

Gender and age gaps in voice & agency in community governance

The value of female local political representation in India and Africa South of the Sahara under intensifying conflicts and climate uncertainty

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Gender gaps in voice and agency persist in developing countries, threatening inclusive development, including for agrifood systems. Gender gaps in political participation and collective action are particularly large. Closing these gaps is essential for meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and fostering inclusive and sustainable agrifood systems. However, it is a sizeable policy challenge—particularly in fragile environments that face recurring conflicts and growing climate uncertainty that threaten to further widen gender gaps.

Key findings include the following:

- In both India and Africa South of the Sahara (SSA), women are consistently significantly less likely than men to contact local government councilors, join various organizations, attend and raise issues at community meetings, or join others to request government actions.
- These gaps exist for both older and youth populations; younger women are often the least likely to engage in these activities.
- Intensifying conflicts and more severe climate abnormality are associated with larger gender gaps in political participation and collective action.
- Women are a minority among local government officials. However, where women hold local political offices, adverse effects of conflict and climate shocks on political participation for women are less severe.

BACKGROUND

Expanding women's voice and agency (VA) within governance and decision-making has increasingly been recognized as necessary for promoting women's welfare, community development, and inclusive food systems. VA are critical components of gender equality, in addition to access to resources and economic opportunities. While agency relates to an individual's ability to make meaningful choices (our specific focus is on choices made beyond the household), voice within community governance and decision-making relates to an individual's ability to play a public role in decision-making processes that affect one's life. Exercising VA within community

governance and decision-making involves having a meaningful say in the public sphere. Women's VA within communities may strengthen resilience, increase women's access to essential resources, improve women's decision-making power in various domains including the household, and facilitate broader social networks for women (Njuki et al. 2021). Sustainable Development Goal five on gender equality specifically targets the full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership for women at all levels of political life. However, gender gaps in VA are persistent. These gaps can be further aggravated by adverse external shocks, such as climate uncertainty and conflicts, which can impact resources, capital, and economic opportunities and which are often disproportionately harmful to women.

This policy note highlights the importance of understanding gender gaps in VA as a baseline for understanding women's well-being and the potential for inclusive food system transformation strategies. The analysis focuses on 29 African countries as well as on India – contexts in which inclusive food system transformation is urgently needed amid climate and conflict shocks, which often disproportionately affect women. We review gender gaps in key indicators of political participation and collective action, drawing from recent studies by Takeshima et al. (2022) and Kosec et al. (2023). We also examine gender gaps between youth (who we define as those aged 35 or younger) and older adults to understand VA dynamics for these groups.

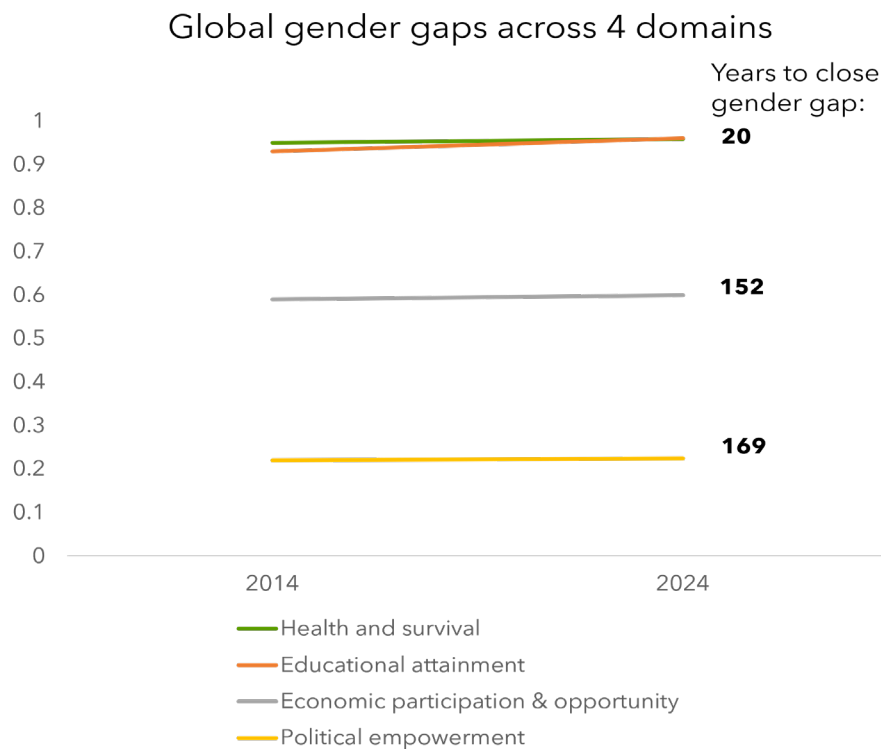
We first review differences by gender and by age in key measures of VA within communities. We then discuss results from a careful empirical analysis of how conflict and climate shocks relate to women's ability to exercise VA within communities. The analysis then turns to an examination of how women's leadership within local governance interacts with climate and conflict shocks. The revealed patterns of women's VA in these fragile contexts reveals promising strategies for women's empowerment across a wide variety of settings.

