Women, Peace and Security agenda. Among other publications, she is the author of the article “From disarmament to reintegration of former combatants in Burundi- An analysis through a gender lens “, published in *Conjonctures de l’Afrique centrale* 2020; and co-author of “Gender and Transitional Justice in Burundi: between sex-specific roles, hierarchies & dynamics”.

A political scientist and internationalist by training, Christella also holds, since 2016, a Master’s degree in Peace and Governance from Africa University of Zimbabwe. In her research and community projects, she favours participatory and community approaches, placing at the centre of her analyses the perceptions and experiences of the populations affected by the issues explored. She regularly shares her expertise and research findings in various forums and platforms on the African continent and outside the continent.

**Perry Aritua** is a Lawyer, Women's Rights Activist and Executive Director of the Women's Democracy Network-Uganda Chapter. Perry currently serves on the board of Uganda Women's Network where she represents the Uganda Association of Women Lawyers (FIDA-U) and serves as the Vice-Chairperson of UWONET. Between May 2015-2017, Perry served on the board of Action for Development (ACFODE) as the Treasurer. Through her work at Women's Democracy Network-Uganda Chapter, Perry has gotten women elected to Parliament and local councils in Uganda. Perry has worked with women leagues of political parties in Uganda to develop strategic plans to guide their work, development of Constitutions for women leagues and communication strategies. As a result of her work, Perry has received awards from political parties like Forum for Democratic Change for her consistency in enhancing the women's league.

Perry has empowered women outside politics who aspire for leadership in associations like the Uganda National Teachers Union (UNATU) and increased the numbers of women elected into the association's leadership. Perry through WDN-U has supported the formation of women organizations like the Women in Politics Forum in Nigeria which currently pursues similar objectives to WDN-U-increasing the numbers and effectiveness of women in politics in Nigeria. Perry has monitored elections within and outside Uganda to ensure that the issues that affect women's participation in elections are documented and voiced. Perry is a strong advocate for women's rights and gender equality and good governance in Uganda.

**Pauline Kahuubire** is an enthusiast of social justice and is an advocate of women and girls' rights to exercise their voice, bodily autonomy and choice and enjoy their sexual and reproductive freedoms. Pauline's heart also beats for a world in which poverty and oppression of African women are alleviated and where they live in peace. She is a feminist and budding activist who uses online media to demand that the rights of all women and girls are recognized and respected. She is the Communications Officer at the Women's Situation Room (WSR) Uganda.

**Dechy Chinyabuuma** is a humanitarian and development actor who has worked with several international NGOs including Render Effective Aid to Children, SOS Children's Villages International, Uplift A Child International, Cambridge Education, World Vision International, Transcultural Psychosocial Organization and Women's International Peace Centre working for the cause of vulnerable people including women and children affected by the conflict.

Dechy has a long experience in children protection and rights defence as enacted by international, regional and national legal instruments such as the International Convention on Child's Rights, the African Charter on the Human's Rights, the United Nations resolutions on the worst form of child labour, the constitution and penal code of the Democratic Republic of Congo. His expertise in the prevention of abuse, sexual violence in schools and the community is well established given his background.

Since April 2021, women's leadership and political participation have been his focus as he is coordinating the Women's International Peace Centre Programme in the Democratic Republic of Congo in partnership with Cordaid.

# Letter To Our Readers

Dear Reader,

Welcome to this 52nd edition of Women's World. In this edition, we reflect on what the elections held in 2020 and 2021 in Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda mean for women in these post-conflict contexts where elections are a critical part of peace building. We invite you to appreciate the perspectives and experiences of women as voters, candidates, political leaders, advocates for peaceful elections and key players in all electoral processes.

Women from Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda share their thoughts and findings on the situation of women's current and prospective participation in political and peace processes associated with elections. This Women's World challenges patriarchal norms and the practice of relegating women's position and contributions to the private sphere, excluding them from deliberative dialogues in political and decision-making spaces across electoral processes.

In Women's Political Participation in Elections in Burundi: a Structural Window Dressing Christella Niyonzima traces the journey of women's role in elections to the Arusha peace process where women's leadership role was clear. She reflects on the impact of the positive legal framework and women's representation on the situation of women and their ability to participate in violence-free elections.

Perry Aritua in Women and Elections in Uganda: Opportunities and Constraints explains how despite the progress made in advancing women's participation in electoral processes in Uganda, challenges of discrimination and marginalisation remain. She reflects on legal frameworks, research findings and the practices of key state and non-state electoral stakeholders that are critical to ensuring diverse women's meaningful participation in electoral processes in Uganda. In her article Filling the Gap: A women-led mechanism promoting peace during the 2021 Ugandan elections, Pauline Kahuubire uses the experience of Women's Situation Room (WSR) Uganda 2021 to highlight the ways women worked with youth across the country to promote peaceful elections. Finally, Dechy Chinyabuuma writes on women's participation in elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

I am pleased to invite you to read and share this 52nd edition of Women's World.

In solidarity,

Helen Kezie-Nwoha  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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## Acronyms

<b>CEDAW</b>	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
<b>CNDD-FDD</b>	Conseil National pour la Défense de la Démocratie-Forces de Défense de la Démocratie
<b>DRC</b>	Democratic Republic of Congo
<b>EC</b>	Electoral Commission
<b>UNSCR 1325</b>	United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325
<b>WDG</b>	Women's Democracy Group
<b>WSR</b>	Women's Situation Room

# Introduction

**There has been a slow increase in women's representation in national parliaments from 13.1 per cent in 2000 to 24.9 per cent in 2020 (UN Women).**

Elections are a key ingredient of democratic governance and women's political participation is a necessary prerequisite for any truly democratic process. They not only determine the dynamics and distribution of political power but also the nature of institutions that shape the political and economic trajectory of a society. The discipline of acquiring power through an election is assumed to make government accountable to citizens, and thereby to confer legitimacy. In the absence of women's full and equal participation as voters, political candidates, critical actors in electoral processes and in elected office, governments cannot claim to be fully accountable to citizens. Women's leadership and participation is expected to take many forms including active participation in the activities of political parties. Women should be seen attending public meetings and campaigns, mobilising others, drafting policies, advocating and taking part in their implementation, among other actions.

In 2020/2021 a number of African countries held general elections including Uganda, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo. These like many African countries have domesticated provisions of international and regional frameworks on women's participation in electoral processes including the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The Beijing Platform for Action also set governments on course to address the barriers to women's participation in political decision-making.

Nevertheless, 26 years since the Beijing conference and 10 years since the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 66/130 on women and political participation women are still underrepresented across all levels of power. This implies that the marginalisation of women, their concerns and needs continues in the defining and implementation of national policies and programmes.

There has been a slow increase in women's representation in national parliaments from 13.1 per cent in 2000 to 24.9 per cent in 2020 (UN Women). Burundi, DRC and Uganda all hold specifically reserved seats for women in parliament. These reserved seats allow these countries to hold a fair percentage of women members in parliament, such as Burundi (38.21%), Uganda (32.89%) and DRC at (12.8%) .

The importance of ensuring women are equally and meaningfully represented in elections, in key decision-making spaces, political processes and structures cannot be overstated. Through the cases of Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda, we explore the status, constraints and opportunities for women's political participation, offering important insights for advancing women's roles and influence in shaping their societies and their countries' governance.

# Burundi



**This article, therefore, sets out to analyse the 2020 electoral process by assessing the implementation of the electoral process from upstream to downstream.**

# Women's Political Participation in Elections in Burundi

## Transformation or Window Dressing?



Christella Niyonzima

### Introduction

The right to vote for women in Burundi dates back to 1961 when the first elections were held before the country's independence. These elections were won by Union pour le Progrès Nationale, (UPRONA) party, and the women's vote contributed immensely. However, studies on women's rights in Burundi show that women's right to vote and to be elected has not evolved sufficiently over the years due to fundamental cultural and structural obstacles. These reasons have also kept pace with the repudiation of the principles of governance and democracy characterised by the authoritarian regimes that existed over decades, which constrained the advancement of women's right to political participation.

Notwithstanding, the 2000 Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement for Burundi laid the foundation for women's inclusion in decision-making bodies. This followed women urging the negotiating parties to guarantee women's representation at a 30 per cent minimum in the executive, legislative and judiciary branches of government, along with all the bodies created by the peace agreement. However, this was not incorporated (the 30%) in the peace agreement, but in 2001, after intense advocacy and awareness-raising on women's political rights. The calls by women

for guaranteed representation in decision-making bodies were eventually accepted and incorporated into the post-transitional Constitution.<sup>3</sup>

The facilitators of the Arusha peace talks and the protagonists had agreed on the relevance of ensuring that the gender dimension and affirmative action were taken into account in the search for lasting peace<sup>4</sup>. Informed by the fact that gender equality is a fundamental principle of social justice and a conducive condition for development and stability, the inclusion of women was eventually standardised by including quotas for women's representation in Burundi's 2005 and 2018 Constitutions. These measures were meant to rectify the inequalities long established in post-independence Burundi.

