

# Fala di Mindjer\*

*\*The voices of women*

***Beyond social pressure and institutional barriers:  
the role of women in decision-making spheres in  
Guinea-Bissau***

March 2018

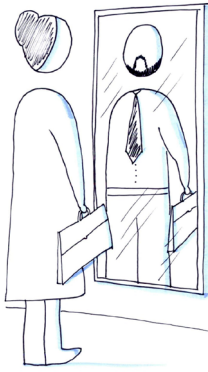
## Key messages

Sponsored by the Gender Promotion Initiative of the  
United Nations Peacebuilding Fund



# Visual synthesis of the key messages

What to remember to better understand the dynamics around women's participation in decision-making spheres



1

**"Politics has a man's face"**

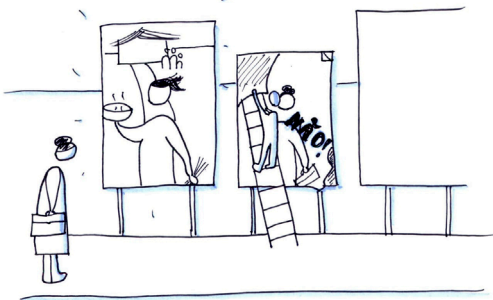


2

**The road to success usually leads to marriage, not politics**

**The frustrating and discouraging obstacles to women's social and political ascent**

3



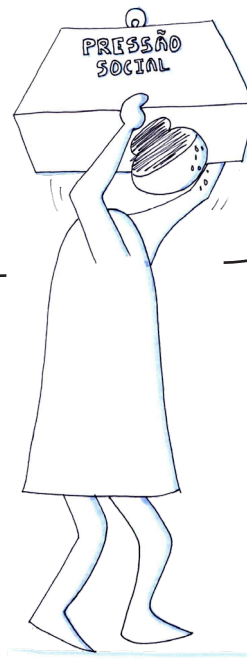
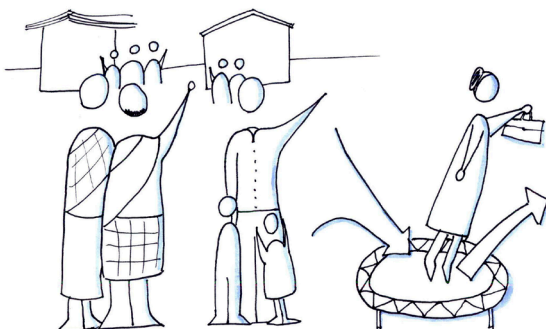
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**Beyond education, self-esteem and self-confidence are at the heart of women's political formation**

## Chapter I: Social pressure

**The entourage, stepping stone for the social and political rise of women**

5

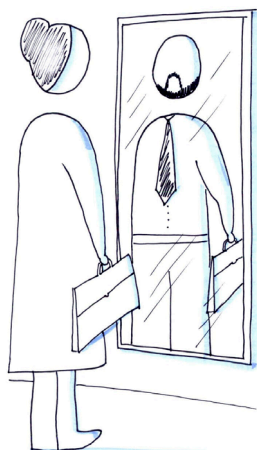




# Key messages

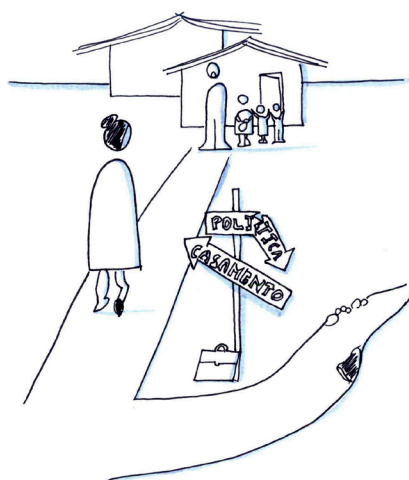
**What to remember to better understand the dynamics around women's participation in decision-making spheres**

## **Politics is not considered a successful pathway for women**



### **1. “Politics has a man’s face”**

There is strong ownership and appreciation of gender stereotypes that relegate women to a domestic role, while men are valued in the public and political spheres. The social preference for having men in decision-making bodies is particularly reinforced by women themselves, who accept and confirm their role outside decision-making and support men's political ascendancy. This attitude of submission and self-exclusion is highly valued, and reflects the complexity and depth of gender relations which are manifested in all areas of society, including decision-making spheres.