GENDER AND AGE GAPS IN VOICE AND AGENCY WITHIN COMMUNITIES

The World Economic Forum (WEF) estimates that at current rates of progress, it will take 134 years to reach gender equality (World Economic Forum 2024). Across the four domains they track—economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment—the gender gap in political empowerment is the largest by far and is the area of least recent progress. Figure 1 graphs WEF's women's gender parity scores over the last 10 years, illustrating the magnitude of the gap as well as the lack of progress over the past 10 years.

While Figure 1 highlights gender gaps at the global level, the measures used to assess the gaps emphasize national-level political representation. Yet, understanding local level gender gaps in VA is equally important given that communities make many decisions that shape women's lives and livelihoods, are often responsible for implementing national policies, and play an important role in mediating individuals' relationship with national representatives and institutions. Individuals can exercise VA within communities in a number of ways. The ultimate goal is that all members of a community are able to participate in the process of making choices about their lives and policies of their communities and that all voices count within decision-making processes. Individuals could participate by attending and speaking up in community meetings or by directly contacting local representatives or public officials to share their opinions on community needs (alone or as a group), among other means.

Figure 1 Global gender gaps across different domains of women’s empowerment



Source: World Economic Forum (2024).

We assess gender gaps in political participation and collective action using Afrobarometer Data for 29 countries in SSA (Figure 2), and the World Values Survey Data for India (Figure 3). For countries in SSA, we consider five different forms of exercising VA within communities, captured for individuals aged 18 or older:

1. Contacting local government officials
2. Attending a community meeting
3. Joining with others to request government action
4. Joining with others to raise an issue at a community meeting
5. Being a member of a voluntary association or other community group

While the first two measures are actions that individuals *can* take on their own to express their views, to make claims within government programs, and to learn about community and governmental affairs, the latter three measures are actions that *require* individuals to engage in collective action. Both are important pathways to exercising VA (Kosec et al., 2024). All measures refer to actions taken within the past 12 months.

For India, we consider four different forms of exercising VA within communities, captured for individuals aged 16 or older:

