

# WHO GETS TO TAKE PART?

Toolbox for local governments to strengthen political participation with an intersectional perspective



## Executive summary

This toolbox aims to support local governments in strengthening political participation from an intersectional point of view. It guides readers to understand how different socio-economic, political, cultural, and gendered dynamics can affect people's ability to partake in political activities, and proposes practical approaches to integrating intersectionality into public policy processes.

The toolbox achieves this by a) exploring the concept of intersectionality and providing examples of how different social dynamics affect participation; b) demonstrating case studies, best practices, and frameworks promoting participation in the local governance arena, and c) using research, empirical evidence, and practical examples of tools for scaling up best practices and adapting these in new contexts.

*“Everybody counts in applying democracy. And there will never be a true democracy until every responsible and law-abiding adult in it, without regard to race, sex, colour, or creed, has his or her own inalienable and unpurchasable voice in government. That is the democratic goal toward which the world is striving today.”*

Carrie Chapman Catt (1917, p. 20).

*“The concept of intersectionality offers an explanatory potential that allows us to transcend the arithmetic metaphor (multiple domination as a sum of inequalities) and move on to a geometric metaphor (multiple domination as the intersection of various inequalities embodied in subjects). While some critics argue that intersectionality does not solve the problem, as it continues to presuppose differentiated and pre-existing roots of oppression, there is agreement that, at the very least, it offers new interpretations of a complex problem.”*

Alicia Migliaro González, Dina Mazariegos García, Lorena Rodríguez Lezica y Juliana Díaz Lozano (2020, p. 64).

*“There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives”*

Audre Lorde (1988/2003, p. 138).

## Authors

### Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) research team:

Juan Camilo Betancur Jaramillo – SEI Latin America

Janne Parviainen – SEI Oxford

Daniela Maestre-Másmela – SEI Latin America

Elisa Arond – SEI Latin America



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# 1. Introduction

## *Participation from an intersectional perspective*

**The core of this toolbox** is practical. It acknowledges that socio-economic, political, cultural, and gendered dynamics affect people's ability to participate in political activities. Injustices and marginalization disadvantage and disenfranchise women, Indigenous groups, and vulnerable groups in particular. An intersectional perspective acknowledges that “women” or “Indigenous people” are not homogenous groups, and that individuals within them experience inequity and discrimination in different ways. This toolbox presents an introduction to intersectional thinking, as well as practical approaches to understand how societal pressures, traditions, and practices diminish or create opportunities based on an interplay of factors, including income, age, education, gender, religion, sexual orientation, or ethnicity, and how to begin changing that.

**No two local democracies are the same:** every context introduces unique challenges and experiences that shape people's ability to participate through informal or formal ways. To understand who gets to take part, local governments must be able to comprehend, assess, and address barriers that different groups face. This is necessary for effective policy implementation that responds to real and varied needs.

**Sustainable Development Goals:** this toolbox contributes to the SDGs 5 (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls) and 16 (Peace, justice, and strong institutions), including SDG 16.7: Ensuring responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels. (Peace, justice, and strong institutions) includes a target 16.7: Ensuring responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels. As such, it measures both the quality of democratic institutions and the environment in which participation can freely happen. Out of all SDGs, none is as close to democracy as Target 16.7. However, promoting participation, inclusion, and representation remains difficult. Progress remains stagnant on many democracy indicators, and civil liberties have declined rapidly since 2015 (International IDEA, 2025). A lot of work remains to be done to safeguard democracies and promote participation, especially at the local level.

## Key concepts

**DEMOCRACY:** From the Greek political systems *dēmokratia*, meaning “rule by the people” *dēmos* (“people”) and *kratos* (“rule”) (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2026), it is a system of government in which power is held by elected representatives. These representatives are freely voted for by the people. In this system, all individuals have the right to participate in decision-making processes and express their opinions.  
(Cambridge, 2026)

**INTERSECTIONALITY:** “The interconnected nature of social categorisations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage; a theoretical approach based on such premise”.  
(Oxford University Press, 2015)

**OPPRESSION:** Structures and dynamics underpinning exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism or violence that erode autonomy.  
(Zutlevics, 2002)

**GENDER:** A group of people in a society who share particular qualities or ways of behaving that society associates with being male, female or another identity.  
(Cambridge University Press, 2025)

**PATRIARCHY:** Social structures and formation of male-gendered and privileging power that affects and directly shapes different arenas of social life, from family and communities to larger institutional contexts (police, military, the state or organised religion).  
(Ortner, 2022).

**SOCIAL JUSTICE:** A set of ideas, values and social practices to ensure that all persons and groups enjoy economic security, can participate effectively in democratic decision-making, exercise mutual respect and caring for one another and live their lives in ways that protect and sustain the natural environment for future generations.  
(Hurlbert and Mulvale, 2018)

Note: different conceptualisations and contextually dependent definitions exist.

## 2. The concept of political participation

### Forms of political participation

*How do people take part?*

**What is political participation?** For a person residing in a democratic country, the answer is often felt intuitively, linked to mechanisms associated with voting (the heart of modern democracies). However, there are other ways people engage with democracy. It is useful to begin with a few definitions and explore how participation can occur – especially in the absence of a universally agreed upon definition for the term “political participation” (Whiteley, 2012):

**Activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take (Verba and Nie, 1972, p. 2).**

**[...] any dimensions of activity that are either designed directly [...] or indirectly to impact civil society, or which attempt to alter systematic patterns of social behaviour (Norris, 2002, p. 16).**

**Political participation is any action by citizens that is intended to influence the outcomes of political institutions or their structures, and is fostered by civic engagement (Sairambay, 2020, p. 127).**

Figure 1: Concepts of political participation. Adapted from Whiteley (2012)

**Over time, definitions have moved** from understanding participation as a formal process (such as voting) toward acknowledging informal or unconventional forms of participation as legitimate engagement. In this context, van Deth (2001) describes 70 forms of participation, including social movements and protests.