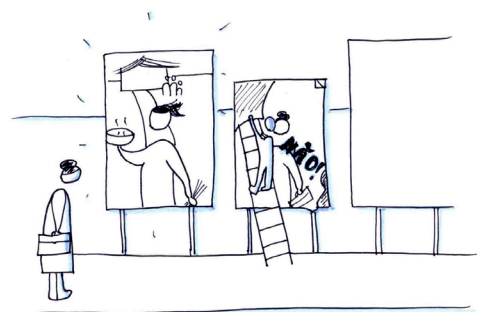
### **2. The road to success usually leads to marriage, not politics**

The model of female success depends on the smooth functioning of marriage, which risks being compromised by women's political participation. From a young age, the woman is educated to believe that she needs a man to take care of her. She sees marriage primarily as an outlet for a better future, or an opportunity to find her way in life. In this scenario, the role of the male provider and head of the family is predominant and decisive for the success of the marriage. The importance given to marriage will thus generally determine whether or not a woman decides to enter politics and claim decision-making positions, at the risk of losing her marriage and going against what society expects of her.

## **Strong social pressure on women weakens the already fragile self-esteem needed to reach decision-making positions**

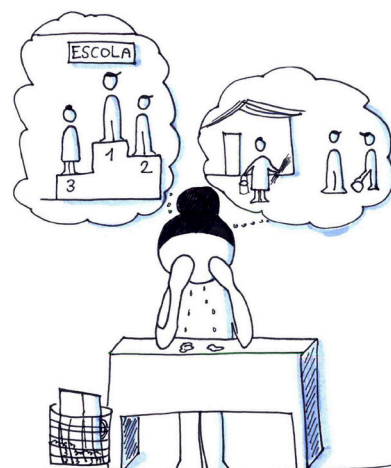
### **3. The frustrating and discouraging obstacles to women's social and political ascent**

Social pressure on women – and by women – creates conformism and frustration. Women are only valued through socially-imposed qualities such as kindness and altruism, thereby creating an idealized image of women. Social pressure makes them reluctant to go against that image. If women decide to go against these constraints in spite of this, they are then the victim of a vast campaign of defamation, often initiated by women. Largely dependent on their family and community circles, women rarely make the choice to risk a loss of their social capital to claim an environment where their guarantees of success are limited.

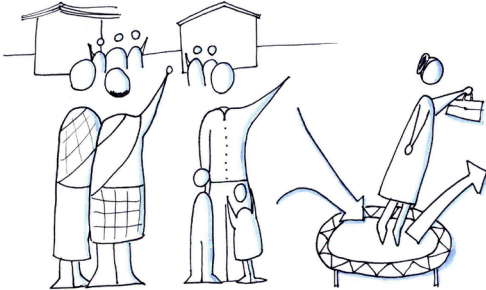


### **4. Beyond education, self-esteem and self-confidence are at the heart of women's political formation**

The idea that lack of education is the main cause of exclusion of women from decision-making spheres is widely perpetuated. While true in some cases, it is observed that low self-esteem and lack of confidence contribute to the low participation of women in this area. In addition, there are many examples of low-educated men in decision-making positions, demonstrating that the source of the problem is current education models, both formal (school) and informal (parents, community). In these settings, girls and young women are hardly encouraged to develop the sense of self-esteem that would enable them to make the choices necessary for their political ascent.



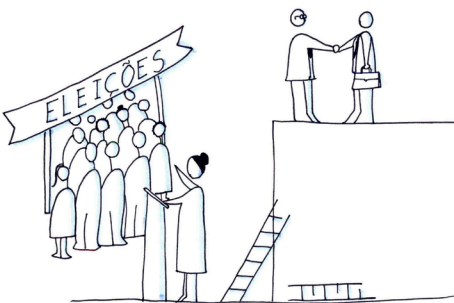
## **Social environment and ethnic traditions are key opportunities for social and political rise**



### **5. The entourage, stepping stone for the social and political rise of women**

The entourage is considered the main source of women's valorisation, giving them the opportunities and capacities to begin their social and political ascent. In some ethnic groups inheriting matriarchal systems or traditions that strongly value the role of women in decision-making, this is even truer. It is particularly the case in the Bijagó ethnic group, which is managed through a matriarchal system, or the Pepe<sup>1</sup> and Manjaque groups, where women are the guarantors of the family line.<sup>1</sup> The social environment, strongly influenced by ethnic practices and where the family and community members play a crucial role in valuing and supporting women, represents a key opportunity to influence socio-cultural practices.