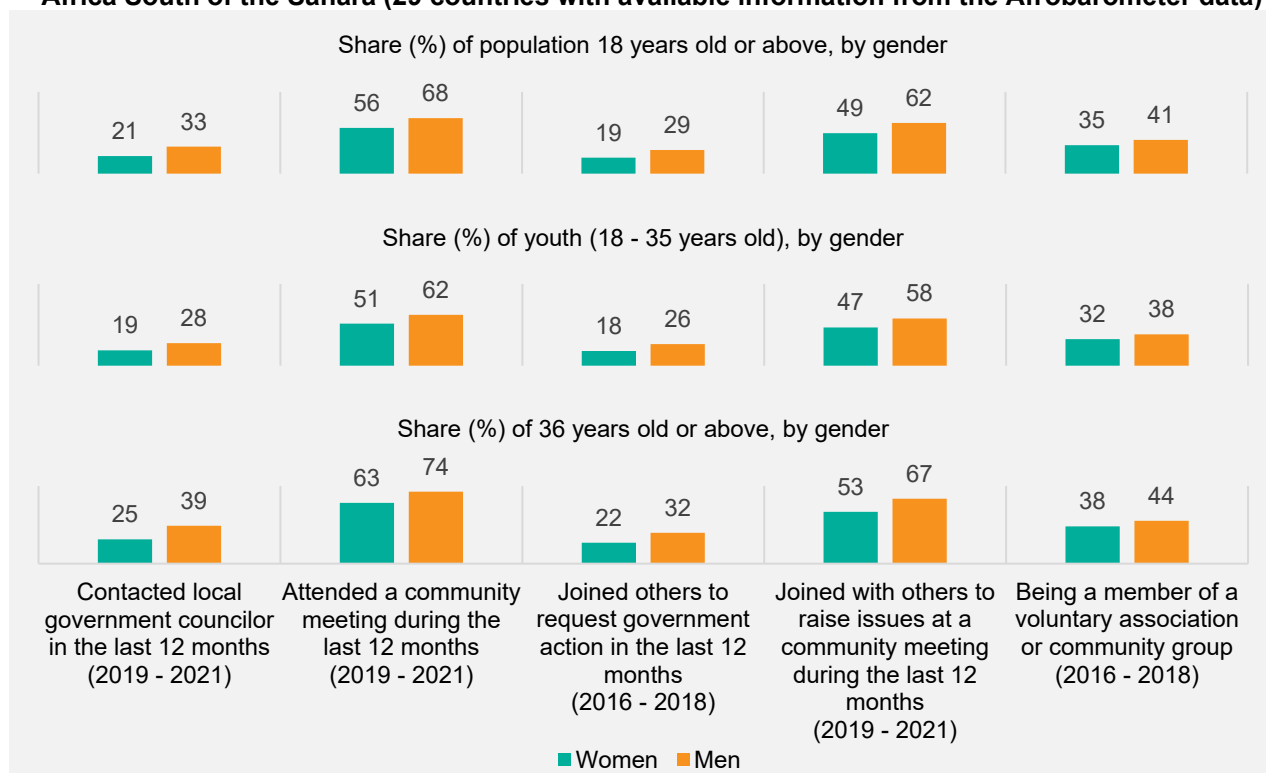
1. Contacting a local government official
2. Signing a petition
3. Being a member of a local group
4. Being an active member of a local group.

Again, as for the SSA measures, these comprise a mix of actions individuals *may* take alone (measures 1 and 2) and those that *necessitate* getting involved with a group (measures 3 and 4).

Broadly, women in both SSA and India are significantly less likely than men to exercise VA within communities. Specifically, over the period 2016-2021 in SSA,¹ 21 percent of adult women (18 years old or above) contacted local government councilors, 56 percent attended a community meeting, 19 percent joined others to request government actions, 49 percent joined with others to raise issues at a community meeting, and 35 percent were members of voluntary associations or community groups (Figure 2; all within the past 12 months).

Figure 2. Gender gaps in political participation across countries in the Africa South of the Sahara

Africa South of the Sahara (29 countries with available information from the Afrobarometer data)



Source: Authors' compilations based on the Afrobarometer data. Figures are weighted averages from 29 SSA countries (16 from Western and Central Africa and 13 from Eastern and Southern Africa) reporting the outcome indicators for 2019 – 2021 in the Afrobarometer data, except for two indicators (“joined others to request government action” or “being a member of a voluntary association or community group”) which were only available for 2016 – 2018 in the Afrobarometer data. Figures are adjusted for both within-country and cross-country variations in sample weights.

