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The current status of women's participation in policy formulation processes at the local government level in Mongolia

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Abstract

Countries increasingly prioritize the inclusion of diverse social groups in the formulation of policies and programs not only at the national level but also at regional and local levels. In Mongolia, women's participation in local level policy formulation processes has improved; however, their substantive influence on decision making remains relatively limited. Women's participation in the policy formulation process is regarded as a fundamental prerequisite for good governance, sustainable development, and gender equitable policy planning. Women's representation and influence in local level policy making processes encounter specific challenges, which are contingent upon institutional environments, prevailing cultural norms, support from political parties, and the negotiation of workfamily balance. These factors interact to shape both the opportunities available to women and the extent to which they can participate effectively in decision-making processes at the local level. In recent years, the representation of women in provincial and capital city level local councils and executive bodies has shown a notable increase. Female representatives are particularly active in deliberations on issues related to education, health, and social protection. Nonetheless, their participation remains comparatively limited in discussions concerning budgetary matters, economic policy, and strategic development planning. Initiatives and projects spearheaded by women tend to focus primarily on children, family welfare, and the economic empowerment of women, underscoring the necessity of expanding the scope of women's engagement in broader policy arenas.

Keywords: Public policy, local policy, women's participation, women's leadership, policy formulation process

Introduction

Facilitating public participation in the policy formulation process serves a fundamental purpose: to ensure that policy decisions reflect the values and priorities held by the public, thereby promoting their welfare and enhancing the legitimacy and effectiveness of governance. Participation is understood as the process through which individuals actively contribute their voices, opinions, and ideas to decision making, engage in constructive and purposeful actions, and exercise continuous oversight. This engagement not only facilitates more informed and inclusive decisions but also strengthens accountability and the responsiveness of governance structures. Enhancing and sustainably developing local governance necessitates the effective inclusion of women in all government activities undertaken at the local level. Evidence from international experience indicates that such inclusion serves as a critical foundation for informing and shaping both national and local development policies. In Mongolia, the government has placed considerable emphasis on enhancing policies and the legal framework to strengthen women's participation. Actively promoting women's involvement in governmental initiatives is particularly crucial, as it facilitates the resolution of local issues in ways that are informed by their perspectives and values, while simultaneously serving the broader public interest. The Constitution of Mongolia guarantees human rights and freedoms, thereby providing women with a legal foundation to actively participate in political decision making and policy implementation processes. It also enables them to protect their fundamental rights, exercise oversight, and

defend both their personal and collective interests. Importantly, when these rights or interests are threatened, women have the legal capacity to organize collectively to safeguard their rights, contributing not only to their own empowerment but also to the promotion of inclusive governance and social equity.

In addition to participating in elections at all levels, exercising the right to vote and stand for office, joining political parties, civil society organizations, and interest groups, and engaging in demonstrations, strikes, hunger protests, and various forms of civic activism, women are legally entitled to utilize mechanisms that enable them to access and disseminate information, participate in deliberations, directly communicate with state institutions and officials, advocate for their rights and interests, and address pressing societal issues. Moreover, they are afforded the opportunity to provide input on draft legislation and other governmental decisions, thereby exercising both direct and indirect forms of civic and political participation in accordance with the law. The various forms and modalities of women's participation are currently developing with relative freedom, and the comparatively high level of female engagement represents a positive trend. Nevertheless, this process is accompanied by numerous challenges that continue to impede the full realization of gender inclusive participation. In order to establish a new culture of women's participation in society, it is crucial, on the one hand, for women to have a high level of trust in political institutions within governance, and on the other hand, for them to be well informed about the issues they can engage with, the ways in which they can participate, and to possess the capacity to implement their engagement in accordance with legal frameworks and commonly accepted ethical standards. Leadership among women plays a critical role in enhancing their involvement in local level decision making, policy implementation, and the evaluation of outcomes. Effective promotion of women's leadership facilitates inclusive governance by ensuring that their perspectives are actively solicited and meaningfully incorporated into deliberative processes. Moreover, strengthening women's leadership capacities empowers them to participate fully and assertively, thereby contributing to more equitable, accountable, and effective local governance structures. Supporting the optimization of organizational mechanisms for women's participation at the local level and fostering their effective engagement is increasingly recognized as a critical priority, both politically and legally. In the context of policy and law, accurately defining this issue requires close attention to citizens' and public officials' perceptions and attitudes regarding women's participation. Equally important are the fundamental characteristics of these perceptions, as well as the differences and commonalities that exist among them.