**In practice**, the lack of consensus regarding what “counts” as participation leads to conflicting outcomes when trying to improve engagement. Here, we outline some forms of participation, to keep in mind when challenges and barriers are discussed later in this guide.



Figure 2: Different forms of political participation from formal (top) towards informal (bottom).

## Barriers to political participation

### *Who gets to take part?*

#### **The forms and benefits of political participation are not equally available to all citizens.**

Globally, research shows that women, marginalised, and indigenous groups face numerous barriers to partaking in democratic processes (Ara, 2019; Rathakrishnan et al., 2025). This can be due to structural barriers (such as a lack of legal status or limited electoral representation) or issues of inclusion. Factors like education, time availability, income levels, or cultural norms can also limit opportunities. Altogether, the wider social context shapes who and how people can participate in political activities.

**Limited participation of women and LGBTQI+ people** continues to characterise democracies around the world: on average, women remain underrepresented at all levels of politics, from local to national and international levels of governance, in terms of direct representation (Ara, 2019). Similarly, LGBTQI+ individuals face barriers to their political participation and are underrepresented in political positions (Gomes da Costa and Cruz, 2026). Key issues include limited access to financial resources, networks, and education, as women, girls, and LGBTQI+ individuals continue to be denied equal educational opportunities (Gomes da Costa and Cruz, 2026; Singh, 2024). Cultural and social norms also play a role. Patriarchal attitudes tend to discourage them from pursuing opportunities and leadership positions, undermine their opportunities in the political arena (Singh, 2024), and can also lead to a lack of self-confidence and dedication. These challenges are also reflected in electoral systems, political institutions, and party structures. In the context of Britain, the white, middle-class, and male-dominated environment at local and national levels has been identified as a continued barrier to women's participation, including evidence of direct and indirect discrimination, and the tendency of women to be selected for marginal seats only (Maguire, 2018). In Mexico, efforts to deliver on quotas for women's participation in elected government positions have faced barriers, including cultural and psychological limitations, marginalization of women in party-based practices, and the structural challenge of women's often heavier burden of care (Freidenberg, 2015). These examples highlight that such challenges cut across both the Global North and South.

**Many challenges may also affect women's and LGBTQI+ people's ability to campaign, volunteer, or otherwise organise around political causes.** For example, in Ethiopia, traditional gendered roles have been found to limit women's involvement (i.e., caring roles such as cooking, childcare, or cleaning) and the perception of women as inferior to men (Kassa, 2015). Claims based on religion, morality, biology, nationalism, and traditions have stigmatised the LGBTQI+ political agenda and participation, constraining the advance in LGBTQI+ rights

(Ayoub and Stoeckl, 2024). In the case of volunteering, care duties may underpin time poverty, or the lack of free time (for leisure, self-care, education, or political participation) due to excessive demands. Having the legal right to vote does not always guarantee opportunities to do so. In the case of Egypt, women are less likely than men to carry IDs, or these are carried by their husbands, leading to concerns about limited freedom to vote (So, 2022).

**Limited participation of Indigenous and marginalised groups** also continues to characterise democracies globally. Colonial legacies and the issues of land rights, structural discrimination, language, ambiguous legal status, insufficient communication, economic marginalisation, and other factors continue to limit their participation in formal governance mechanisms (Rathakrishnan et al., 2025). For example, in the United States, some Native American nations, like Indigenous Peoples in other countries, may not be officially recognized by the federal government (Emanuel and Wilkins, 2020). In Colombia, campesino rural communities face significant challenges in formalising collective land tenure through Campesino Reserve Zones (ZRCs) amid historical processes of dispossession. At the same time, they are transforming their practices and discourses in response to extractivism and climate change by promoting production systems that conserve local biodiversity and function as buffer zones for protected areas, such as national parks (Maestre-Másmela & Roa-García, 2023). Even more, formalising participation is not always enough to challenge existing power dynamics.

Other barriers and challenges include discrimination and marginalisation, limiting participation due to characteristics such as disability, age, caste, ethnicity, citizenship, sexual orientation, or religion, all of which may shape and underpin the formation of barriers to participation in diverse ways. These are discussed in detail in the following section.

## Why Intersectionality?

### *The hidden dynamics behind barriers to participation*

**Personal identities are multi-faceted and complex:** in addition to gender and indigeneity, characteristics or markers such as age, ethnicity, class, caste, sexual orientation, disability status, or religion can compound discrimination and add barriers to participation (ACE Project, 2025). These cannot be deemed exclusive from one another. Rather, they must be understood as interacting issues that can compound and exacerbate the dynamics of marginalisation, discrimination, and exclusion in unexpected ways. For example, all women or the elderly do not have the same preconditions or are affected by societal dynamics in the same way. Similarly, some elderly people have money, power, and influence despite reduced mobility, whereas others are increasingly isolated. Importantly, it is also necessary to recognise that such markers of identity are not the causes of marginalisation, but rather this is underpinned by various forms of oppression (Figure 2).