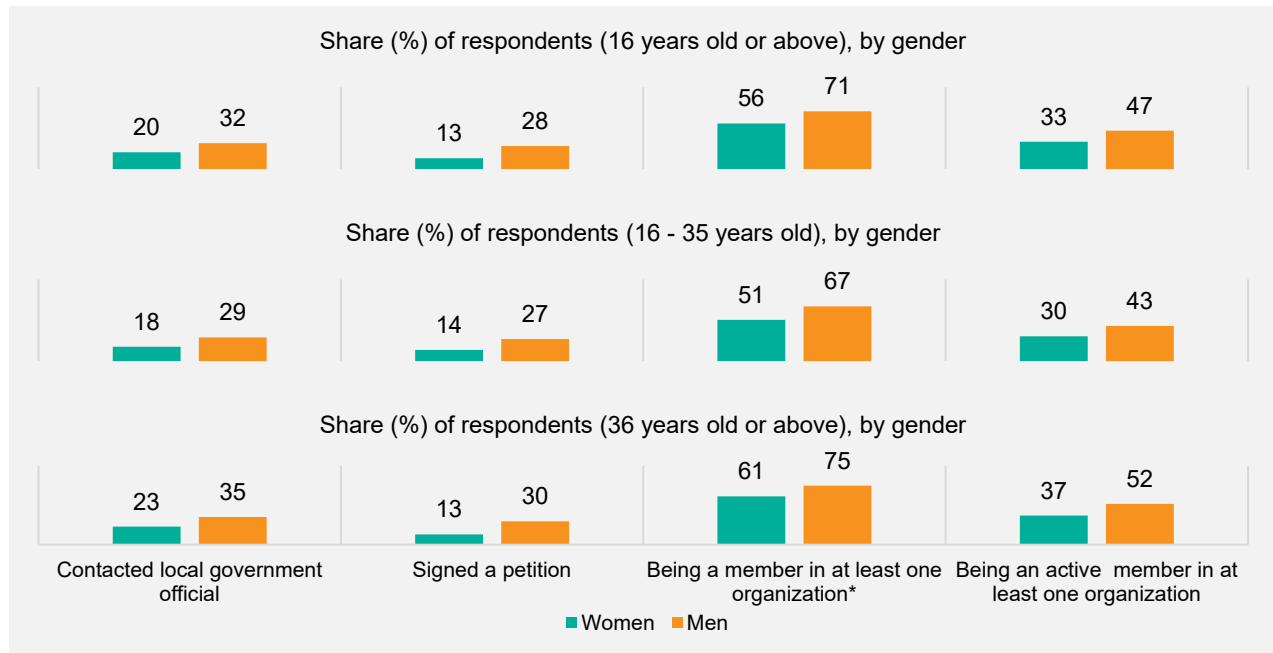
Across all measures, both female and male youth exercise VA within communities at lower levels than do older adults, and female youth exercise VA at the lowest levels. This is consistent with findings that African youth participate less in elections than older adults (Resnick and Casale, 2014). Gender gaps are remarkably similar across both youth and older adults, with women consistently about 10 percentage points less likely than men to engage in these forms of VA in both age groups. The fact that gender gaps persist across both youth and the older generation suggests that gender gaps will not necessarily close over time without gender transformative approaches and interventions.

As noted above, we are able to analyze similar (though not identical) measures of VA within communities in India. Specifically, we look at four measures: contacting local government officials, signing a petition, being a member of a local group, and being an *active* member of a local group. In India in 2022/2023, 20 percent of women 16 years old or above contacted local government officials, 13 percent signed a petition, 56 percent were members of at least one organization, and

¹ Different countries have different reference periods depending on when surveys were fielded, but all were fielded between 2016 and 2021 (inclusive).

33 percent were active members. Across these measures, women were 12 – 15 percentage points less likely than men to engage in these actions (Figure 3), a higher gender gap in VA within communities than that observed in SSA. Similar to SSA, youth of both genders were generally less likely to exercise VA within communities than were older individuals, though gender gaps persist at similar levels among both youth and older adults.

Figure 3. Gender gaps in political participation in India (2023)



Source: Authors' compilations based on the World Values Survey data.

*Organizations include church/religious organizations, labor unions, political parties, environmental organizations, professional organizations, charitable/humanitarian organizations, and consumer organizations.