A few months after the Arusha Agreement was signed, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1325, reinforcing the need to take into account women's involvement in conflict resolution and post-conflict recovery. Indeed, UNSCR 1325 came to strengthen women's advocacy efforts and achievements at that time. Fast-forward twenty years to 2020 when Burundi held its third post-Arusha elections.

3. Åshild, Falch (May 2010). Women's Political Participation and Influence in Post Conflict Burundi and Nepal. A Paper. Peace Research Institute Oslo

4. Euphrase M., 2011, 6

The last 20 years have therefore reflected the emergence of new ideas, which have undoubtedly shaken up the traditional conception of the relationship between women and power. Long marginalized in the high decision-making circles and limited in number to the strict minimum, the new rules of power-sharing introduced over the past two decades ushered women's leadership into a new era. While the right to vote is perceived as essential by a good number of observers, the impact of the 2015 political crisis in Burundi caused a sharp decline in the exercise of this right by women. The reappearance of political violence and the strong militarization of society did not leave enough space for the agency of women who culturally do not participate in war.

**After 15 years of the establishment of 30 per cent quotas, it is legitimate to question the impact it has had looking at how women themselves perceive their right to vote and to be elected.**

Best practices and lessons learned over the years have not been pragmatically consolidated and protected, and therefore the rightful place for women in decision-making has gradually disappeared. The 2015 political crisis weakened general governance and democratic achievements and eroded women's right to political participation including for women to run as candidates in the 2020 elections. All of this took place in a shrunken civic space brought about by the ruling party's radicalism, in a highly militarised environment. After 15 years of the establishment of 30 per cent quotas, it is legitimate to question the impact it has had looking at how women themselves perceive their right to vote and to be elected.

This article, therefore, sets out to analyse the 2020 electoral process by assessing the implementation of the electoral process from upstream to downstream. It identifies the perceptions of women concerning the process through two research questions: Is women's political participation in the electoral process perceived, by women themselves, as a cardinal right in Burundi? Is the 30 per cent quota system imposed by the basic law considered to serve the interests of women in decision-making?

## The legal framework and the electoral processes

### Women's concerns

For the first time in the history of Burundi, the ruling party, Conseil National pour la Défense de la Démocratie-Forces de Défense de la Démocratie (CNDD-FDD), raised funds for the activities needed to implement the 2020 elections.<sup>5</sup> This was presented as a unique achievement and great pride of the party. While the ruling party was concerned with the availability of funds for the elections, the women interviewed in the framework of this article were worried about the legitimacy of the elections due to the weak respect for the legal framework and elections standards. Due to the prevention measures put in place to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, international travel was curtailed hence the presence of an international monitoring body for the elections was not possible. The absence of independent monitors and observers had an impact on the credibility of the elections. While all the categories of citizens and actors were affected by the COVID-19 situation, the political participation of the vulnerable, like women, was highly affected. This was compounded by continuously growing gaps in the application of the legal framework, with regards to women's participation in the electoral process.

**For years and over the series of electoral processes that have taken place in Burundi, campaigns have typically been periods of tension and insecurity.**

The call for elections was made by the late President Pierre Nkurunziza under Decree n°100 / 030 of February 20, 2020, and the announcement of the three weeks of a campaign under Decree n°100 / 057 of April 25, 2020. On 20th May 2020, millions of Burundians went to vote for the new members of the National Assembly and the communal councils and to elect a new President of the Republic.<sup>6</sup>

For years and over the series of electoral processes that have taken place in Burundi, campaigns have typically been periods of tension and insecurity. These periods saw intense mobilization activities of supporters and potential voters throughout the country. Convinced of the existence of electoral mobility, political parties and independent candidates mobilised and sold different programmes to their potential voters.<sup>7</sup> It was, in fact, a turning point for Burundian political life because it mobilised active and non-active members of parties where each political party sought to gain or keep power. This phenomenon was reinforced by the fact that Burundian political parties are not for the most part mass movements and often lack stable basic structures, and are strongly aligned or determined by active militants.

Unlike the previous elections organised based on the provisions in the 2005 Constitution, which was rooted in the founding principles of Burundian

5. Speech by President Pierre Nkurunziza in Muramvya during the CNDD-FDD Party election campaign

6. <https://www.ceniburundi.bi/2020/02/20/decret-n-100-057-du-25-avril-2020-portant-ouverture-et-cloture-de-la-campagne-electorale-pour-les-elections-du-president-de-la-republique-des-deputes-et-des-conseillers-communaux-du-20-mai-2020/>,

7. Bruno C & Anne J, 2007.

**One woman interviewed for this article asserted, “We believe that the representation of women is threatened because the break with the principle of the Arusha Accord will enshrine the return to force in the political arena. We will therefore be gradually excluded”<sup>9</sup>**

unity enshrined in the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement, the 2020 elections were held under a new electoral law. The new 2018 Constitution had subsequently led to the revision of the electoral code by the law organic n° 1/11 of 20 May 2020, and the law on the organisation of the municipal administration by the law organic n°1 / 4 of February 19, 2020, to adapt them to the new fundamental legal standards in force. This legal context was described as not very reassuring for women because for most Burundians, the new Constitution marked a break with the spirit of Arusha and the resulting “consociativism”.<sup>8</sup> One woman interviewed for this article asserted, “We believe that the representation of women is threatened because the break with the principle of the Arusha Accord will enshrine the return to force in the political arena. We will therefore be gradually excluded”.<sup>9</sup>

Opinions of women converge on the uncertainty of their future in elected office if quotas were no longer an obligation. “The right to vote is a real and effective right in Burundi, but the right to be elected is only a deception, women are protected by the law without which we will surely be forgotten on the sidelines.”<sup>10</sup> For women, the growth



in numbers in institutions such as the National Assembly and Communal Councils does not stem from changing attitudes among men but rather from enforcing the affirmative provisions in the law. Indeed, the electoral code requires political parties to include at least one woman out of three candidates. “Without the backing of the law, other minorities have nothing to envy us. However, we must recognize that the Government of Burundi is sparing no effort to advance our cause. In the electoral code,

8. Vendergiste, S. 2016

9. Interview with respondent, July 2020, Bujumbura

10. Interview with respondent, July 2020, Bujumbura



it is permissible for a woman to be elected with the circumspection of her husband without taking into account the 5 years of residence required for a man.”<sup>11</sup>

Article 125, paragraph ‘e’ of the electoral code that is intended to strengthen the representation of women, accepts the candidacy of wives of natives or nationals of a place. It is an affirmative action measure, which is seen as an entry point to accelerate

change. However, activists understand this measure in a very negative sense. “This article reinforces the position of strength of the man over the woman because she can only be elected if she is very actively supported by her husband. It will also depend on the position and influence of the husband within the party. The proof is that this provision mainly benefits the wives of the army generals.”<sup>12</sup>

**Article 125, paragraph ‘e’ of the electoral code that is intended to strengthen the representation of women, accepts the candidacy of wives of natives or nationals of a place. It is an affirmative action measure, which is seen as an entry point to accelerate change.**

Given the results from the élections collinaires (county representatives’ elections), the concerns of women about the risks of a legal vacuum protecting women were well-founded. Indeed, the law does not provide for quotas for the county/colline councils elections. According to the executive secretary of Association Burundaise des Elus Locaux (ABELO, an association of local elected representatives, the great impact is on the numerical fall in the representation of women.<sup>13</sup> A study carried out by this association shows that women are under-represented at the colline/county level, with less than 10 per cent of women elected as chiefs, and in certain areas less than 5 per cent.<sup>14</sup>

11. Interview with respondent, July 2020, Bujumbura

12. Interview with respondent

13. ABELO is a representative body of all 119 Burundian communes.

14. Interview with respondent July 2020, Bujumbura

## The electoral process and violence Challenges for women's participation

The 2020 elections were held in a very special context in the sense that they were the first elections organised after the post-election crisis, which erupted in 2015 following a contested third mandate of President Nkurunziza. According to Gerard Birantamije, a political scientist and researcher, the electoral process took place behind closed doors, in a country that was almost isolated internationally and whose credibility in the media was undermined by a conflict that persists. Furthermore, the elections took place in a country that was less and less scrutinised and in a climate of monopolisation of public space by the authorities and political intolerance towards political competitors in action.<sup>15</sup> The electoral process, therefore, took place in a context of buoyant tension between members of the CNDD-FDD party and members of the opposition characterised by fear, intimidation, confrontation and arrests.

**One woman said, “We could not fully participate in all the activities of our party; we were afraid of falling into an ambush of the “Imbonerakure\*<sup>16</sup>” of our commune because we do not have enough strength to fight against these young people.”<sup>17</sup>**

Although African women including women in Burundi are portrayed as the symbol

of peace, unfortunately, conflict times tend to become the time of exclusion of women. Burundian women have therefore been side-lined by circumstances that are not favourable to their inclusion in peacebuilding such as the threat or fear of getting entangled in violent situations. One woman said, “We could not fully participate in all the activities of our party; we were afraid of falling into an ambush of the “Imbonerakure\*<sup>16</sup>” of our commune because we do not have enough strength to fight against these young people.”<sup>17</sup> Tensed political and security situations are hard on everyone in the country but, testimonies such as these showed how much more difficult it was for women to participate in political activities which easily degenerate into violence. A member of the ruling party said she was afraid to identify herself with her fellow “Imbonerakure” because as a mother, and a Christian in the Free Methodist Church of Kinyinya in Ruyigi, she should embody pacifist values.