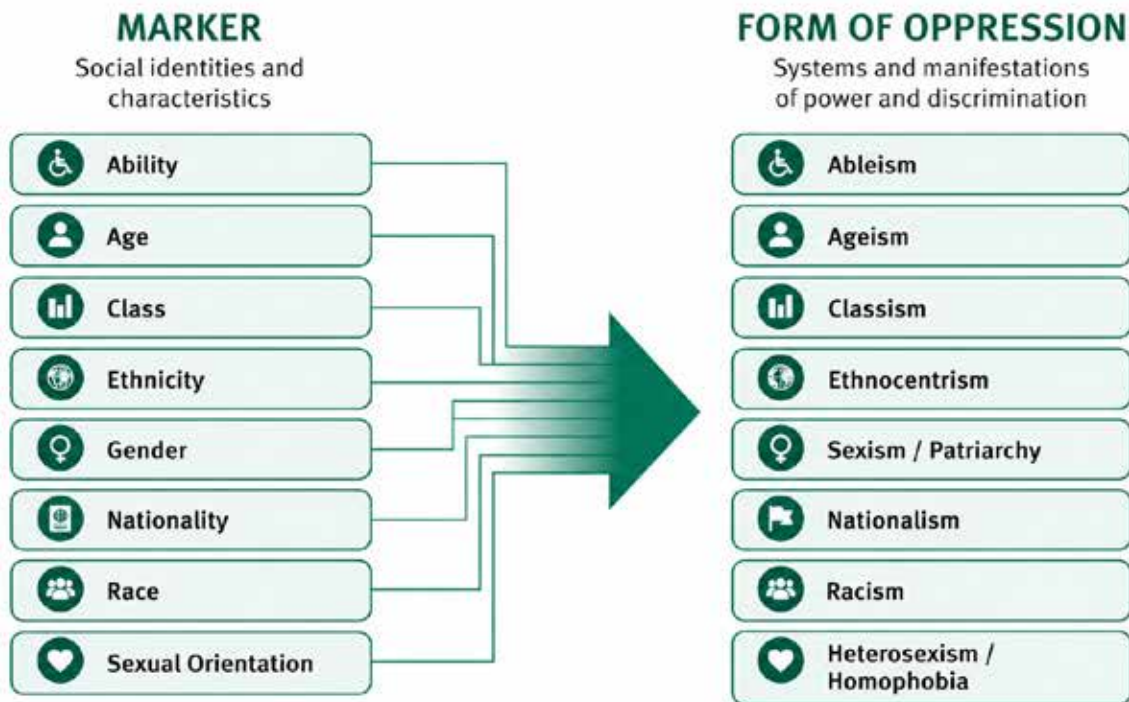


Figure 3: Identity markers and characteristics versus forms of oppression. Adapted from Mason (2010).

Intersectionality is a lens through which such dynamics can be analysed, alongside societal pressures and oppression that may compound or cause harm (Hill Collins, 2019). Understanding these can enable the design of mechanisms that promote participation beyond standard approaches like quotas, which tend to neglect dynamics and circumstances that prevent participation. This is especially true when political participation safeguards are challenged and civic space is constrained. An extreme example of this is the case of environmental defenders, who, in exercising their right to participation and protest, have lost their lives: of 196 environmental defenders killed in 2023, nearly half were Afro-descendant or Indigenous (Global Witness, 2024).

Individuals may face disadvantages based on both ethnicity and gender, or due to gender and disability. Working-class women from minority backgrounds may face heightened discrimination compared to individuals with higher income and education, or to individuals belonging to majority groups. Similarly, LGBTQI+ individuals may face discrimination due to their sexuality or gender alongside marginalisation due to their ethnicity or income, depending on the context. Combined, the effects of such dynamics can constitute differing levels of political participation and inclusion, even within groups sharing similar backgrounds or characteristics. Section 2.2 Practical approaches to promoting participation from an intersectional perspective exemplifies this further.

It is also necessary to recognise that dynamics of power and oppression shape participation at different levels of society (Mason, n.d.). Limited participation can be caused by formal structures such as the legal system, education, laws or religion, or informally within groups and families due to pressures emerging from family, friends, or community (Mason, 2010). Although interacting, recognising the sources of marginalisation may enable the development of more targeted interventions.

### 3. Strengthening participation from an intersectional lens

#### Stories of Popayán, Colombia

In Popayan, the capital of the Cauca department in Colombia, the case of the Women’s Advisory Council – an official local participatory body – offers important insights into applying an intersectional perspective to efforts to support women’s participation in public policy. The case illustrates how intersecting barriers related to gender, age, and socioeconomic status shape women’s engagement in local public policy and governance processes.



Figure 4: Women of Popayán’s Women’s Advisory Council and SEI researcher, Daniela Maestre.

The current members of the Council are between 55 and 75 years old, and their trajectories into political participation have been strongly influenced by gendered power relations. Many describe facing opposition from husbands with machista attitudes who restricted their access to education and professional development, relegating them primarily to domestic roles. In contrast, Council members perceive that younger women today – particularly those affiliated with academic institutions – experience greater autonomy to learn, engage with, and participate in political and policy spaces than their generation did. From their perspective, the key barrier is thus not access to education or information, but rather a generational divide in political engagement with the Council as a participatory space.

Additionally, several representatives entered the Council through collective nominations from their respective sectors and participated in the first elections in 2015 by running self-financed campaigns. These campaigns relied largely on personal savings and low-cost materials such as banners and flyers. This process highlights two initial key challenges, as political participation required both substantial unpaid labour and reliance on personal investment, adding to already heavy and largely unrecognised care responsibilities and paid work. Compared to men, women faced a disproportionate burden of unpaid and invisible labour, resulting in reduced financial autonomy and limited time for political engagement. Such circumstances may exclude many women with constrained resources and limited support mechanisms from participating in such democratic processes.