Aggravating gender gaps with intensifying conflicts and climate uncertainty

Gender gaps in VA within communities may be shifting given increasing conflict and climate stress. Estimates from a smaller set of countries in SSA—the 13 SSA countries² studied by Kosec et al. (2023)—reveal that intensifying conflicts and climate abnormalities are associated with wider gender gaps in women's VA within communities (Figure 4). A one standard deviation (1SD) increase in the number of violent events in local administrative units reported in the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) is associated with a significantly lower likelihood of adult women contacting local government councilors (3.6 percentage points (pp)), attending community meetings (9.5 pp), joining others to request government actions (3.6 pp), joining with others to raise issues at community meetings (6.0 pp), and being members of a voluntary association or community group (6.3 pp) (Figure 4, top panel). On average, conflicts are linked with lower VA within communities for both women and men, though local conflicts are associated with a significantly lower probability of attending community meetings for women than for men, indicating that women's participation in community meetings is even more negatively affected than men's.

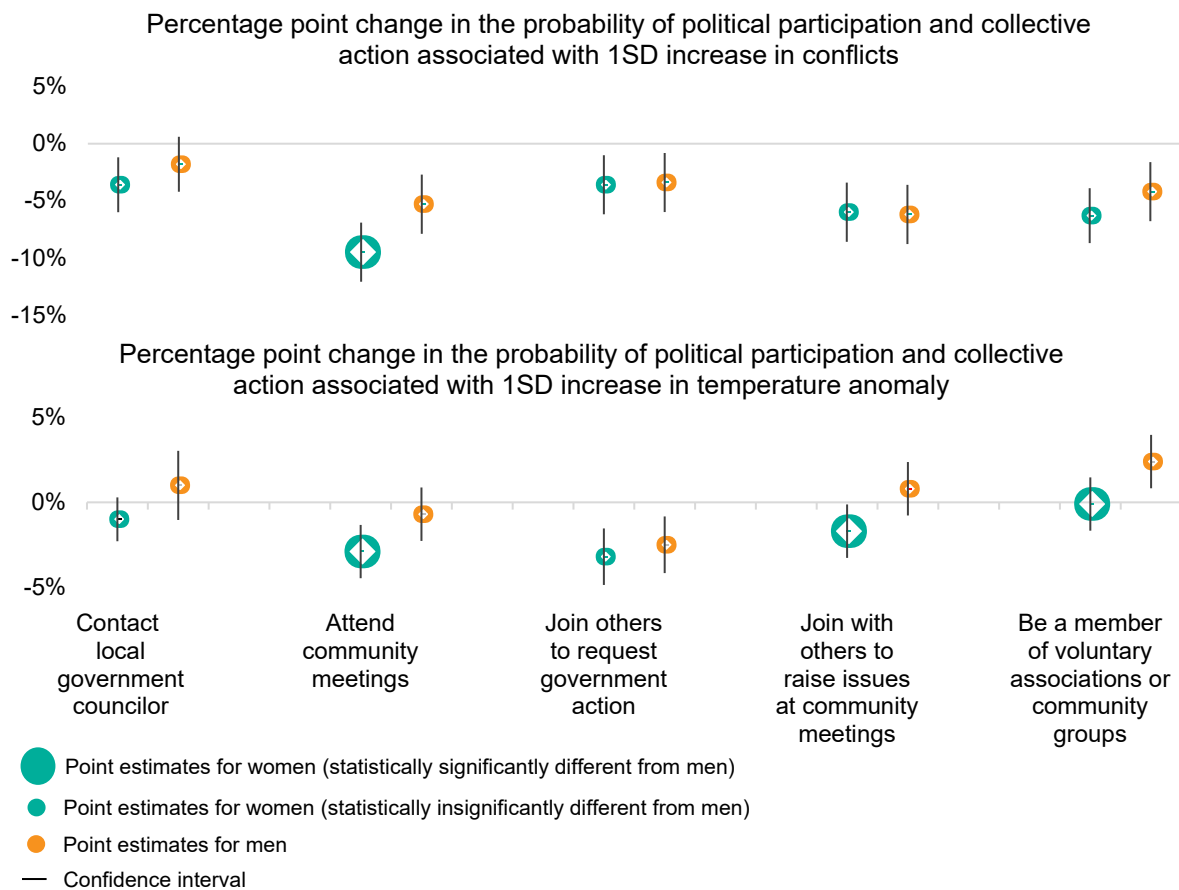
For the same set of outcomes, a one standard deviation increase in temperature anomaly (measured as an absolute z-score with respect to the historical mean and standard deviation) is associated with a lower likelihood for adult women by 1.0, 2.9, 3.2, 1.7, and 0.1 pp of contacting local councilors, attending community meetings, joining with others to request government actions, joining with others to raise an issue at a community meeting, and being a member of a community group, respectively, many of which are statistically significant (Figure 4, bottom panel). Importantly,