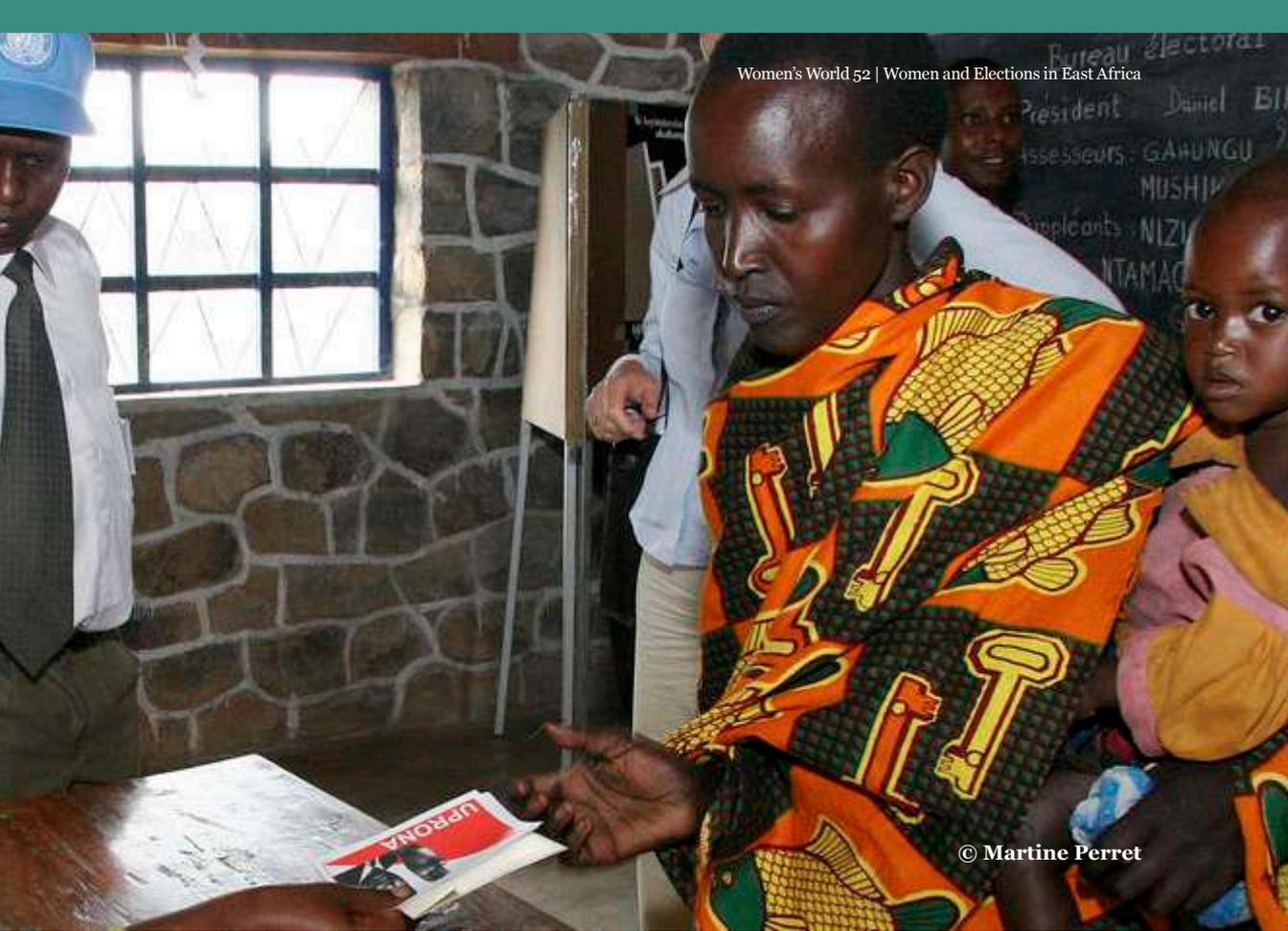
Another woman said, “in general, women are not involved in acts of violence, although some of them supported or refused to condemn their children. I think women even despise such actions, but you know Burundi, nobody can dare to criticise them openly otherwise you will be labelled as an opponent “Igipinga”. I think these elections were not at all regular because the competitors did not enjoy the same rights.”<sup>18</sup> The responses of the women interviewed

15. [iwacu.collateral-freedom.org/interview-exclusive-avec-gerard-birantamije-lhydre-qui-aura-gagne/](http://iwacu.collateral-freedom.org/interview-exclusive-avec-gerard-birantamije-lhydre-qui-aura-gagne/)

16. the youth wing of the CNDD-FDD party

17. Interview with respondent July 2020, Makamba

18. Interview with respondent July 2020, Ruyigi



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**A member of the ruling party said she was afraid to identify herself with her fellow “Imbonerakure” because as a mother, and a Christian in the Free Methodist Church of Kinyinya in Ruyigi, she should embody pacifist values.**

showed that Burundian women, although silent on political issues, can present strong and opposite points of view. Was this a confirmation that women’s involvement in the management of public affairs would considerably reduce men’s attitude toward going to war? Women who are perceived as

symbols of peace, therefore, aspire to play a stabilising role in society, unfortunately, they are not technically and materially well equipped to do so.

Other women argued that “women are generally highly respected by everyone in the communities. When they decide to speak out, the men are obliged to listen. They are the true embodiment of life in our hills. Unfortunately, they rarely take the initiative to oppose the men. They may consider us mature enough to make the right decisions or stubborn enough to listen to them.”<sup>19</sup>

19. Interview with respondent, July 2020, Gitega

## Elections, the quota question and women's representation

The inclusion of women is the result of a great deal of work by women's civil society organisations during the negotiations of the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement<sup>20</sup>. Women's representation in decision-making is often presented as a crucial step in taking into account the specific needs of women, and efforts towards integration of women in political institutions and administration have been going on in Burundi for 20 years.

"The 30 per cent quota provided for in the Constitution aims to encourage women's participation in decision-making bodies, i.e. in government, and parliament and to increase women's representation in decision-making processes more generally."<sup>21</sup> This measure seeks to provide women with a platform for women's action

**"The 30 per cent quota provided for in the Constitution aims to encourage women's participation in decision-making bodies, i.e. in government, and parliament and to increase women's representation in decision-making processes more generally."** <sup>21</sup>

and to act as a voice on women's issues in Burundi. In principle, the presence of women in these institutions opens the door to ensure women's issues are on

the agendas of those in power. "Women therefore actively practice their citizenship when they sit in the legislative arena. However, it is important to stress that women representatives also constitute a central rallying point in the process of mobilising and aggregating the interests of women citizens, because they have the opportunity to integrate feminist or gendered issues into the political agenda and to actively defend them during the various phases of the legislative process."<sup>22</sup>

It was, therefore, legitimate to seek to determine women's perception of the importance of taking this measure into account in the 2020 elections. Are women's expectations regarding the presence of women in important positions such as women deputies, senators or communal councillors established and publicised? In the case of the 2020 elections, the perception of Burundian women was strongly influenced by the three previous post-Arusha mandates and the actions of elected women were severely judged by their fellow citizens. One woman posited, "There is no women's representation in the elections in Burundi, it is certainly a few demanders of well-paid jobs who jump on opportunities to receive huge sums of money. They are in parliament for themselves but not for us."<sup>23</sup>

The gap between the living conditions of women members of parliament and the

20. UNDP, 2011

21. Ibid

22. Anouk Lloren, 2013

23. Interview with respondent, July 2020, Bujumbura.



**Are women's expectations regarding the presence of women in important positions such as women deputies, senators or communal councillors established and publicised?**

rest of women is huge. The aspirations of educated women are totally different from those with lower levels of education and often engaged in agricultural activities. A teacher in the province of Bujumbura was of the view that the first concern of elected women should be the conditions of women in public administration. "We are all frustrated by the treatment reserved for women, and their under-representation in management positions only makes things worse, yet the women put forward on the lists of MPs do not understand much of what we endure, so I do not have particular expectations of these newly elected women."<sup>24</sup> Generally, the representation of women in leadership and the knowledge and understanding of the issues faced by women at the grassroots level is lacking as they are not sufficiently informed or exposed to platforms that could enhance their understanding and abilities to perform well in representing and defending women's rights.

Drawn into the whirlwind of a campaign fraught with passion and emotions, the women of the Isare commune, the majority

of whom are farmers, affirmed that in their participation in the elections of 2020, they were never asked the question about the gender of the candidates. Out of 15 women selected, 13 of them or 86.6 per cent, think that the gender of those "elected" has no impact on the status of women at their level. However, they recognized that the visibility of women can have an impact on young girls who may aspire to go further in their studies so that one day they can become deputies or senators and hopefully influence policies to improve women's living conditions.