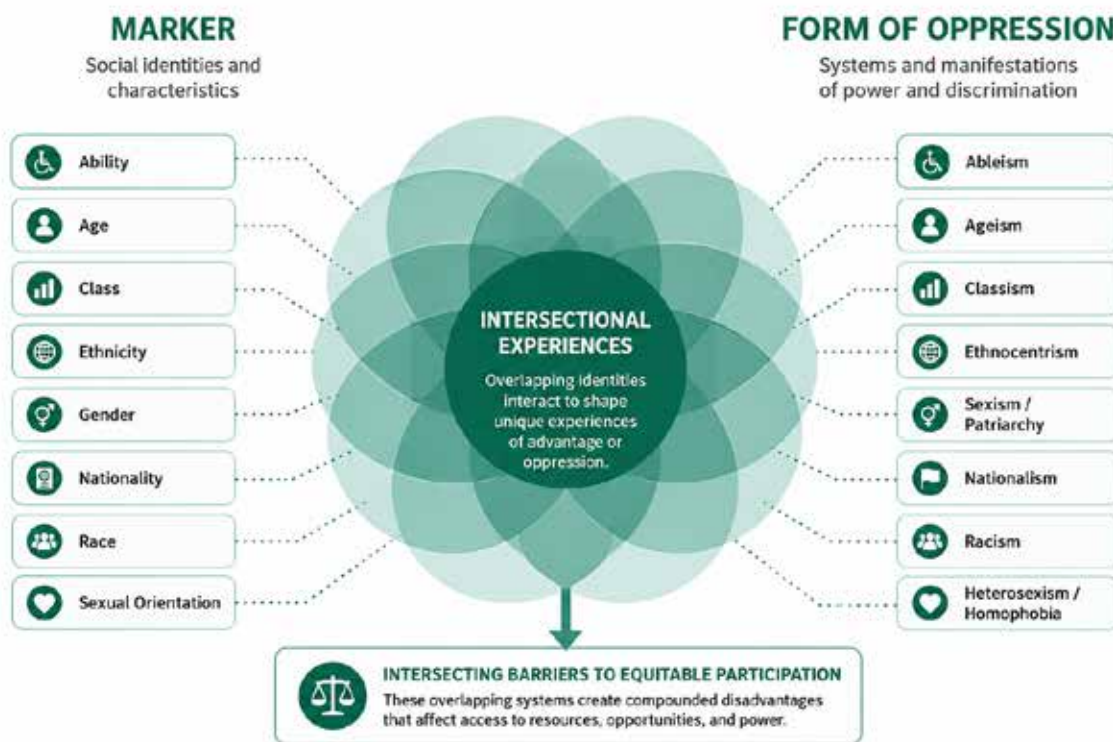


Figure 5: Adapted from identity markers and characteristics versus forms of oppression Adapted from Mason (2010) to show intersecting barriers to political participation, using the example of the Women’s Advisory Council of Popayan, in Colombia.

This case illustrates how an intersectional lens is essential for strengthening political participation, since simple social categories cannot represent diverse societies in accurate ways. The participation of those most marginalised and vulnerable hinges upon this recognition, and in its application through projects and interventions to respond to identified issues. In the context of participation, this means going beyond quotas, toward understanding how different groups and individuals interact with political systems, how and why some are excluded, and what they may need to meaningfully take part. Therefore, issues of intersectionality and inclusion should first and foremost be approached as an open conversation, creating spaces enabling such discussions.

## Practical approaches to promoting participation from an intersectional perspective

### First step: acknowledge intersectionality as a comprehensive lens

The first step to integrate intersectionality into local governance is to lean into curiosity, listening, and openness. While detailed surveys and other carefully designed quantitative and qualitative data collection methods can contribute to better identify and characterise intersectionality among different communities and populations, these methodologies are inadequate to represent individual experiences. Therefore it is necessary to develop additional methods of research and governance that recognise overlapping identity characteristics and the dynamics of oppression that may affect participation, as discussed under section 1.1. This starts with recognising one's own positionality and background: "how does my own identity affect and shape the way I approach and understand others?" For example, those who are able-bodied may not even be knowledgeable of the barriers people living with disabilities face in everyday life without listening to their experiences, and therefore might miss out on identifying the relevant questions to ask. The same applies to wealth: higher income groups generally struggle to understand the challenges faced by the poor.

Before jumping into action, it is always good to begin with a problem statement regarding issues of participation. What is the "problem"? According to whom? Who is affected by it, and how? **A desk review** is an easy start, followed by the identification of relevant stakeholders and groups. At the same time, it is useful to ask: are we the right people to conduct this research? Can we include someone else who widens our focus or connects us with other topics we may not be aware of? What are our motivations, and are we able to ask the right questions? Can we validate our findings with leaders of social movements or defenders of specific groups' rights? Are different forms of oppression in this context co-produced or interdependent?

Hankivsky (2014) provides guiding questions to support planning and reflection (Figure 6):

**What knowledge, values and experiences do you bring to this area of policy analysis (and action)?**

**What is the participation “problem” under consideration?**

**How have discussion about political participation come about, i.e., who has introduced the topic, and why? Does it emerge from affected groups, or someone else?**

**How are groups differentially affected?**

**What are current responses to the strengthening participation processes?**

**What inequalities exist in relation to political participation?**

**Where and how can interventions be made to improve the situation?**

**What are feasible short, medium and long-term solutions?**

**How will proposed interventions or policy responses reduce inequalities or support participation?**

**How can the implementation and uptake be assured and sustained?**

**How will you know if the issues have been addressed? What worked and why? What did not work?**

Figure 6: Guiding questions for intersectional planning and reflection. Adapted from Hankivski (2014).

## Other resources

**The Women of Color Policy Network** at NYU Wagner has introduced an Intersectional Approach for Policy and Social Change. This Model provides an overview of intersectionality and practical approaches for identifying issues, gathering data, and guiding policy advocacy campaigns. It also includes a list of useful working definitions and suggested readings.

**The Institute for Intersectionality Research and Policy** has developed a helpful 101 guide to understanding intersectionality in the context of governance. It introduces relevant topics, including issues of power, reflexivity, justice, equity, and resistance, and provides examples of how intersectionality relates to issues such as climate change and public health.