²These countries include Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Namibia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

for three out of five outcomes, these associations were statistically significantly more negative for women compared to men.

The negative associations between conflict and climate shocks and VA within communities indicates clear need to focus on supportive interventions for VA in fragile settings. Greater affectedness for women suggests that gender-transformative approaches are needed in these settings to help overcome the even greater barriers for women compared to men.

Figure 4. Associations between intensifying conflicts / climate shocks, and political participation / collective action, by gender (among 13 SSA countries studied by Kosec et al. (2023))

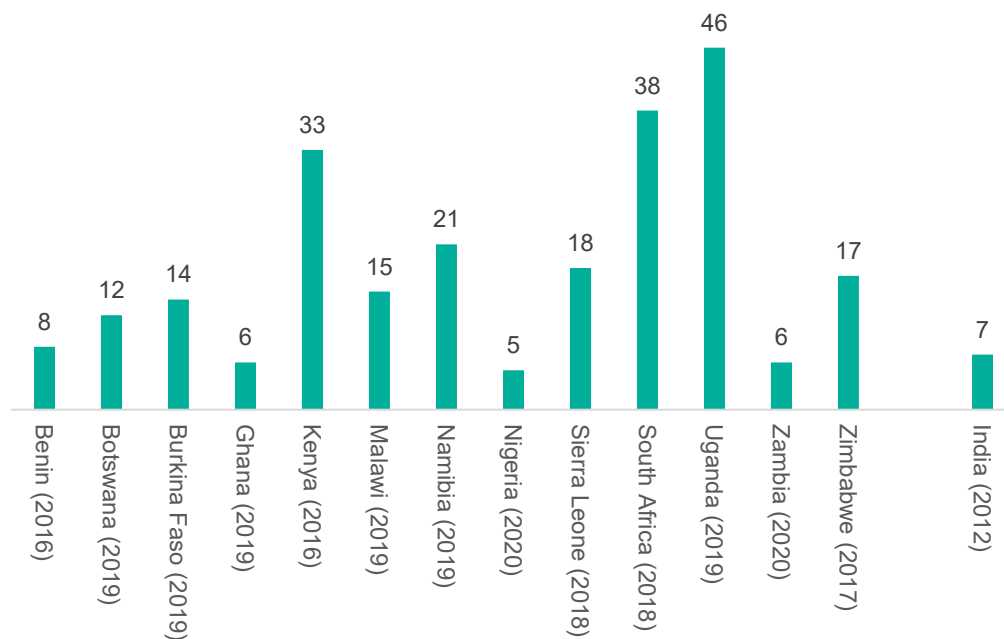


Source: Based on Kosec et al. (2023 Table A1). 1SD = One standard deviation.

