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Instruction manual for better governance

Step one: Put more women at the top

Mexico has just elected its first female president, following a rare contest between two women, and a record number of women were recently elected to South Korea's National Assembly. But while these results represent welcome gains for gender equality, they are outliers. The broader picture is disheartening.

Consider, for example, another recent election. Thirty years after the end of apartheid and the first free vote – and despite impressive strides (led by women) toward gender equality in other domains – the people of South Africa still have not had a chance to elect a woman to the country's highest office.

Nor is South Africa an outlier. In Portugal's parliamentary election in March, only 76 women won seats, down from 85 in the previous election. Even though most of the South Africans who went to the polls last week were women, all the country's major parties are still led by men. Given that we are in a super election year – when around half of humanity will cast ballots – the stakes have rarely been higher for women's representation and participation in public life. Yet, in the three largest countries voting this year – Indonesia, India and the United States – the main contenders for the highest office have all been men. And in Africa, where 19 countries will have held elections by the end of the year, a woman is likely to become president in only one: Namibia.

Practical benefits

Our global targets and commitments related to gender equality are in jeopardy. The latest data from the United Nations show that, if the current trend holds, it will take 47 years for women to be represented equally in national parliaments and other elected bodies. That will be 41 years past the deadline to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal for gender equality (SDG 5).

Ensuring that women have political power and are equally represented in decision-making is not only morally right; it also yields practical benefits. When women occupy positions of political leadership, they are more likely to emphasise the policies that are central to sustainable development — from ensuring that people have access to safe drinking water to providing affordable childcare. Moreover, countries that pursue these goals and strive for gender equality in government are more likely to have strong protections for human rights. Research even shows that overall economic performance improves as women bring their unique experiences to bear on policymaking.

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While life in much of the world has come to feel more turbulent, regressive, and authoritarian in recent years, women have been resisting these trends, by supporting national mobilisations for political change and combating exclusionary policies. Their efforts show that it is not too late to reverse the disturbing trend that we are seeing in this year's elections.

Electing more women to political leadership remains crucial. But meaningful, lasting progress requires governments and philanthropies to empower more women to seek these positions. In 2022, projects focused solely on gender received no SDG-related funding whatsoever. In fact, SDG 5 lags far behind the 16 other SDGs, and the effects of the funding shortfall are already visible around the world.

Greater investment and more initiatives needed

As women leaders, we have a duty to call out inaction on gender equality. Through a new Women's Political Leadership Fund, Open Society Foundations is doubling down on its investment to make bold women political leaders the global norm. The goal is to help tear down the oppressive and discriminatory structures that have blocked women from driving transformative changes in their societies.

Similarly, the Ellen Johnson Sirleaf Presidential Center for Women and Development has committed to supporting accomplished and aspiring women public leaders through its flagship Amujae Initiative. More than 40 Amujae Leaders have campaigned for climate security, equitable health care, accessible finance and inclusive digital technologies, and some of them are now campaigning for political office in several African countries.

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In addition to our own efforts, there are dedicated civil-society groups that remain steadfast in championing women's rights and freedoms. But they are competing for shrinking sources of funding. Until bilateral and multilateral donors and philanthropies put more money on the table, women, particularly in low-income countries, will continue to suffer from the lack of investment in their empowerment. We must not shy away from supporting initiatives that are solely focused on getting more women into elected and appointed positions. Women already face enough obstacles as it is.

Let's make 2024 a year when we empower the next generation of women leaders. Together, we can build a future in which strong female leaders are a driving force in politics.

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