Although Mongolia is considered among the countries with relatively advanced gender development, the United Nations Development Program's Human Development Report 2022 indicates that the country's Gender Inequality Index remains below both the regional and global averages [7]. Women constitute 51 percent of Mongolia's total electorate and participate actively in elections [17]; however, their representation in political decision making remains insufficient. Despite this gap, women are actively engaged in policy development at the local level. Enhancing their participation in national level policy formulation processes

is essential for ensuring more inclusive and equitable governance.

Policy Formulation and Peculiarities at the Local Government Level

There are established indicators that reflect the extent to which social well-being is ensured in developing countries that have chosen a democratic path. These indicators include the degree to which people unite around shared views and actions; the level of participation and interest in social and political activities; the scope of ideological differences; and the level of public trust in citizens, government institutions, and other social institutions [10]. These indicators not only define a country's level of development but also serve as a basis for assessing the degree of citizens' engagement in social and political life. Therefore, increasing women's participation in local level policy formulation is a crucial requirement for advancing the gender equality goal of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The advancement of women's political participation and their representation in decision formulation positions is influenced by a wide range of factors. These include the legal framework that ensures gender equality, the level of public support, prevailing social norms and attitudes, the structure of political financing and electoral systems, as well as the policies and commitment of political parties [8].

Public policy constitutes a systematic set of strategies and actions devised and executed by governmental institutions to achieve defined objectives. These policies encompass, but are not limited to, economic policy, social welfare policy, and educational policy. The primary purpose of public policy is to safeguard citizens and their property, promote social development, and establish conditions that facilitate the production and provision of essential goods and services necessary for the well-being of the population. Effective public policy thus serves as a fundamental mechanism through which the state ensures social stability, equitable resource distribution, and the overall advancement of society.

Democracy represents a governance system in which state policies are formulated through the active participation of citizens. Effective policy formulation should not rely solely on government officials or decision makers; rather, it requires a process that integrates public engagement, empirical research, and systematic analysis. Public policy, in this context, encompasses the set of actions and measures designed to be implemented on behalf of the populace, reflecting both their interests and the collective welfare. Such an approach ensures that governance is transparent, accountable, and responsive to the needs of society, thereby strengthening the legitimacy and effectiveness of state institutions [9]. In other words, public policy consists of the actions undertaken by the state to address various issues. These policies are implemented by both the public and private sectors. Public policy encompasses both those matters that the state seeks to implement and those it has decided not to pursue [9]. The issue can be analyzed through the systematic assessment and dissemination of values, which are conveyed through multiple channels, including documents, practical activities, representations, and tangible goods and services. These values are reflected not only in formal and informal discourse, negotiation processes, and regulatory frameworks, but also in relation to income, authority, and responsibilities. Furthermore, they encompass a spectrum of evaluations that capture both positive and negative dimensions, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of their social, cultural, and institutional significance. Public policy encompasses the deliberate actions and deliberate inactions of the government aimed at addressing specific social challenges [5].

The policy formulation process can involve multiple levels of government, encompassing both central and local institutions as key stakeholders. This participation is justified by the fact that social issues, as well as public demands for their resolution, frequently emerge at the local level and subsequently inform and influence central authorities. Such dynamics underscore the interdependent nature of governance and the importance of responsiveness across all administrative tiers [5]. The formulation of public policy relies on practical political knowledge regarding the identification of goals and the strategies for their effective implementation. Formulating and implementing policy at the local level is a complex and multifaceted process, involving the participation of numerous organizations and individuals, with a central role played by representative bodies of citizens, local executive authorities, local residents, and civil society organizations.

The process of formulating public policy takes place within the specific political, economic, and social context of a given country. In addition, sectoral and local policies are developed and implemented within their own distinct contextual environments, each shaped by unique institutional, cultural, and contextual factors. In the process of local level policy formulation, both formal and informal actors are involved. Formal actors primarily include governmental institutions, while informal actors encompass citizens participating in democratic processes, interest groups, and business organizations. Formal actors engage in policy formulation in accordance with their legally defined mandates and constitutional responsibilities, and they possess the authority to develop and approve public policies. The main characteristic of public policy lies in its relevance to, and impact on, society as a whole. Increasing women's participation in local level policy formulation has become one of the key indicators of a truly democratic society. The insufficient participation of women in decision making levels in Mongolia stems from a combination of factors, including gaps in the legal framework for ensuring gender equality, persistent societal norms and attitudes, limited commitment from political parties, and a male dominated political environment.