Thus, it was clear that the issue of women's representation during the elections was not a major issue for women. The low impact of the action of women representatives in previous years is one of the main factors of women's lack of interest in their representation during the 2020 elections. Indeed, the change in living conditions for women in Burundian society has not proportionally followed the numerical growth of women in decision-making positions. This is associated with the view that women have a lower level of influence or power in the making of such decisions. It was argued that "the integration of women in politics in Burundi is experiencing remarkable growth, and on the other hand, there are still gaps between the number of women political activists and the influence they have on changing women's living conditions in society."<sup>25</sup> The delay or low level of gender mainstreaming in all dimensions of national life makes the notion of female representation and quotas unattractive to women voters.

24. Interview with respondent, July 2020, Bujumbura.

25. Minani, P. 2011.7.

## Women exercising their right to vote and be elected Persisting challenges

Political challenges weigh disproportionately heavier on women than on men. Indeed, various studies show that political vulnerability or any other kind of vulnerability is exacerbated by situations of tensions and crises. While the 2020 elections were described as closed and tense, they hurt women's political participation despite the improved national legal framework.

Women still had challenges in exercising their political convictions in voting for a candidate or a political party of their choice, as one of the women interviewed testified, "my husband strongly forbade me to vote for a party other than the one he is a member of. Overwhelmed with fear, I realised after the vote, that he couldn't know which candidate I voted for, but it was unfortunately too late, and I'm sure that I am not the only one who experienced this."<sup>26</sup>

Other women did not collect their voter cards themselves, but rather their husbands did, and kept them and assigned proxies to vote for them. In other words, the right for these women to vote was taken away. Observers in some provinces such as Ruyigi and Bujumbura Rural correctly claimed that the proxy votes were mostly those of women.

The difficulty with accessing positions of responsibility by women was one of the primary challenges in the organisation and running of the 2020 elections. For women to be effective, they need to be present where decisions are taken, where real and

hard tasks are handled. Indeed, the general observation for the elections was that very few women were members and even fewer in the election management body for example 'heads' of polling stations. While recognising that being a woman does not make someone sensitive to women's needs, the impact is real on those who stand for gender equality and women's empowerment.

The perceptions collected and analysed in this article allow us to perceive a need to enforce the law concerning the political participation of women. Burundian women still face challenges in their right to vote and getting elected to achieve their political ambitions of representing the causes they defend, even though the right to vote and to be elected is strictly permitted by the Constitution and the electoral code. It is therefore understandable that it is difficult to meet the quota of at least 30 per cent of women because the electoral process is still undermined by several limitations – mainly cultural and structural when it is not reached by co-optation. The legal platform is of utmost importance, but enjoying one's rights requires strengthening the implementation of laws at various levels.

**The perceptions collected and analysed in this article allow us to perceive a need to enforce the law concerning the political participation of women.**

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26. Interview with respondent

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# Democratic Republic of Congo



**This article unpacks the experiences of women in the Democratic Republic of Congo elections, with a focus on the challenges and obstacles they faced in fully participating in this important process.**

# Women's Participation in Elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo



Dechy Chinyabuuma

Democratic elections are a pivotal process for consolidating peace and democracy in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The National Gender Policy of the Democratic Republic of Congo affirms the civic and political participation of women as a key national priority, under the Constitution, the Sustainable Development Goals and United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. By participating as voters and as candidates, women can exercise their right to contribute to national peace and state-building.

Voter registrations statistics from previous elections show that women represented 51% in 2006 while in 2011 they represented 49.7% and 51%<sup>27</sup> in 2018. In addition, even though women form the majority of the population, the number of female candidates remains far lower than that of men. The number of elected women

does not exceed 10% in both national and provincial legislative assemblies<sup>28</sup>. According to the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) mid-term report on the identification and registration of voters, 41% of women registered to vote. This reflects slow progress in advancing women's political and civic participation due to several factors including the socio-political environment.

This article unpacks the experiences of women in the Democratic Republic of Congo elections, with a focus on the challenges and obstacles they faced in fully participating in this important process. It examines a wide range of causes for the shortage of women's representation in high-level political roles, noting constraints that play a role in keeping women from progressing up the ranks as much as men do.



27. Mission Électorale de l'Union Européenne en République démocratique du Congo  
Website: [www.moeue-rdc.eu](http://www.moeue-rdc.eu)

28. écompte partiel des résultats de la présidentielle du 30 décembre 2018 en RDC, divulgué par un lanceur d'alerte, <http://congoresearchgroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/imprim%C3%A9s.pdf>, consulté le 2 juillet 2020.

## Tracing the status of women's political participation in the history of DRC

The political history of the DRC began in the late nineteenth century when the King of Belgium (Leopold II) won international recognition for the Congo Free State.<sup>29</sup> In the eighteenth century, King Leopold II virtually made the Congo his kingdom. All developmental projects had to be supported by the King's funds and private companies in Belgium. Between 1890 and 1895, Leopold II made an appeal to the Belgian government for financial assistance for the development of what was then known as the Congo Free State. His appeal was only granted in 1901 when the government provided him with a free loan – but with the understanding that the Belgian government had the right to annex the territory.<sup>30</sup>

**The historical setting of political governance in the Congo shows that at the time of independence the participation of women in public decision-making was non-existent.**

The right to annex the territory became a reality in 1909 when the Belgian government took over the administration of the Congo Free State, ending Leopold's vicious system of forced labour. However, the Congo was

still regarded almost exclusively as a field of European investment, and very little was done to give the indigenous Congolese people a significant role in the government or economy during the colonial era.<sup>31</sup> Before 1960, the Congolese had no participation in any political decision-making processes. The status of women did not make any strides during those years. Congolese men, too, were hamstrung by the colonial experience and stepping up to leadership positions in the DRC was severely curtailed. Most decisions on the DRC were taken in Belgium without consulting the local people.

The historical setting of political governance in the Congo shows that at the time of independence the participation of women in public decision-making was non-existent. Women only became involved in politics in 1964 after the end of the civil war.<sup>32</sup> This was due to an increase in awareness of the right to collective participation by both men and women in the development of the DRC. Two years after the "Coup d'état" under Mobutu Sese Seko in 1965, women were allowed to participate in the 1967 election.<sup>33</sup> Mobutu Sese Seko, President at the time, then appointed Sophie Kanza as the first Congolese woman in a ministerial position. This was a ground-breaking move and the first time a female Congolese

30. B Gascoigne, "Congo Free State: AD 1885–1908", 2011 (available at <http://www.historyworld.net>, as accessed On 15 February 2011).

31. G Bausch, *Belgian administration in the Congo* (London, Oxford University Press, 1961); and Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, "Democratic Republic of Congo: History" (Columbia, Columbia University Press, 2007), pp. 1–6.

32. United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "Introduction: How do you assess the current level of women's participation in decision-making in Africa?" 1999 (available at <http://www.esaconf.un.org>, as Accessed on 8 March 2010).

33. A Karam and J Lovenduski, "Women in parliament: Beyond numbers", 2008 (available at <http://archive.idea.int/women/parliament/index.htm>, as accessed on 28 February 2008).

politician was appointed to a senior leadership position. Catherine Nzunzi wa Mbombo was another high-profile appointment, at the level of Premier of the province. She was Premier of the Kinshasa province and later became the premier of the Bas Congo province. She subsequently held various ministerial portfolios during the administrations of Mobutu and Laurent Desire Kabila. Concurrently, the number of women who were members of parliament was also increasing. Despite this progress, the emancipation of women in senior levels of government did not change gender inequality at the grassroots level. Nothing was written into the constitution at the time to ensure that women's rights were raised to the level enjoyed by men. Women were still lagging in terms of political participation and public decision-making.

During the mid to late 1980s, there were no major advancements in women's participation in politics because of the centralized power in the hands of the male-dominated dictatorship. The transformation of women in political decision making only began to advance after 1990, when the democratic process began to improve. Many women in the DRC became involved in diverse developmental sectors outside the domestic environment. Their participation was not only seen in political parties but also in other sectors such as the media, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and senior management positions in both private enterprise and the government. Since 1987, various women NGOs and networks of women have been established in the DRC and they are actively involved in the promotion of the rights of women. The majority of women who lead these NGOs

have received tertiary education in the DRC.

To improve the participation of Congolese women in political decision-making "several [NGOs] decided to continue exchanging ideas and they established a network called Caucus des Femmes with representatives in all of the 11 provinces of the DRC"<sup>34</sup> which gave birth to another similar organization called Cadre Permanent de Concentration de la Femme Congolaise (CAFECO). The establishment of this NGO led by women promoted the participation of women in political parties and many of the women in politics today began their politicization in NGOs across the country.

These transformative gender initiatives were complemented by the first democratic elections held in 2006, after 48 years of independence. Four women were registered as possible presidential candidates, and this motivated other women to become involved in political activity.