**The Deaconess Foundation** has introduced a Training Manual for intersectionality. This introduces basic concepts and provides practical exercises for identifying different forms of discrimination. The Manual also provides examples of how racism and oppression can underpin marginalisation and guidance for facilitating practical activities within organisations to understand and promote inclusion.

## Second step: listening to local social movements

The second step in integrating intersectionality into local governance is acknowledging continuous learning and understanding as core pillars (Taylor, 2019). To identify why groups may become excluded from political activities, it is important to listen to the experiences of oppressed groups, including women, LGBTQI+ groups, of different ages and ethnicities, to form a richer understanding of who can access what spaces and why. It is important to keep in mind that those most impoverished, most vulnerable, and most marginalised are often rendered invisible, and tend not to reach out or are unable to meaningfully participate in governance processes due to pressures of income, time, education, and access. Consider the following case studies and experiences:

### **The Agta and the Northern Sierra Madre Natural Park, the Philippines.**

The Agta are an Indigenous group of hunter-gatherers, settled along the coasts and rivers of northeastern Luzon within the Natural Park. As such, they hold one-third of the seats in the Park's management board and formally take part in its governance. However, as research by Minter et al. (2014) demonstrates, barriers can emerge even when safeguards and measures to protect participation and representation are in place. Further, although Agta are granted extensive resource use and settlement rights within the park (preventing them from being relocated or displaced against their will as per the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act of the Philippines), issues remain.

For example, the Park Management Plan only enables "traditional resource utilisation" but does not define what this would constitute. Zoning rules and regulations are inadequately communicated to the Agta, and issues such as commercial logging threaten their hunting, fishing and gathering grounds along the rivers. In theory, the management board could address these matters. However, the Indigenous representatives within the board are not elected, but appointed, and they are all men representing populations from certain regions (Minter et al., 2014). In terms of participation, Agta leverage remains weak: Agta matters have been discussed without the involvement of members, and the Agta are rarely involved with setting the agenda of meetings, rather, there is a tendency for participation to be limited to answering questions directed at them. Barriers are often practical: schedule changes do not reach Agta members on time, there are no financial mechanisms in place to support their travel, and the meetings are held in English, not well understood by Agta (who prefer Tagalog or Ilocano). Non-literacy limits their understanding of the procedures and processes, including meeting minutes and the contents of the agenda. Therefore, the Agta are not provided realistic chances to take part in participation (Minter et al., 2014).

From an intersectional perspective, the issues are magnified among Agta women (not included in the management committee) and among those who live in areas not represented on the

board. Those without the means to travel and pay for expenses associated with meetings cannot attend, resulting in low Agta participation in decision-making. Therefore, participation processes were described as “empty rituals” in the absence of meaningful measures to tangibly promote Indigenous involvement (Minter et al., 2014, p. 777).

### Intersectionality Assessment of Political and Electoral Participation in Ukraine

In Ukraine, Atkinson et al. (2020) provided an assessment of challenges affecting political participation by applying the intersectionality framework of the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) Framework. In their assessment, they noted that people across groups and backgrounds wish to participate in political life (Figure 7).