As of 2024, women constitute 51 percent of Mongolia's total population, or 1,808,475 individuals, and represent 52 percent of all registered voters [18]. According to the Global Gender Gap Index published annually by the World Economic Forum, Mongolia ranked 58th out of 149 countries in 2018 [11] and 79th out of 153 countries in 2020 [11]. In 2024, Mongolia was placed 85th among 146 countries [11]. The country had ranked 80th in 2023 and 70th in 2022, respectively [11].

Women's Participation in Local-Level Policy Formulation and Emerging Challenges

Participation refers to a process in which citizens, organizations, professional associations, administrative bodies, political representatives, and private sector actors engage in, collaborate on, and exercise mutual oversight

over political and administrative decision making. Although participation demands time, financial resources, and patience from stakeholders, it plays a crucial role in building trust within society and is therefore of significant importance. Participation often requires significant investments of time, financial resources, and patience from the stakeholders involved. Despite these demands, it plays a critical role in fostering trust within society. The development of such social trust is essential for promoting cooperation, social cohesion, and the effective functioning communal institutions. Therefore. engagement is widely recognized as a fundamental component of sustainable and resilient societal structures. The concept of participation, in its broadest sense, encompasses a wide range of activities, initiatives, patterns, and mechanisms through which individuals or groups are able to exert influence over decision-making processes within a democratic framework [11] (Handbuch. Participation, 2012, p. 14). Researcher Kase (1991, p. 521) conceptualizes political participation as the entirety of voluntary actions undertaken by citizens with the purpose of influencing decision making processes at various levels within the political system [6]. In the context of local policy formulation, the meaningful and effective participation of women is essential for ensuring that decision making processes adequately reflect issues pertaining to their lives and livelihoods. The engagement of civil society organizations, the media, governmental institutions, and the leadership of public officials is instrumental in facilitating such participation. These actors collectively contribute to creating an enabling environment that promotes genderinclusive governance and strengthens the capacity of women to influence policy outcomes. In the Nordic political model, the stimulation of women's participation in politics is analyzed through the interaction of three principal factors: political institutional, economic, and cultural. Each of these factors is examined according to specific criteria that assess their influence on women's political engagement. Moreover, targeted mechanisms such as gender quotas, reserved seats, and legislative regulations are employed to facilitate and enhance women's representation within political institutions [3]. In Mongolia, women continue to encounter significant barriers to participating in local governance and decisionmaking processes. The implementation of neoliberal policies has contributed to the erosion of the state's responsibility in providing equitable social and economic opportunities to its citizens. This policy orientation, coupled with insufficient accessibility, limited quality, and inadequate regulation of public services, has further constrained women's capacity to engage meaningfully in political and administrative spheres.

The major economic reforms implemented in 1990, which facilitated the transition from a centrally planned economy to a market-oriented system, brought about profound changes in the economic structure. These reforms created new employment opportunities for women, particularly in emerging sectors such as education, healthcare, retail, and service industries. Consequently, women increasingly participated in formal labor markets beyond their traditional domestic and informal roles, contributing to a notable diversification of the workforce. This shift not only expanded women's economic engagement but also reshaped the composition and dynamics of the labor market in the post transition period [4].

Urbanization and internal migration from rural to urban areas have influenced women's economic participation. Many women relocating from rural regions to cities seek employment, which has contributed to an increased representation of women in the urban labor market. However, these women often face challenges such as limited access to education and skills training, as well as inadequate social protection due to informal employment. In other words, while contemporary conditions and urbanization have reinforced traditional gender roles in certain sectors, they have also created disparities in economic opportunities for women [13].

At the institutional level, the civil service emphasizes ensuring equitable treatment of all individuals, providing them with fair access to employment opportunities and associated benefits. This focus extends to the organization's policies, procedures, and operational practices, and may, in certain instances, necessitate the establishment of new organizational structures or the design, modification, and implementation of targeted programs to achieve these objectives. Governments implement policies and initiatives aimed at mitigating employees' biases and challenging entrenched societal stereotypes, including beliefs that certain groups (e.g., men) are inherently superior to others (e.g., women), or that specific individuals are naturally predisposed or unsuited for particular roles. Such efforts seek to promote equity in the workplace by addressing structural and cultural barriers that perpetuate discrimination and limit opportunities based on gender, social identity, or other categorical distinctions.

