

# Reinventing the discussion on women's participation

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Speakers at the Women in Power event: Esther Murungi (left), minister of parliament of Nyeri County in central Kenya and Binti Ali Kiza (right), co-founder of women's voice movement, Sauti Ya Kinamama. Photo by: VSO

Women's political empowerment is often measured in numbers: How many countries are currently headed by a woman? How can we push for that two-thirds gender rule in parliament?

But instead of counting how many women are elected in office, Esther Murungi, currently on her second term in office as minister of parliament of Nyeri County in central Kenya, suggested the push should be on finding those women willing to serve and have a cause they are passionate about.

"What I always say is even if you get women into politics, don't just go for women per se — go for quality women, not the quantity," she told Devex Tuesday at the sidelines of the Women in Power reception set up by the [Voluntary Services Overseas](#) and [U.N. Women](#) in London. The event highlighted the importance of women's participation and talked about the current negotiations on the issue in the sustainable development goals.

If citizens want someone to address the issue of water or improve health care services in their communities, the lawmaker argued, they shouldn't just vote for a woman for the sake of boosting their political participation. Instead, they should vote for a woman who is passionate about the cause, for "you know she'll address it," she said.

## Heckling and bullying, even from peers

But the MP also highlighted the different forms of violence — including bullying — that women running for office or in government service face, noting how it holds back some women from participating more in politics. For instance, several women who had been campaigning for a seat in parliament during Kenya's 2013 general elections reportedly withdrew their candidacies because of threats to their lives, including physical violence against their supporters.

Those who pushed through with their campaigns and got elected, like Murungi, continue to face

intimidation from their peers, even within party lines.

Murungi remembers being screamed down by what she described as “hooligans” brought by her male rivals while making a speech in public prior to her appointment as minister for gender and children’s affairs in 2008, and later on as minister for special program in 2010.

She also recalled having to wear tights under long skirts to avoid being exposed in public by those who are notorious for lifting female candidates’ skirts, and that male MPs are just as difficult to engage on women’s rights.

“They think a woman should not be elected. Not because you couldn’t do it, not for anything else, but because this is their terrain,” she said.

## **Women against women**

But men aren’t the only problem when it comes to women’s empowerment.

Binti Ali Kiza co-founded women’s voice movement Sauti Ya Kinamama in 2011. Based in Likoni, Kenya, the women’s rights advocate notes the community-based organization now has 6,500 members throughout the coastal region, a huge jump from the 50 members it had when it started.

Even so, Kiza, who has been fighting cultural practices that are pushing women deeper into poverty and providing them unequal rights, continues to meet resistance from women who do not support their work.

“[There are] women [who] are afraid [and] don’t want to talk, even if their right has been violated,” she said. But the activist wryly noted that some women just don’t like what they do. “They say we don’t have work to do, we don’t respect our husbands, and we’re like prostitutes [because we’re pushing for women’s rights].”

Money is an issue as well, she realized. In trying to spread the message to communities for example, Kiza claims she had to resort to open spaces as she couldn’t even rent a hall with her organization’s limited funding. This lack of funding has even rendered her incapable of providing much-needed assistance sometimes.

Kiza recalled one instance when she wanted to support a victim of sexual violence. But she couldn’t bring the victim to the police station or to the hospital as doing so required money she didn’t have.

“I want to follow up the case to the court, but I don’t have money,” she said.

## **Don’t keep the males out**

Focusing on girls and women’s rights though can elicit feelings of isolation among boys and men who might feel that their rights aren’t being respected and their needs aren’t being addressed.

Whenever Kiza’s organization conducts forums in schools to educate girls about their rights, the boys would also be coming to them and ask: “Why girls? What about us?”

“So at this point, we involve all — man, girl, boy and community at large,” the activist said.

The approach, usually done through what Kiza calls “outreach meetings,” works to the advantage of girls and women, she claims.

“To help a girl, if there is a problem at the community, the boy child and the man will say, ‘that is your problem.’ But if we involve all of them, they [will realize] this is our problem,” she concluded.

***Corinne Podger contributed reporting.***

**In what ways can we improve efforts to advance women's rights and increase women's political involvement? Let us know how we can #MakeItHappen by leaving a comment below.**

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