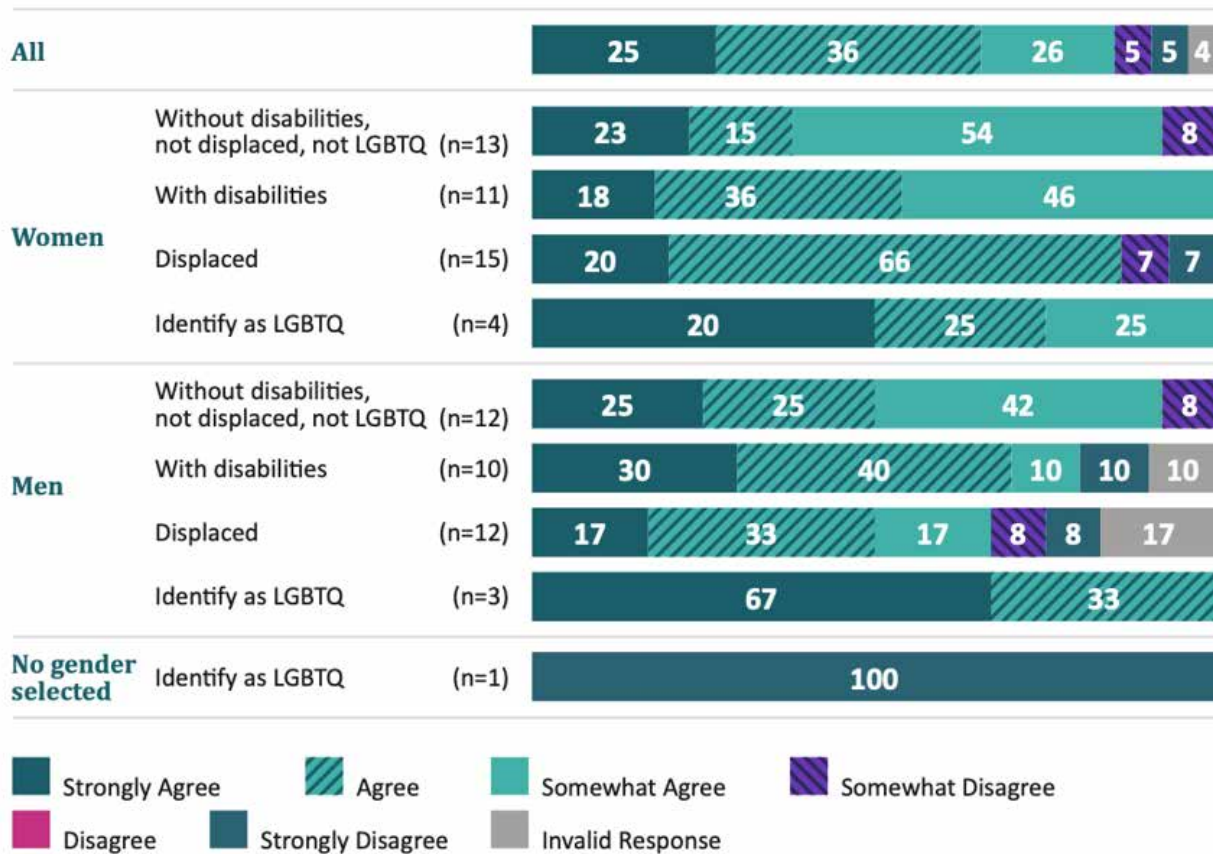


Figure 7: The degree to which participants agree or disagree with the statement, “I want to participate in political life” (Atkinson et al., 2020).

However, they also examined barriers that limits peoples’ ability to do so. For example, they found that the issues of personal safety and lack of protection affected women with disabilities and persons from the LGBTQI+ community more intensely (dissuading them from partaking in public rallies, marches or protests). The absence of hate crime legislation and the lack of trust in the police were noted by the LGBTQI+ community.

Lack of time was the most consistent obstacle faced by most groups. Women were much more likely to cite family and domestic responsibilities, and women who had been internally displaced faced this problem more than others (Atkinson et al., 2020). In contrast, men experienced financial responsibilities and the time required for employment as an issue that hindered political participation. Men and women with disabilities noted almost universal barriers to access, including lack of accessible locations (wheelchair ramps or lifts), materials and devices (for voters with visual, auditory or cognitive disabilities) designed to enable voting and participation in electoral processes. Some also noted discrimination by some government and polling station staff (Atkinson et al., 2020, p. 34).

In sum, comprehensive measures and understanding are required to enable equal participation across different groups, considering the context-specific barriers and challenges they may face due to discrimination or marginalisation. Participatory activities should be used to design strategies to support political participation, since the challenges may be invisible to those who do not face them in their everyday lives. These are discussed further in Section 6: Activities and Ideas.

### **Understanding intersectionality and political participation in Colombia**

Women's Advisory Councils in Colombia are formal, institutionalised bodies intended to represent women from diverse sectors at the municipal level. Bogotá, Colombia's capital, established the country's first Women's Advisory Council in 2009. In Popayán, in the southwest department of Cauca, the local Women's Advisory Council has operated since 2011 to strengthen women's participation and representation in local governance. The Popayán Council aims to represent 28 different sectors, including elder women, education, victims, and academics. Its composition is determined by municipal authorities – mayor's offices and legislative bodies – reflecting the institutional arrangements of each municipality. By bringing together women representatives from diverse sectors, Popayán's Women's Advisory Council enhances representativeness and provides decision-makers with first-hand insight into sector-specific needs and concerns.

However, political participation within the Popayán Women Advisory Council is shaped by complex social identities and power relations, making intersectionality a critical analytical tool. For example, a council member representing Indigenous women may experience political participation differently depending on factors such as age, experiences of armed conflict, household responsibilities, and ethnicity. Women in the Popayán Council have faced significant, historically rooted, and multi-layered barriers. Intersectional analysis highlights how different marginalisation forms co-produce one another, and compound their effects on people's well-being and agency. Many of these constraints are embedded in patriarchal cultures and their enduring legacies, which restrict women's access to public life and decision-making spaces, and render invisible the political work and public participation they already do.

At the same time, women's collective organisation through the Women's Advisory Council serves as a powerful catalyst for political engagement and collective action. Yet this potential remains constrained by siloed institutional mechanisms and limited material support. Economic autonomy emerges as a foundational condition for sustained political participation. Council members often must forgo paid work to attend meetings, while their unpaid care responsibilities accumulate. Many members live on limited incomes and, in some cases, even transportation to attend council sessions might mean a financial stretch. These realities underscore the need for stronger recognition, resourcing, and institutional support for Local Women's Advisory Councils as legitimate and effective advisory bodies within local governance systems.

On the other hand, the Bogotá's Women's Advisory Council demonstrates the potential of women's political participation to shape public policy when sustained institutional support is in place, benefiting from close coordination with Bogotá's Secretariat for Women and enabling continuous policy influence – most notably through its advocacy for the city's Care System. This system recognises, redistributes, and supports unpaid care work, providing free services for women in all their diversity, including those who perform care work and those who require different levels of care and support.

The effectiveness of Bogotá's Council is rooted in its integration of political dialogue, technical expertise, and institutional coordination with the Secretariat for Women. Also, the centralisation of political and economic power has benefited Bogotá's Women Advisory Council, being located in the country's capital. However, the Council's impact could be further strengthened by adopting a more explicit intersectional approach to representation. While the Council formally includes representatives from more than 50 sectors, further developing an intersectional lens would allow it to better capture how multiple forms of inequality overlap in women's lives.

More broadly, Local Women's Advisory Councils across Colombia reveal both persistent barriers to women's political participation and significant opportunities for transformation. These experiences highlight the value of strengthening such councils not only as consultative bodies, but as influential actors in local decision-making. Inter-council learning – through exchanges among cities on regulatory frameworks, institutional processes, and mechanisms for participation – can accelerate progress. Such efforts should prioritise council autonomy, effective coordination with local governments, and the systematic integration of intersectionality to ensure that policies respond to the full complexity of women's lived realities.

### Third step: community dialogue and non-conventional policy spaces

It is crucial to create and support conversation spaces about structural forms of inequity, promoting dialogue between individuals, communities, and their governments (whether at the local, municipal, or national levels). These may not be revealed in “consultation” meetings or through checkbox-based surveys, which may feel too formal or imposing to marginalised and vulnerable groups. Rather, there is a need to create safe spaces where marginalised communities are empowered to speak freely (Taylor, 2019).