Table 1: Percentage of Women in Leadership Positions (2020-2023)

| No. | Category | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 |
|---------|------------------|------|------|------|------|
| 1 | Urban | 50 | 42.3 | 41.7 | 52.5 |
| 2 | Rural | 35.3 | 42.1 | 30.9 | 43.4 |
| 3 | Age 15-24 | 35 | 58 | 52.7 | 57.9 |
| 4 | Age 25-64 | 47.8 | 42.5 | 39.5 | 49.1 |
| 5 | Age 65 and above | 41.7 | 31.2 | 33.1 | 93.2 |
| 6 | Western Region | 22 | 35.4 | 26.1 | 23.4 |
| 7 | Khangai Region | 49.7 | 39.6 | 34.3 | 59.1 |
| 8 | Central Region | 27.9 | 40.3 | 43.7 | 56 |
| 9 | Eastern Region | 54.6 | 36.5 | 22.4 | 53.4 |
| 10 | Ulaanbaatar | 51.9 | 44.1 | 42.7 | 51.6 |
| Overall | | 47.2 | 42.3 | 39.9 | 50.4 |

Source: National Statistics Office of Mongolia

Table 2: Percentage of Women Holding Political Office (2020-2023)

| No. | Political Party Name | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 |
|-----|---|------|------|------|------|
| 1 | Minister | 4 | 4 | 2 | 3 |
| 2 | Deputy Minister | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| 3 | Governor (Province/Capital City) | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| 4 | Deputy Governor (Province/Capital City) | 8 | 8 | 5 | 4 |

Source: National Statistics Office of Mongolia

Table 3: Female Candidates and Elected Representatives in Parliamentary Elections [15]

| Election Year | Total Candidates for Parliament | Proportion of Elected Female Representatives (%) |
|------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| 2008-2012 | 66/366 18.5% | 3 (3.9%) |
| 2012-2016 | 174/544 32% | 11 (14.5%) |
| 2016-2020 | 129/498 25.9% | 13 (17.1%) |
| 2020-2024 | 151/606 24.9% | 13 (17.1%) |

Source: General Election Commission of Mongolia

The data presented in the table highlight the persistent underrepresentation of women in parliamentary positions, underscoring the necessity to promote and strengthen women's leadership at decision making levels.

Men exhibit a 35.9% lower rate of higher education and college graduation compared to women, and their average life expectancy is 9.23 years shorter. Conversely, women have a labor force participation rate that is 14.6 percentage points lower than that of men and demonstrate threefold lower representation in political decision making positions [17]

The 2024 local elections in Mongolia, which included elections for the Citizens' Representative Khural at the provincial, capital city, district, and soum levels, were held to fill 796 seats in the provincial and capital city Khurals and 6,922 seats in the district and soum Khurals. Analysis of the election outcomes reveals that women accounted for 17.9% of the representatives in the provincial and capital city Khurals and 28.8% of the representatives in the district and soum Khurals. These figures indicate a notable gender gap in political representation at the local level, with female representation being significantly higher in district and soum Khurals compared to provincial and capital city Khurals. The results reflect ongoing challenges and opportunities for enhancing gender equality in Mongolia's local governance structures [16]. Compared to parliamentary levels, this indicator is lower at the provincial and capital city level, but exceeds the district and subdistrict level by 3 percent. Despite a gradual increase in the number of female members in local Citizens' Representative Khurals, their representation in leadership positions remains very limited. Specifically, only 3 of the chairpersons of the 21 provincial and capital city Khurals, 1 of the 9 district Khural chairpersons, and 41 of the 330 soum Khural chairpersons are women. These figures fall one to two times below the quotas mandated by the Law on Gender Equality, highlighting persistent gender disparities in local governance leadership.

Women's participation in local decision making extends beyond representation in local councils to include appointed political officeholders in executive positions across all tiers of local government, such as governors and deputy governors. This broader conceptualization recognizes the multifaceted roles women play in shaping policy and governance at the subnational level.

According to the 2025 report by the Civil Service Council, women account for 23% of governors at the subdistrict (bag) level, 47% at the district (khoroo) level, 13% at the soum level, and 11% at the subdistrict (khoroo) level [14]. Notably, no women have been appointed as governors at the provincial or capital city level, indicating a regression compared to previous years. These disparities suggest persistent gender imbalances in local governance and underscore the need for targeted interventions to enhance women's representation and participation in policy formulation processes at all levels of local administration. Increasing women's involvement in leadership roles is critical not only for achieving gender equity but also for ensuring diverse perspectives in the formulation and implementation of local policies.