THE ROLE OF FEMALE POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN LOCAL OFFICE

Introducing gender quotas for political representation is often promoted as a policy solution for closing political gender gaps. With women’s equality in political leadership positions as one of the measures for Sustainable Development Goal five on gender equality, raising the number of women holding formal public office has been an increasing focus internationally. While more women in political positions of power would close representation gaps, it is less obvious whether such quotas can facilitate women’s individual and collective VA within their communities. In India and selected SSA countries with available data, women still account for small shares of the officials representing local constituencies in the subnational assemblies (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Shares (%) of female elected officials in subnational political offices in selected SSA countries and in India^a

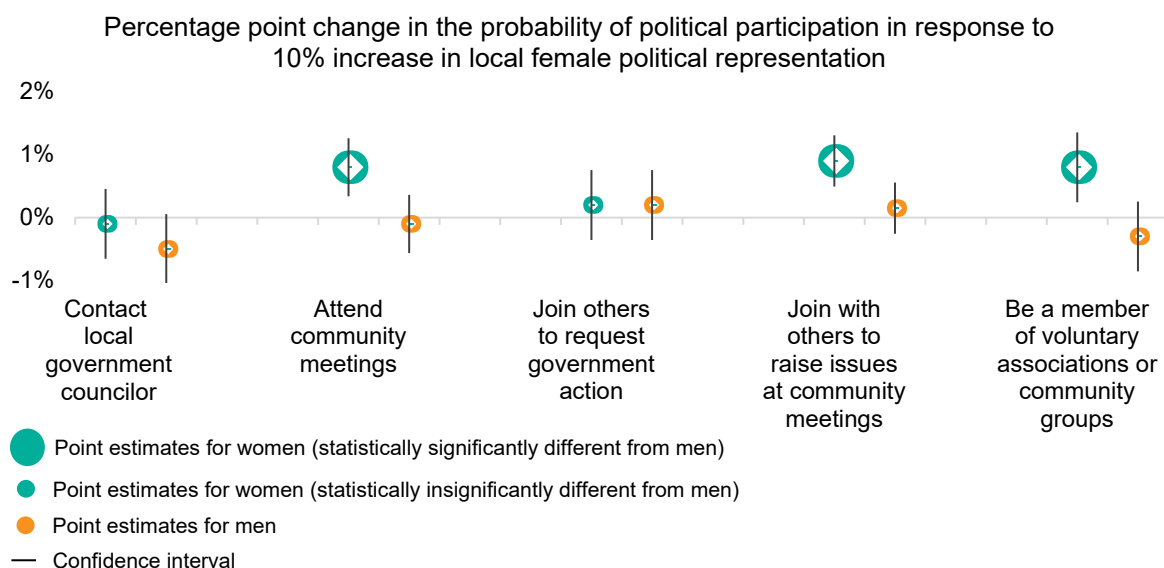


Source: Authors' compilations from various datasets described in Takeshima et al. (2022) and Kosec et al. (2023).

^aFigures are for the locality and years that overlap with the Afrobarometer data and India data used in Takeshima et al. 2022, Kosec et al. (2023)

Among the 13 SSA countries studied by Kosec et al. (2023), a 10% higher share of women among local elected officials is associated with about a 1 pp higher probability that adult women attend community meetings, join with others to raise issues at these meetings, or are members of voluntary associations or community groups (Figure 6). These associations for women are statistically significantly more positive than those for men, thus suggesting the value of women's political representation for narrowing gender gaps in local political participation and collective action.³

Figure 6. Associations between female political representation and political participation / collective action, by gender in select SSA countries^a