The period 2002 to 2006 was a phase of political transformation during which gender equality was considered for inclusion in the DRC Constitution. The newly adopted 2006 DRC Constitution states, "there should be equal involvement by men and women in political decision making". According to article 12, all Congolese citizens, be they men or women, are "equal before the law and are protected by that law". This means that there should be no discrimination in terms of gender or sexual orientation. Despite this, the practicality in terms of women's participation in the different spheres of government does not reflect the stipulations in the Constitution<sup>35</sup>.

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34. For information on women's NGOs in the DRC, refer to <http://www.psi.org/democratic-republic-congo>.

35. DRC, "Constitution de la République Démocratique du Congo" (Kinshasa, Gombe, 2006)



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## Barriers to Women's participation in the electoral process

Women have a critical role to play in the consolidation of peace in the DRC. However, several obstacles inhibit women's participation in the electoral processes. While opportunities have opened up for greater involvement by women in the electoral process and politics, there remain considerable barriers.

Challenges exist at every stage of women's participation in the electoral process. The initial, and possibly greatest barrier to women's political participation is a lack of self-confidence and self-belief to aspire to leadership positions. This is largely due to the cultural marginalization that has restricted women's rights and opportunities and undervalued their potential role in society. The Congolese society remains largely dominated by traditional and

**The Congolese society remains largely dominated by traditional and religious patriarchal hierarchies. Although more extreme in rural and isolated areas, these practices effectively block women from seeking involvement in decision-making.**

religious patriarchal hierarchies. Although more extreme in rural and isolated areas, these practices effectively block women from seeking involvement in decision-making. Women are relegated to traditional household roles as caregivers, often resulting in arranged marriages and early pregnancies, which leave women feeling trapped with few rights. The demands of family and household responsibilities often preclude women from even considering



**Despite their public commitments to promote women's participation in party structures and as candidates for election, women regularly find their ambitions frustrated.**

participating in the electoral process and politics. The burden for caring for the family makes it impossible for women to stand out in public life even though they are qualified and capable.' This is reinforced by women's fear of rejection or even violence from husbands and family if they strive to enter politics.

Due to gaps in the reach of ongoing civic education programmes, many women still lack a basic understanding of the political system and the role of government. This prevents women from knowing their rights and how to claim them, and from appreciating how elections can help them to

seize the available opportunities. Women's lack of basic civic education serves to reinforce the traditional view that politics is "men's business" and it is much less likely that they will vote for female candidates – if they vote at all.

Women who have overcome these "internal" barriers and aspire to greater political involvement face discriminatory attitudes of social and political powerbrokers. Male-dominated political parties control the formal political sphere. Despite their public commitments to promote women's participation in party structures and as candidates for election, women regularly find their ambitions frustrated.

Large political parties dominate the political system in the Democratic Republic of Congo, leaving very little space for independent candidates. This means that securing a party's support is vital for the chances of aspiring candidates. In the absence of

formal quotas, the main political parties in Congo have voluntarily committed themselves to select at least 30 per cent female candidates, but have abjectly failed to do so. Parties have done little to identify and train suitable women from their membership and have a tendency to sideline them into “women’s wings” that have very little influence. The same can be said of youth members aspiring to run for office with the potential to break out of traditional mindsets.

As potential voters, candidates and election observers, women have the right to assume senior management positions. For this very reason, the integration of the gender principles into the electoral processes must not be reduced to more sensitization of women as voters given their large numbers, but must also focus on promoting women’s participation in the electoral processes as candidates, observers, political parties’ witnesses and, members of the electoral administration.

In 2006, the DRC organized its first democratic and transparent elections after 40 years. Although the new Constitution adopted by referendum included, for the first time in black and white, the principle of equal male-female representation, the implementing law for this parity was not adopted in time to force political parties to submit electoral lists with equal numbers of female and male candidates.<sup>36</sup>

The fact that in the DRC power is still perceived to be in the hands of men and

women are culturally regarded as unsuitable for the public arena has also had an impact on the election of female politicians. In every election, women find it difficult to be publicly accepted. Their personalities are sullied by false accusations, and the publication of compromising photographs and videos on the internet or via Bluetooth is a way of discouraging them and tarnishing their images in the minds of the Congolese electorate.

**The law, therefore, does not protect women aspiring for political positions from cyber violence.**

Regarding privacy violations, Congolese laws do not recognize the sanctity of personal mail, which may include emails. The provisions of the Criminal Code stipulate that defamation is applicable if newspapers publish false information. However, in most cases, only influential citizens and politicians go beyond their right to respond and resort to the legal system to assert their rights. There is no provision in the law for the theft of data, which falls under the misappropriation of goods belonging to another person, as any type of fraud is classified by the Criminal Code. In the case of publication without consent, there is no real misappropriation as the data still exists and is accessible to the owner. The law, therefore, does not protect women aspiring for political positions from cyber violence.

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36. see DRC, Independent Electoral Commission (Kinshasa, CEI, 2008)



## Conclusion

Women in DRC have assets that can effectively contribute to improving their involvement in the electoral process, particularly in increasing the rate of women enrolling in the process.

These include the involvement of women in community activities based on voluntary engagement and their strong mobilization capacity around community issues. The membership of women in women's organizations' networks and the existence of faith-based associations where women can draw others to vote for women provide a valuable opportunity. These assets are also supported on the one hand, by the emergence of awareness within women's

organizations on women's rights and the other hand, by the presence of women in political parties and their interest in competing for elective positions as well as participation in decision-making.

Faced with this reality, decisive action must be taken at all levels by the government with a duty to bring the constitution to life; by the Electoral Commission and political parties whose democratic goals and decision-making positions must reflect the diversity of the country; by NGOs tackling gender-discriminatory cultural practices and norms, as well as by women, who must support the participation of other women at all stages of the electoral processes.

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# Uganda



**This article focuses on opportunities and constraints for women's participation in electoral processes in Uganda. Using the data available, it reviews the opportunities available and the direct and indirect barriers to women's participation in electoral processes.**

# Women and Elections in Uganda

## Opportunities and Constraints



Perry Aritua

### Introduction

Regular free and fair elections present an opportunity for citizens to periodically choose their leaders and for leaders to renew their legitimacy to lead. Uganda's Constitution and subsidiary laws on elections provide for women's equal participation with men in electoral processes. Ugandan women of 18 years of age and above who are registered to vote can vote in elections, stand as candidates, volunteer as party agents, and work as election officials.

An important expression of women's agency is women's political participation and their ability to fully engage in public life. The World Bank's World Development Report on Gender Equality and Development (WDR, 2012) identified women's voice,

agency and participation as a key dimension of gender equality and as a major policy priority. Agency, as defined in the WDR, 2012, is the ability to use endowments to take advantage of opportunities to achieve desired outcomes.

This article focuses on opportunities and constraints for women's participation in electoral processes in Uganda. Using the data available, it reviews the opportunities available and the direct and indirect barriers to women's participation in electoral processes. Finally, the article identifies the priorities for future work to ensure that women attain the right to equal treatment with men to participate in electoral processes in Uganda.

## Opportunities for women's participation in electoral processes

The Constitution of Uganda has domesticated several provisions on women's participation in electoral processes from international and regional frameworks including The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 21(1);<sup>37</sup> the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW);<sup>38</sup> the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), which outlined 12 strategic objectives and critical areas of action including, "Women in Power and Decision Making" and the 1985 Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies and the Platform for Action (1993), which affirms that "women's rights are human rights". Other frameworks that elucidate women's participation in decision-making include United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) and 1889 (2009);<sup>39</sup> the African Union's (AU) Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, 2000; and the African Charter on Elections, Democracy and Governance, which provide for gender parity - 50/50 representation for men and women in parliament, as re-affirmed in the AU Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality, 2004.

The National Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy of the Constitution of Uganda provides the cardinal legal framework for women's participation in electoral processes.<sup>40</sup> Objective VI and Article 33(5) of the Constitution are important articles for women's rights to participate in electoral processes in Uganda.<sup>41</sup> Article 78 (1) (b) provides for the election of one woman representative for every district, while Article 180(2) (b) provides for one-third of the membership of each local government to be reserved for women.

The affirmative action policy enshrined in the Constitution for women's representation at parliamentary and local council levels has brought more women into mainstream politics and key government positions.<sup>42</sup> At the global level, Uganda's position in terms of women's representation in parliament is at 33 out of 190 countries,<sup>43</sup> while within the African continent Uganda is at 9th position out of 54 countries. Apart from women's participation in the electoral process as candidates, the laws of Uganda enshrine women's rights to participate in the electoral process as party agents, election administrators and election observers.

37. Article 21 (1) of UDHR stipulates that, "Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country directly or through freely chosen representation"

38. CEDAW provides the basis for realizing equality between women and men through ensuring women's equal access to, and equal opportunities in, political and public life, including the right to vote and to stand for public office

39. Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies and the Platform for Action provide for women's active participation in leadership positions geared at preventing conflicts and guarantee the protection of women and girls' rights.