For local governments, this can mean **arranging workshops or informal catch-ups** with marginalised citizens, in efforts to enable discussions and listening. To make sure the spaces remain open, accessible, and safe, it is good to refer to the guiding questions presented in this toolbox and consider people’s needs: are the venues accessible? Can participants join if child-care is not provided? Can they afford to take part in discussions regarding intersectionality, both in terms of transport and in terms of time spent? Is the format of the space part of the communities’ political practise? Traditional spaces such as mingas and community kitchens have the potential to transform local governance if local governments are willing to shift how they make policy decisions.

To raise awareness and improve community engagement, newsletters can be sent or published online, in efforts to communicate with different audiences. Such channels are also necessary to begin engagement processes and participatory planning: citizens should be aware of the plans of local authorities and the opportunities to contribute to governance. Importantly, the accessibility of messaging should be taken into consideration: for example, will they reach groups with visual or auditory disabilities?

This approach can support priority setting and stakeholder mapping by grounding problem definition in both evidence and lived experience. An initial desk review helps identify who is affected, how harms are distributed, and which groups and institutions are most relevant, while also prompting reflexive questions about who conducts the research, whose knowledge is included, and whose voices may be missing. Engaging affected groups through accessible and safe spaces – such as workshops or informal dialogues – allows local governments to better understand intersecting forms of disadvantage and validate findings with social movement leaders and rights defenders.

## Fourth step: putting knowledge into action

Based on lessons learned, barriers to political participation must be addressed: whether in terms of changing practices and structures of governance, funding for initiatives promoting inclusion, or simply opening doors to conversations designed to improve participatory governance, practical initiatives are required. To promote participation in meaningful ways, it is also necessary to ensure that diverse organisations working on the ground, and with issues of representation (such as women and women's rights organisations), can take the lead in the design of projects and interventions (Taylor, 2019).

There is no universal template for addressing these. However, there are numerous frameworks and approaches for tangibly addressing issues of political participation from a political perspective. These are designed by leading researchers and organisations in the field, selected here to help local governments in designing inclusive strategies and interventions.

As described in the second case study, the **International Foundation for Electoral Systems** has developed an assessment Framework to identify intersectional barriers and opportunities related to political participation. The assessment combines desk review of relevant laws, policies, observer reports, and media; key informant interviews; interactive focus group discussions; and feedback loops so that stakeholders can provide feedback for reporting. This information can then be used to support the development of intervention strategies.

It is also helpful to connect with networks and other organisations working on issues of participation, equity, and intersectionality.

**The ACE Electoral Knowledge Network**, including a resource pack on Gender and Elections: <https://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/ge/ge3/g31/gender-sensitive-legal-frameworks-and-policies-in>

**Alianza TEJI: Transición, Energía, Justicia e Igualdad:** Latin American alliance that brings together various actors to influence the design of just energy transitions with a focus on equity and intersectionality. <https://www.instagram.com/alianzateji/>

**ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly:** Women's Political Participation and Leadership Plan of Action Framework <https://aipasecretariat.org/plan-of-action-on-promoting-womens-political-participation-leadership-wppl/>

**The Latin American Council of Social Sciences (CLACSO)** has established several working groups regarding intersectionality and gender equity: <https://www.clacso.org/grupos-de-trabajo/grupos-de-trabajo-2023-2025/>

**Red Latinoamericana y del Caribe para la Democracia (REDLAD)** works to strengthen democracy, defend human rights, and promote social cohesion among Latin American citizens <https://redlad.net/https://www.hdl.fi/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Training-manual-about-intersectionality-and-multiple-discrimination.pdf>

## 4. Call to action

Who gets to take part is ultimately a question of how democracy is designed, resourced, and practised. To build a more inclusive local governance, decision-makers, policymakers, and institutions ought to move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches and commit to continuous, intersectional reflection and analyses on whose voices are heard, whose are missing, and what conditions make participation possible. In practice, this means opening institutions, sharing power, listening to social movements and civil society, and supporting the diverse ways people already participate in public life. The task ahead is not only to invite participation, but to reshape the systems that determine it.

### Activities and ideas for promoting political participation

#### Develop intersectional analyses of political participation

Before designing interventions, local governments and organisations should seek to understand who participates, who is excluded, and why. Intersectional diagnostics can help identify how barriers differ according to gender, age, disability, ethnicity, income, migration status, sexuality, rurality, or caregiving responsibilities. This can include participatory mapping exercises, surveys, interviews, focus groups, and community-led assessments. Data collection should combine quantitative and qualitative methods to capture lived experiences, which are often left aside from official statistics. Diagnostics should be validated with affected communities and social movements to avoid extractive or top-down interpretations.

#### Questions to consider include:

- Which groups are absent from participatory spaces?
- What practical barriers prevent participation?
- Who speaks during meetings, and who remains silent?
- Which forms of participation are recognised as legitimate?
- Are there differences between formal representation and meaningful influence?
- How can demographic data in surveys and interviews be used to understand the interactions between different forms of inequity?

## Audit the accessibility of participation spaces

Participation processes should be audited to establish if they are physically, economically, linguistically, digitally, and culturally accessible. Accessibility audits can help identify barriers related to transportation, childcare, disability access, domestic work, meeting schedules, internet access, language, safety, or administrative requirements. Accessibility is not optional and should be treated as a condition for participation.