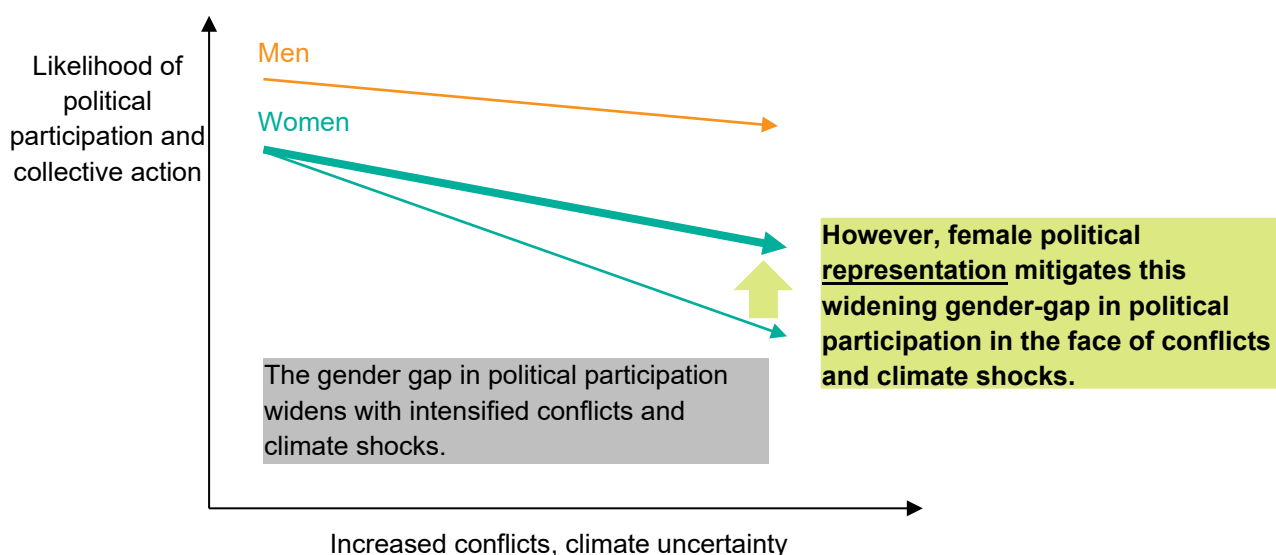
Source: Based on Kosec et al. (2023).

^aThese countries include 13 SSA countries studied by Kosec et al. (2023)

³It is important to note that the confidence intervals can have some overlaps even though their differences are statistically significant.

These associations between higher female political representation and a smaller gender gap in political participation/ collective action are particularly pronounced in areas confronting severe climate uncertainty and intensifying conflicts. Specifically, Kosec et al. (2023) find that, while women’s political participation and collective action are statistically significantly more negatively affected by climate shocks and conflict than are men’s, having greater female representation in local offices statistically significantly mitigates these negative effects. Figure 7 provides a theoretical diagram illustrating how these relationships work in practice. Specifically, as climate or conflict shocks intensify, gender gaps are expected to grow—but women’s political participation may reduce or eliminate their growth.

Figure 7. Mitigating role of female political representation on political participation gender gaps in the face of intensifying conflicts and climate shocks^a



Source: Authors based on Kosec et al. (2023).

^aStylized illustration based on empirical results in Kosec et al. (2023).

IMPLICATIONS

Both policy actions, as well as continued research to inform such actions, are essential for narrowing gender gaps in VA within communities, especially in developing countries that are increasingly fragile due to conflicts and climate uncertainty. This policy brief offers several policy implications:

- Findings suggest that greater female representation in local governments can support women’s VA within communities. Policies like gender quotas and measures to foster and train future women leaders, or to train women citizens on how to engage their local government around their needs, hold promise for closing gender gaps in women’s individual and collective VA within communities. Particularly critical here are gender transformative approaches that help buck traditional gender norms and create new spaces in which women can effectively exercise VA. Female political representation should also be promoted through the longer-term “trickle-up” processes such as education and the promotion of female labor force participation. Further research examining potential pathways through which female political representation can narrow gender gaps in political participation and collective action, and broader dimensions of VA beyond the household, is also critical.
- Efforts to address conflicts and climate uncertainty are also essential in preventing widening gender gaps in political participation and collective action, as well as other forms

of VA within communities more generally. Addressing these sources of fragility is critical for the voice of both women and men, though women seem more affected than men across several measures.

- Finally, gender gaps do not appear to be closing in either SSA or in India across generations, and findings indicate that young women exercise VA within communities at the lowest levels. Future research should identify solutions and approaches that work for each age group—but youth in particular—to ensure that socioeconomic and institutional barriers are considered when developing solutions. Attention is needed here to the multiple, intersecting social identities that women and youth may have.

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