40. Objective VI of the National Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy of the Constitution of Uganda provides for gender balance and fair representation of marginalized groups in all government Institutions

41. Article 33(5) of the Constitution of Uganda provides for Affirmative Action in favour of marginalized groups on the basis of gender, age, disability, or any other reason created by history, tradition, or custom, for the purpose of redressing imbalances that exist against them

42. Women's Democracy Group (2016) report on Women in Uganda's Electoral process: Mapping Positive Trends and Persistent Deficits in Uganda's Electoral process.

43. Inter-Parliamentary Union (2019)

As candidates, women do not only vie for affirmative action positions but also contest for the open seats locally known as 'direct seats', which have otherwise by default been made a preserve of men. A few women have also positioned themselves for the elected position of the presidency and have contested since 2006. None of the three women who contested for the position of President since 2006 was elected.

In terms of support for women candidates, political parties like the National Resistance Movement (NRM) and Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) provide financial

and in-kind support to women candidates. The two parties pay nomination fees for new women candidates and FDC also prints a certain number of posters for its women candidates. The limited access to resources for women candidates, therefore, makes these incentives important to encourage women to contest in elections.

Table 1 tracks the participation of women as candidates at the parliamentary level from 1989. As illustrated, the increment in the number of women in parliament is due to affirmative action.



**Table 1:** Women in Uganda's Legislature (1989-2016)

Y/r	Districts	Assembly	Affirmative Action	Open Seat	Others	Total Women	Total Men	Total MPs	% Women	% Men
1989	39	National Resistance Council	39	2	9	50	230	280	18	82
1994	39	Constituent Assembly	39	8	3	50	236	236	17	83
1996	39	Parliament	39	8	4	51	276	276	19	81
2001	56	Parliament	56	3	6	75	304	304	24	76
2006	79	Parliament	79	14	1	100	319	319	31	69
2011	112	Parliament	112	11	8	131	375	375	35	65
2016	112	Parliament	112	18	9	139	428	428	33	67

**Source:** Madanda A. (2016). Inclusion and Exclusion in 2016 General Elections: The Case of Gender Equality. Forthcoming in J. Oloka Onyango & J. Ahikire (eds.) Controlling Consent: Uganda's 2016 Elections.

As voters, Article 59 of the Constitution provides for the right of all citizens above the age of 18 years who are registered to vote, the right to vote. The 2016 election campaigns saw many women attend campaign rallies. Women voters were enthusiastic about campaign messages and candidates' promises to the electorate, which informed their voting decisions.<sup>44</sup>

Coupled with the legal framework and especially due to affirmative action enshrined in the Constitution civic awareness created majorly by women's rights organizations has increased the numbers of women contesting for elections especially at parliamentary and local council levels in Uganda.<sup>45</sup> A positive trend for women's participation in the electoral process is improving community attitudes towards women's active engagement in the electoral processes at different levels,

including political representation at higher levels. The changing trend was attributed to women's good leadership qualities, such as being trustworthy and caring about their communities.<sup>46</sup>

Social media has also increased access to information for women and provided a platform for women to participate in electoral processes. Social media is an important mass media platform for women's participation in electoral processes because women in the 2016 elections comprised only 14 per cent of the sources of campaign stories in the traditional media<sup>47</sup>. As election officials, three of the seven Commissioners of the current Electoral Commissioners are women. While there are legal opportunities for women's participation in the electoral process, there are also constraints that women continue to experience.

## Constraints

### *Marginalisation of Women in Decision-Making*

Despite the progress made in women's participation in electoral processes in Uganda, challenges of discrimination and marginalisation remain. Notably, women largely continue to reside in the margins of decision-making processes and tend to confront specific hurdles making the election ground unlevelled for women and men. For women, there are critical social, cultural, economic and political factors that impact their election journey uniquely hence creating persistent deficits.<sup>48</sup>

Female political candidates are expected to negotiate discriminatory attitudes and practices at the family level, within political parties, and in their communities. At the family level, they are expected to get family approval and support, which is often denied. At the political party level, preference is given to men, and high nomination fees are usually prohibitive. Indeed,

44. Madanda A. 2016 Inclusion and Exclusion in 2016 General Elections: The Case of Gender Equality. Forthcoming in J. Oloka Onyango & J. Ahikire (eds.) *Controlling Consent: Uganda's 2016 Elections*.

45. Ibid

46. Ibid

47. Ibid

48. Madanda A. 2016

some women reported the need for a “strong male sponsor” within the party to be taken seriously. Political parties are themselves gatekeepers to women’s effective participation in electoral politics. In the absence of strong women’s wings, party nomination procedures are often not transparent, denying women’s nomination or coercing them to give the nomination ticket to a man. Additionally, the likelihood that women will suffer sexual and gender-based violence is greatly heightened in the run-up to and during actual elections.<sup>49</sup>

### *Poor implementation of laws on women’s participation as candidates for open seats*

The legal framework provides the basis for holding the Government of Uganda accountable for the protection and promotion of women’s rights including their participation in electoral processes. While the laws are largely progressive, implementation of the laws remains a challenge partly due to societal norms and practices that depart from the legal framework, and are still followed in different parts of Ugandan society. For instance, in some districts especially in rural areas, men determine the women candidates even for affirmative action seats.

The open seats for Member of Parliament have now been named in no uncertain terms – “men’s seat”. The open seat is what it should precisely be – open. Instead, the seat is now open only to men and closed to women. This is reflected in the small numbers of women who contest for election for the open seats and the low success rate of women who do contest. Table 2 illustrates the situation of women who contested on the open seat at the level of President, Parliament and District Chairperson in the 2016 elections.<sup>50</sup>

**Table 2:** 2016 Contestants for Open Seats by Sex

Post	No. of Candidates	No. of Females	No. of Males	% of Females in the race	% of Males in the race
President	8	1	7	12.5	87.5
Open MP Seat	1,314	90	1,224	6.8	93.2
District / City Chairperson	376	9	367	2.4	97.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,698</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>1,598</b>	<b>5.9</b>	<b>94.1</b>

**Source:** Electoral Commission of Uganda

49. Ibid

50. Madanda A. 2016

The multiplicity of gender roles where women serve as providers, home managers and carers leave little time for them to effectively participate in electoral processes. This is compounded by long distances to travel to voter registration centres and polling stations, as well as long queues. The lack of access to timely election-related information targeted at women is also a major contributing factor to women's inadequate participation.<sup>51</sup>

### *Lack of women with a voice and name recognition vying as presidential candidates*

At the presidential level, in the 2016 elections, communities expressed their frustration at the fact that the women who have visibility and voice are not presenting themselves for the election. As a result, for the presidential candidates in 2016, one woman, Maureen Kyalya contested but not many people knew her or spoke about her. According to the Women's Democracy Group (WDG) report on the 2016 elections, men and women interviewed informed the researchers that voters were saying, they would have voted for the female Speaker of the Parliament if she stood for the highest office. Others asked, "Why can Kadaga [then Speaker] not become the next president of this country?"<sup>52</sup>

According to the WDG report majority of the respondents felt they had no problem entrusting capable and willing women with key political positions, including the presidency of the country (55.0 per cent); as Members of Parliament (93 per cent); Local Council V Chairpersons (78 per cent) and Local Council III Chairpersons (76 per cent).<sup>53</sup> However, in terms of ranking, respondents felt it was better for women to contest as Members of Parliament, followed by Local Council V chairpersons, Local Council III Chairperson and lastly as President.<sup>54</sup> This shows that society still prefers men to be in leadership at top levels of decision making. More work needs to be done, to change attitudes and beliefs about the place of women in political leadership.

### *Media bias against women as candidates and voters*

Reporting and coverage of women candidates and women as sources of information during elections is still low. In the 2016 elections women comprised only 14 per cent of the sources of campaign stories in the different media.<sup>55</sup> As a result, fewer women voices during the elections were captured in the media. This affects the citizens' decision making on the kind of candidates to elect, the issues that women candidates stand on and the concerns of female citizens.

51. The Uganda Electoral Commission Gender Strategy (2019)

52. Madanda A. 2016

53. Ibid

54. Madanda A. 2016

55. Citizens Election Observers Network-Uganda Final election observation report on the 2016 elections in Uganda

Furthermore, generalized voter education over electronic media ignores women's restricted access to mass media channels, coupled with dominant perceptions portrayed that politics is a male domain. Additionally, patriarchal norms still endow men with the power to dictate and impose their political views on women in their respective households, subsequently silencing women.

### *Violence against women in elections*

Violence is a major constraint to women's participation in the electoral process. As candidates, some female contestants in the 2016 elections noted that when a woman is progressing in her political career, she is usually heavily criticized or bullied and labelled as a failure in her marriage because there is a belief that successful women politicians neglect their husbands and family.<sup>56</sup> Women as party agents report that they are subjected to vulgar language, assault and intimidation.<sup>57</sup> Women agents and supporters of candidates indicated insults and assaults against women were not taken seriously in society and this had the effect of scaring many women away from contesting.<sup>58</sup>

Indeed, violence against women is one of the primary barriers to women's participation in politics. Whether it is threatened or actual violence in the family or public, violence undermines women's confidence and ability to participate in civic and political activities such as contesting for leadership and/or casting the vote for their preferred candidates<sup>59</sup>.