Overall, public participation in local decision making processes remains limited. Although there is ongoing discussion about enhancing women's representation in policy formulation, their involvement continues to be insufficient. At the local level, decisions directly affect residents, and evidence from numerous studies indicates that incorporating women's voices into these decisions enhances the implementation of local development policies and, consequently, produces positive outcomes. Scholars' works further reflect a conceptual shift in local governance, gender, and participation-from "local administration" to "local governance," from the "Women in Development" approach to "Gender and Development," and from "citizen participation development" "participatory development. Indigenous populations play a pivotal role in shaping the development of their local regions. Within this context, women's voices are particularly significant, as they often embody and convey the specific needs, priorities, and cultural perspectives of their communities. Consequently, the integration of women's perspectives into governmental policy formulation is essential for ensuring that policies are both contextually relevant and socially inclusive. Women's engagement in governance extends beyond formal participation in meetings and decision-making processes to include a range of informal activities, which are often overlooked and undervalued in scholarly and policy discourses. Both their formal and informal contributions, along with those of their collective organizations, function as a bottom up mechanism capable of driving transformative change. In Mongolia, rural women encounter numerous barriers that hinder their participation in the policymaking process. For instance:

- The state's responsibility to provide social and economic opportunities and deliver essential services to its citizens is undermined by the inadequate accessibility, quality, and regulatory mechanisms of public services.
- Economic instability and inflation have disproportionately affected low-income and vulnerable populations, including women.
- As a result of government interventions, the livelihood strategies of rural citizens have shifted, leading to increased dependency on welfare support; consequently, when such assistance decreases, feelings of disillusionment and loss of trust have become common.
- In the course of performing paid work, many women experience discrimination, and some are compelled to work in the informal sector, where their labor is undervalued and insufficiently protected.
- Women are often expected not only to support their immediate families but also to manage a wide range of emotional and social responsibilities within their extended family and community, sharing burdens and providing mutual support.

Conclusion

Mongolia has made considerable efforts to protect women's rights and promote gender equality by joining the United Nations and other international conventions, and by integrating their principles and provisions into national legislation, policies, and programmes. Since 2013, the country has advanced gender-responsive policy formulation and planning, resulting in the development of sector-specific gender strategies as well as the implementation of gender sub-programmes at the provincial, capital city, and district levels. Women's participation in decision making in Mongolia remains insufficient, with legally mandated

gender quotas often unmet. At the subnational level in particular, stronger policy attention is required to enhance women's involvement in local policy formulation processes. Notably, the quotas stipulated in the Law on Ensuring Gender Equality in Public Service have not been fulfilled in the national legislature, in provincial and municipal citizens' representative khurals, nor in appointments to political posts and senior civil service leadership positions. Strengthening state level policy interventions is therefore essential to advance women's representation and participation across all levels of governance.

An inverse relationship is observed between rank and the representation of women within the civil service: as rank increases, the number of women declines. As of the first half of 2024, women occupy 44 positions at the auxiliary officer level and 12,156 positions at the assistant officer level. In contrast, women hold 303 senior officer positions and only 44 principal officer posts, accounting for 66.1 percent of officials at that rank. In the political service, women constituted a total of 47 officeholders equivalent to 13.1 percent-between 2020 and 2023. Meanwhile, women account for 44.9 percent of individuals serving in managerial positions [17].

It can be concluded that the following measures could enhance the participation of women in the local level policy formulation process:

- Drawing upon international experiences, it is essential to strengthen the efforts of relevant institutions to promote gender equality and effectively implement quota systems within local governance structures.
- At the institutional level, it is crucial to strengthen women's leadership, enhance their responsibilities, and expand their knowledge within local organizations, thereby building capacities across all levels of governance.
- Mongolia's ongoing transition toward a "Digital Nation" is underpinned by extensive internet connectivity-accounting for 80% of data usage with approximately 2.6 million users-and a mobile penetration rate of 96%, thereby presenting substantial opportunities for digital inclusion [12]. This context creates a favorable environment to enhance women's participation in digital platforms, particularly at the local policy-making level. By accelerating digital transformation, it is possible to foster greater civic engagement, enhance transparency and accountability, and facilitate the submission of applications, complaints, and recommendations through electronic means.
- Enhancing the coordination and collaboration between governmental and non-governmental organizations engaged in the protection of women's rights is essential to ensure that women's participation is promoted and sustained at an appropriate and meaningful level.

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