### Practical measures may include:

- Providing childcare spaces during meetings
- Offering transportation stipends
- Ensuring wheelchair accessibility
- Using sign language interpretation or other assistive technology when deaf or hard-of-hearing people participate
- Scheduling meetings outside standard working hours
- Offering hybrid or offline participation mechanisms

## Support community-led and informal participation spaces

Many forms of political participation happen outside formal institutional settings. Community kitchens; mingas<sup>1</sup>; neighbourhood assemblies; youth, women, and LGBTIQ+ collectives; and Indigenous organising spaces are political spaces where priorities, care practices, and collective political practise emerge. The support of local governments towards these forms of participation can help build trust and reduce the distance between institutions and communities.

### Local governments can:

- Recognise informal spaces as legitimate forms of participation
- Provide small grants or logistical support to social movements and informal participation spaces
- Create channels connecting community spaces with formal decision-making
- Invite community organisations to co-design local policies
- Support autonomous organising without imposing institutional control

<sup>1</sup> A minga refers to a collective gathering aimed at fostering community wellbeing, and draws on the Quechua word “minka” and diverse related traditional and Indigenous practices of solidarity practices and community labour. It has been leveraged to convene spaces to support, discuss and seed social movements aimed at developing locally grounded solutions and resistance to structural marginalization and discrimination.

## **Build participatory budgeting processes with an intersectional lens**

Participatory budgeting can help communities directly influence how public resources are allocated. However, without an intersectional approach, these processes may reproduce existing inequalities. Intersectional participatory budgeting should prioritise both representation and equitable outcomes.

### **To strengthen intersectionality in participatory budgeting:**

- Ensure outreach reaches marginalised groups
- Reserve spaces for underrepresented communities
- Provide accessible information about budgets
- Offer technical support to participants unfamiliar with budgeting processes
- Monitor who participates and whose proposals are funded
- Avoid separating groups that are naturally intertwined (e.g., a group for women, a group for LGBTIQ+ people, a group for Indigenous or ethnic groups, etc.)

## **Establish official participation spaces for discussing and planning gender equity beyond a women-only focus**

Local governments can establish formal participatory bodies – for example, Gender Advisory Council, Gender Commission, working groups, or periodic consultations platforms – that enable communities to influence local governance and public policy regarding gender affairs. These would not be intended to replace other advisory bodies such as the Women’s Advisory Councils but to support and supplement as institutional spaces for dialogue, consultation, advocacy, and collective planning on issues related to gender equity, care work, safety, political participation, economic autonomy, and access to services, while broadening the engagement beyond women in addressing the root causes of patriarchy and gender-based discrimination, and finding appropriate solutions.

To strengthen representativeness, these spaces and platforms should include women, men, and LGBTIQ+ people from different sectors and backgrounds, including Indigenous, Afro-descendant, rural, youth, elderly, disabled, migrant, and low-income communities. An intersectional approach is necessary to recognise that experiences of exclusion, participation, gender-based violence, and the effects of patriarchy differ across groups and identities.

These spaces require institutional recognition, resources, and decision-making influence to participate meaningfully in governance processes.

**Local governments should therefore:**

- Allocate budgets and logistical support for participation
- Ensure accessible meeting spaces and schedules
- Provide childcare, transportation, or digital participation options where needed
- Establish clear communication channels with municipal authorities
- Integrate these spaces into policy design, monitoring, and evaluation processes
- Support autonomy and community-led agenda setting
- Promote working lines that address gendered problems and solutions related to all gender identities and sexual orientations that concern local contexts
- Avoid segmenting the gender equity discussions into women's, LGBTIQ+'s, and men's affairs. Patriarchy concerns everybody; its dismantling must be collective

Such formal spaces focused on gender equity can also strengthen collaboration between civil society organisations, grassroots movements, and local institutions, creating opportunities for collective action and shared learning between municipalities and territories. When supported meaningfully, they can become important mechanisms for improving inclusion, representation, and accountability in local decision-making.

**Promote collaboration between councils and movements**

Gender Advisory Councils; Women's Advisory Councils, youth organisations; disability rights groups; Indigenous organisations; women's, men's, and LGBTIQ+ collectives; and other community actors often work separately despite facing interconnected challenges. Intersectionality requires understanding how struggles connect rather than treating inequalities as isolated issues.

**Local governments can facilitate:**

- Cross-sector dialogues
- Policy platforms that are participatory and open to the organised civil society
- Peer-learning exchanges between local organisations and other organisations across the regional or national levels
- Collaborative advocacy initiatives
- Joint participatory planning processes involving activists, NGOs, and diverse social movements

## Develop leadership and political education programmes

Training programmes can support individuals and communities that have been historically excluded from political decision-making. These programmes should go beyond technical knowledge and formal participation strategies, towards confidence-building, collective organising, rights awareness, and strategies to challenge discrimination. Programmes should be adapted to local contexts and designed collaboratively with communities, recognising that local leadership often exists, instead of attempting to create new leadership.

### Possible actions and themes include:

- Understanding local governance mechanisms, technical language, and policymaking
- Advocacy, public speaking, and community communication strategies
- Artivism and other participation forms based on creativity
- Promoting feminist and intersectional leadership
- Fundraising for community projects and communication strategies
- Creating and supporting digital participation tools
- Strengthening community organising through funding and technical assistance
- Consolidating electoral participation and campaigning

## Strengthen feedback and accountability mechanisms

Participation processes should not be limited to consultations. Communities must have the possibility to be informed about how their input was used and what decisions were made. Transparent feedback processes can reduce distrust and demonstrate that participation has tangible outcomes that are favourable to communities.

### Possible mechanisms include:

- Community assemblies for reporting back on policy formulation and implementation
- Public policy progress updates
- Participatory monitoring committees
- Citizen observatories and open data platforms
- Open-access communication channels

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**ICLD** Swedish International  
Centre for Local Democracy

ICLD | CONTACT [INFO@ICLD.SE](mailto:INFO@ICLD.SE) | [WWW.ICLD.SE](http://WWW.ICLD.SE)