## **Stakeholder's priorities for ensuring women participate in electoral processes**

### *Electoral Commission*

Voter education should include a variety of initiatives whose messages and methods of delivery take cognisance of the social-cultural contexts and heterogeneity of Ugandan society. This will involve reviewing the Electoral Commission Voter Education Handbook to ensure that it is gender-responsive and addresses the factors that affect women's equal treatment with men as they participate in the electoral process.

The Electoral Commission (EC) must utilize its oversight mandate to encourage political parties to promote gender equality in their structures and activities.

56. Madanda A. 2016

57. Ibid

58. Ibid

59. Uganda Electoral Commission Gender Strategy.

60. Uganda Electoral Commission Gender Strategy

61. Ibid

It is the responsibility of the EC to ensure that electoral processes take place in a safe and secure environment that facilitates the full participation of citizens- women and men, young and old and the exercise of their human rights. The power of the EC involves liaising with security organs to maintain law and order and goes with an equivalent responsibility to retain overall control and management of the electoral process in fulfilment of its mandate. Finding that balance is critical for the promotion of gender equality and women's participation in politics. <sup>60</sup>

The EC has to ensure that when data collection exercises are designed, a category for 'sex' is always included as one of the data fields/variables. Data on voter registration, voter turnout and candidate registration should all be disaggregated by sex, and where possible, consider other multiple intersections of discrimination such as age, race, religion and disability. Such data is important for the EC, the government, and other elections stakeholders to assess the participation of men, women and youth in electoral processes as well as to inform policy and election-related programming <sup>61</sup>.

The EC should develop and manage multi-stakeholder platforms designed to mobilize broad support for the promotion of popular participation in politics especially for marginalized groups including women and youth. The EC should put in place a system for reporting election-related violence, particularly women, and include this information in the election report- disaggregating the data by sex and age.



The EC should also work with CSOs that enhance women's participation in electoral processes to deliver specific messages to women and men about the rights of women as candidates especially on the open seats, as voters, as party agents and as observers. This should include messaging on the rights of women as voters to make their own choices and to exercise the right to vote in secret.

### *Non-state actors and other stakeholders*

Regular documentation, updating and use of sex-disaggregated data in all institutions relevant to elections like the political parties and media will enable actors to assess progress, gaps and best practices for gender equality in electoral processes.

Partners who support the work of political parties should demand regular evaluation of parties on gender equality and advocate for women empowerment action plans to address gaps.

Civil society organisations should continue to provide technical support to political parties to enhance gender equality in parties.

In conclusion, even though Uganda has made relative strides with women's active involvement in electoral processes a lot more needs to be done to ensure that progressive laws on gender equality in electoral processes are in tandem with the practice. This requires a commitment by the leadership in government, political parties, the Electoral Commission, the media and CSOs to work towards gender equality for women in electoral processes in Uganda.



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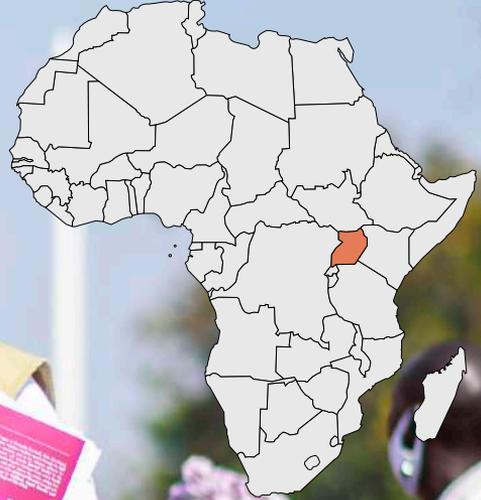
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# Uganda



**This article describes the role of the WSR Uganda 2021 in promoting peace before, during and after the recently held general elections.**

# Filling the gap

## A women-led mechanism promoting peace during the 2021 Ugandan elections



Pauline Kahuubire

Election periods often confirm how deeply sexist countries are and also provide proof that discrimination against women and marginalised groups continue to exist. In Uganda's case, matters of concern to women were notably absent during the 2021 presidential campaigns. How is it that political issues were addressed but the needs and demands of half of the country's population were not taken into consideration?

**Imagine a mechanism that allowed women to participate in the political sphere from a peacebuilding perspective, and not just as a mere box-ticking exercise but one that promoted and valued the power of their agency in fragile, conflict and post-conflict settings.**

There are some bright spots. Imagine if women were included in every phase of the electoral cycle, including maintaining peace during the process by interrogating patriarchal norms and other structural inequalities that are usually at the heart of disputes and conflict. Imagine a mechanism that allowed women to participate in the political sphere from a peacebuilding perspective, and not just as a mere box-ticking exercise but one that promoted and

valued the power of their agency in fragile, conflict and post-conflict settings. A place where women's participation in mediation and conflict resolution was not based on perceived gender roles but on their ability to be valuable agents of change and where they were at the helm of peacebuilding efforts during electoral processes.

Enter the Women's Situation Room (WSR) Uganda, whose aim is to promote the full and active participation of women and youth in ensuring peaceful elections in Uganda through a model of peace for and by everyone. The WSR was first established in Liberia in 2011 by the Angie Brooks International Centre (ABIC) and has since then been replicated in Guinea-Bissau in 2014, Kenya and Mali in 2013, Nigeria 2015, Senegal and Sierra Leone in 2012, Ghana in 2020 and Uganda in 2016 and recently 2020/21. This is a women-led early warning and rapid response mechanism to electoral violence in Africa that has been recognised by both the UN Security Council and at the African Union as a best practice for prevention of violence through constructive dialogue with stakeholders and peace advocacy.

This article describes the role of the WSR Uganda 2021 in promoting peace before, during and after the recently held general elections.

62. Report by UN Women on Women's Participation in Peace Negotiations: Connections between Presence and Influence, 2012

63. Promoting Democracy in Preventing Electoral Violence: The Women's Situation Room 2015 by Paula Drummond 10

## Women, Elections and Violence in Uganda

It is not news that women are less likely than men to participate in politics in Uganda<sup>64</sup>. Since colonial times, a gap has existed – and is gradually thinning but not as fast as women would like it to. It is difficult for some women to attend community meetings, contact elected officials, join men in raising public issues, and express partisan preferences or even vote. When they choose to participate actively on the political scene and contest for office, some of their campaigns are marked by harassment and violence directed towards them and in many cases, the majority opt out because of the fear of the impact of this violence, beyond physical harm. A good example is the case of a woman who contested for the Bushenyi Woman Member of Parliament seat in the recent elections but later dropped out after being intimidated by her family members.<sup>65</sup>

**Landmark frameworks such as the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 affirm the important role that women play in the prevention and resolution of conflicts.**

Even with the same level of education as men, work experience, age and level of interest in political affairs, women's participation in electoral processes is still limited. There is no better example of this than the deliberate exclusion of women from public discussions on political and electoral issues in the mainstream media of

the country. This is considered exhaustive lists of women who can engage in such discussions have been supplied but are ignored repeatedly. When attempts are made to include women in the conversation, it is the same speakers or thought leaders who are recycled and while all this may seem trivial, this gap has severe consequences on the representation of diverse women's priorities. As such elected officials and voters are less likely to be well appraised of different women's concerns, which should inform policies due to the absence of more representative and inclusive voices.

Landmark frameworks such as the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 affirm the important role that women play in the prevention and resolution of conflicts.<sup>66</sup> The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa also known as the Maputo Protocol that was ratified by Uganda in 2010 underscores women's contribution to peace and security processes. The instruments recognise that women are gravely affected by conflict, and to address this, women should play a key role in achieving lasting peace after conflict by participating in decision-making processes.<sup>67</sup> They acknowledge the relationships between women, fragility and the struggle for peace. Similarly, WSR Uganda acknowledges that instability during elections has unique impacts on women and girls and that their contributions are central to building peace and security during the electoral processes.

64. Reality Check: Women in Leadership Positions in Uganda by Forum for Women in Democracy, 2020

65. Stop Using Our Family Name – In-Laws Warn NRM Bushenyi Woman MP Aspirant Against Using Husband's Name On Campaign Posters

66. United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security

67. The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, 2005



## Waging Peace

Even though elections were primarily conceived to allow a country's citizens to make collective decisions about their leaders, too often, force is employed by different actors to influence the electoral process and its outcomes. The outbreaks of physical violence that occur can undermine the legitimacy of the process and have lasting impacts on the population especially vulnerable groups such as women and children. In Uganda, general elections have previously been marred by reports of voter intimidation, violence and gross violations of rights to assembly, association and expression. In 2016 there were reports of threats and antagonistic rhetoric from

politicians and a tense environment in fear of the aftermath if voting results were contested.<sup>68</sup> The 2021 elections were no different. Some might argue that the situation was considerably worse when compared with past elections, as outbreaks of violence against candidates and voters were observed and reported.