## **Women have a political role in electoral processes, but are rarely part of decision-making**



### **6. Women's political mobilization does not necessarily lead to inclusion in decision-making**

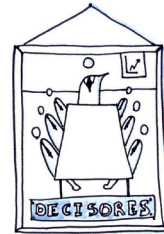
The perception that women have an important role in politics through their active participation in political mobilization is widespread. However, this commitment, which translates into women's empowerment in all activities relating to logistics and culture, is limited to supporting roles that rarely allow inclusion in decision-making spheres. This phenomenon therefore reflects a gap between the perception that women are actively participating and the actual implications of this participation with regard to exerting a real influence at the decision-making level.

<sup>1</sup> In most patriarchal traditions, the descent benefits (legacy, throne, workforce) are passed on by the father, who is the guarantor of the family line. In the Pepe and Manjaque ethnic groups, those benefits are passed on by women, because their biological bond to their children is particularly valued. This tradition is a real advantage for women in terms of access to wealth and workforce.



## 7. Many militant women, but few political leaders

The formal structures of political parties, which give women few opportunities to reach decision-making spheres, are influenced by informal practices. Despite a large female representation in the militant bases of political parties, women are rarely included or encouraged to integrate into the decision-making spheres of political parties. An inheritance of political practices strongly influenced by dominant socio-cultural figures, these formal structures have little appreciation of the importance of women's integration into the decision-making spheres of political parties.

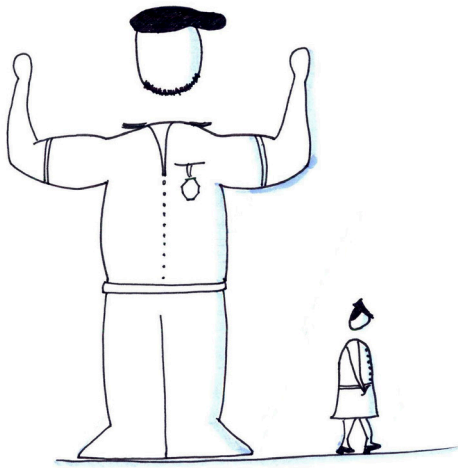


## The Defence and Security Forces are the domain of men

### 8. Women in the Defence and Security Forces are viewed as illegitimate

The lack of objective criteria and transparent processes to enter the Defence and Security Forces (DSF) and obtain promotions, helps to reinforce informal practices such as clientelism and nepotism, which are observed by both men and women. In the collective imagination, men are naturally associated with the DSF, particularly in the context of voluntary recruitment, which is represented as a process for men. In turn, women are seen as intruders who can only « enter by the window » that is, through informal processes. The association between formality and men on the one hand, and informality and women on the other, reinforces the social belief that women in the DSF do not fulfil the social role prescribed for them by society.





## 9. The culture of masculinity devalues women in the Defence and Security Forces

In the Defence and Security Forces (DSF), women are often devalued and excluded from decision-making spheres, under the pretext that they speak too much, cannot keep secrets or are too weak physically. These perceptions, strongly influenced by the macho culture that dominates the DSF, discourage many women in their ascent and prevent their empowerment. Such behaviours illustrate the lack of inclusive internal structures and policies that could empower women in the DSF.

## Power structures as vectors of change



## 10. Decision makers, drivers of inclusive change and reforms

Male and female politicians can only implement reforms to promote gender if they are themselves committed to better understanding the gendered needs of the population. The heated debates around the effective application of a gender policy, notably through the revision of laws (framework law of the political parties and electoral law) and the adoption of a law of parity (law of quotas) put into light the limits of what reforms can and cannot accomplish. Successful change will have to be led by those who vouch for a process that is inclusive and representative of the population as a whole.







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