Until the establishment of the Women's Situation Room in 2016, concerted efforts to ensure that all stages of the election cycle were free of violence were minimal. Whereas some interventions existed, there was a void in terms of understanding the dynamics around electoral violence

68. Evaluation of the Women's Situation Room Uganda 2016

69. Good Practices for Promotion of Peace Before, During and After Elections, by WSR Uganda, 2020



© Womens' Situation Room Uganda

**The WSR Uganda recognises that the causes of election violence are both systemic and structural and that election violence in Uganda usually manifests in the forms of physical, emotional or psychological and sexual violence, all of which impact individuals differently.<sup>69</sup>**

and consequently, the development of comprehensive strategies to ensure that peace is advanced during the process. For instance, some focused on the period during and after but not the period of phase before the elections. Further, the existing mechanisms did not galvanise the wider role women play in electoral processes beyond just participating as voters and candidates.

The WSR goes beyond including women as the community's less threatening nurturers who are more inclined to engage in dialogue compared to men who are often at the head of a conflict. The WSR reinforces the role of women as key components of strong coalitions for peace. The WSR also affirms that women in Uganda are a peacebuilding force deserving of an equal space across all sectors of peacebuilding.

The WSR Uganda recognises that the causes of election violence are both systemic and structural and that election violence in Uganda usually manifests in the forms of physical, emotional or psychological and sexual violence, all of which impact individuals differently.<sup>69</sup> Sexual and gender-based violence has been observed to

69. Good Practices for Promotion of Peace Before, During and After Elections, by WSR Uganda, 2020

escalate during elections due to different political views among men and women which is compounded by unequal power at the household and community level. The WSR, therefore, acknowledges that there are no quick fixes to averting violence during elections because the causes of such violence are deeply ingrained issues that need to be interrogated continuously, as well. As such, prevention of electoral violence is a long-term initiative that requires a comprehensive approach to ensure that such violence is minimised and that citizens peacefully perform their civic duty.

The Women's Situation Room Uganda approach and activities are steered by a group of non-partisan, neutral and well-respected women, referred to as the Eminent Women, who advocate for peace, intervene and mediate to avert electoral

**The Women's Situation Room mechanism has demonstrated that the mitigation of electoral violence plays a large role in generally maintaining the peace before, during and after the elections.**

conflict and violence. The Eminent Women also engage with electoral stakeholders including the Electoral Commission, political parties, the police, the army the Uganda Human Rights Commission and the Inter-Party Organization for Dialogue to ensure that they each play their role in conducting peaceful elections. During the 2021 presidential and parliamentary elections, the Eminent Women hosted four 'physical rooms' in four different regions across the country, namely, Gulu, Soroti, Mbarara and Kampala, where they received and dealt with 2,038 calls reporting violent incidents



through the WSR call centres. In many cases their response, stopped violence and threats of violence, thus contributing to generally peaceful elections in the country.

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The Eminent Women-led stakeholders through the process of pledging to pursue peace by encouraging them to sign the 'WSR Peace Cloth' as a sign of their commitment to work for peace irrespective of the outcome of the election.

Closely working with the Eminent Women, and guiding the activities of the WSR is a 15-member Steering Committee comprised of women's rights organisations representing women from diverse

backgrounds and working on a spectrum of issues such as good governance, women's leadership, violence against women and peacebuilding, under the leadership of Uganda Women's Network (UWONET), with the Women's International Peace Centre (The Peace Centre) serving as the WSR Secretariat. The establishment of the Steering Committee guaranteed the broader engagement of diverse women represented in civil society in ensuring that elections were conducted peacefully by as many stakeholders as possible.

Before the elections, the organisations of the members of the Steering Committee conducted Assessment Missions in 30 districts to establish the electoral process,

70. Preliminary Report by The Women's Situation Room, Uganda, On the Presidential and Parliamentary Elections Held On 14th January 2021



the status of preparation, and the potential for violence. The findings of the assessment guided the planning for the different activities of the WSR in the build-up to the general elections.

Secondly, WSR Uganda also provided an opportunity for women and youth, including persons with disabilities, to monitor peace and the polling process as peace advocates and election observers within their communities. In the last quarter of 2020, about 1,500 women and 1,500 youth leaders were trained in conflict resolution and peace-building and equipped with skills to promote peace and de-escalate tensions that might have resulted in violence in their communities. An additional 1,500 women were trained as election observers to observe the polling process and report any anomalies to the WSR toll-free lines, in each of the four physical rooms, for action by the Eminent Women. In an election where young people played a remarkable role in political mobilisation, the involvement of youth by the WSR drew on their potential to positively contribute to their communities, not just for peace and security, but also for sustainable development if they are to be recognised as political actors.

To quash the use of hate speech and other actions that could have ultimately led to violence, peace messaging was adopted by the WSR through a multimedia campaign that encompassed both traditional and modern media. Messages aimed at encouraging citizens to prioritise peace and avoid any situations that may threaten that peace, the Eminent Women and influential leaders from religious institutions and the informal sector, to mention but a few, were broadcast on television, radio and social media platforms. The WSR engaged and trained the journalists and media practitioners to leverage the power of the media to promote peace through responsible and gender-sensitive reporting.

These are simply a few of the approaches that the WSR used to ensure that Ugandans went to and participated in non-violent polls in 2021. The Women's Situation Room mechanism has demonstrated that the mitigation of electoral violence plays a large role in generally maintaining the peace before, during and after the elections.

## An Uphill Climb

It has not all been a bed of roses. Community peacebuilding during conflict-prone elections, with women at the centre of the process, remains a daunting task. A key challenge faced during this period is that women are often not perceived to have the skills, knowledge or social status needed to bring about change in conflict environments. Women are still seen as victims of conflict as opposed to change agents. Changing this requires a shift in how the role of women is viewed by all electoral stakeholders and the general public. Emphasis must be placed on the quality of women's involvement and their ability to create transformation both in peace-making and peacebuilding and their impact recognised. Women must be engaged right at the very beginning of peace processes for lasting impact.

## The Face of Conflict Transformation is Female

Some may be inclined to think that the peace work of women and youth of the WSR mechanism is not transformative but reports indicate that the peace advocacy work was empowering and also helped transform community dynamics for the better.

**The concluded election season has demonstrated that elections can provide the best possible opportunity to ensure women's voices are heard, their concerns are addressed, and their potential contributions to peace and democracy are maximized.**

Throughout the process, new issues for reconciliation have been raised such as conflicts between the young and the old, those living in urban areas and those in rural areas, and so many more. The efforts of community peace advocates were without doubt, essential to peacebuilding in the communities where they occurred and critical to the broader goal of contributing to peaceful elections in Uganda. Step by step, they are building blocks to strengthening democracy and good governance in the country

The concluded election season has demonstrated that elections can provide the best possible opportunity to ensure women's voices are heard, their concerns are addressed, and their potential contributions to peace and democracy are maximized. That said, for WSR Uganda, peacebuilding does not stop with the end of elections – the women of Uganda will continue to promote peace between elections. The implementation of the Women's Situation Room in Uganda in 2021 confirms that women in collaboration with the youth are determined to take into their own hands the task of ensuring that elections in Uganda are peaceful for the citizens, to benefit maximally from the democratic process for sustainable peace and development.

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## Conclusion

Based on the contributions from the writers of this edition, politics and decision-making processes remain male-dominated and women are hardly visible in political decision-making. Women who strive to take part in active politics specially to challenge male counterparts and assert their political rights are ridiculed as immoral, badly brought up, unruly. The historical patriarchal exclusion of women and girls from access to and participation on an equal basis with men in public institutions and systems of governance poses the greatest challenge to gender-equitable human resource development. Despite the gains reflected in the different countries, women's representation in political decision-making continues to increase but at a dragging pace, with three-quarters of parliamentary seats still held by men, placing women at the margins of decision-making spaces.

**This will eventually lead to a shift in how the role of women is viewed as victims of conflict and emphasis put on their ability to create transformation both in peace-making and peacebuilding and their impact recognised.**

From Burundi, it is clear that the best practices and lessons learned over the years have not been pragmatically consolidated and protected, and therefore the rightful place for women in decision-making has gradually disappeared. Christella Niyonzima calls for the strengthening of laws on women's political participation in Burundi. To facilitate women's meaningful participation in electoral processes in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Dechy Chinyabuuma calls for women empowerment strategies be adopted to help them push their political participation beyond the space offered by state structures such as increasing their access to quality education, participation in decision making processes at domestic and public levels. Perry Aritua calls for gender responsive voter education and regular documentation to assess progress, gaps and best practices for gender equality in electoral processes. Using the Women's Situation Room mechanism in Uganda, Pauline Kahuubire calls for the engagement of women right at the very beginning of peace processes for lasting impact. This will eventually lead to a shift in how the role of women is viewed as victims of conflict and emphasis put on their ability to create transformation both in peace-making and peacebuilding and their impact recognised.



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