

Women's participation in grassroots organisations:

# Strong voices in an uncertain world

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Werkinesh Yimanu (41) is the leader of a local women's group in Ethiopia. "Working together has strengthened us all. We now have a voice in decisions both in the family and in the community," she says.

**TITLE**  
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Small-scale farmer Werkinesh Yimanu in Ethiopia. Photo: Addis Aemero

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# Equality begins in local communities

Women's rights are under increasing pressure in an ever more unstable world. The Development Fund works to strengthen women's participation, rights and role within local communities. This report presents findings from surveys conducted across our programmes, focusing on women in leadership roles and their participation in decision-making processes.

Evaluating the impact of our programmes is a key part of The Development Fund's work. We regularly conduct surveys and collect data among programme participants to create safe spaces where they can share their experiences and perspectives. In 2023 and 2025, we conducted surveys to measure the extent to which women in decision-making roles actively participate in grassroots organisations, including whether they attend meetings and feel their voices are heard. The findings highlight the importance of strengthening women's voices in decision-making processes and provide insight into the challenges they face.

## Women's rights are under pressure

Women's rights across the world are under increasing pressure. Climate change, democratic backsliding and conflict are contributing to a more unstable global context, where inequality and gender discrimination are rising. At the same time, the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to create challenges in many rural areas.

This global regression increases the vulnerability of women small-scale farmers. They make up a large share of the agricultural workforce, yet have fewer land rights and limited access to decision-making processes. As many as 32% of people in rural areas live with moderate or severe food insecurity. These are also the areas where the climate crisis is felt most strongly, particularly by women and girls. The impacts of climate change reinforce existing gender inequalities and threaten women's livelihoods, health and safety.

At the same time, women are the backbone of their communities. They play a key role in food production and in protecting local environments. Their knowledge and experience are essential for building sustainable societies. By strengthening women's influence, both they and their communities are better equipped to address climate change, reduce poverty and improve food security.

## The Development Fund's work on women's rights

The Development Fund is strongly committed to gender equality. We believe that women's economic empowerment and equal access to resources and power are fundamental to strong communities and resilient food systems.

We work to raise awareness of rights among women and girls, and together with our partners we provide leadership training and training in financial management. This helps strengthen women's confidence, independence and economic decision-making power.

Through participation in savings and loan groups, women learn how to increase their income and invest in their farms or businesses. These groups also provide a space to discuss shared challenges and find solutions together, building solidarity and ensuring that women have a stronger collective voice when decisions are made in grassroots organisations.

## Equality requires long-term efforts

The findings from the surveys on which this report is based show that The Development Fund's work contributes to challenging discriminatory gender norms. Among other things, the share of women in decision-making roles increased from 43.2% in 2023 to 48.8% in 2025.

At the same time, there is still a long way to go before all women experience real participation. As the world becomes more unstable, strengthening women's rights and gender equality will be even more important in the years ahead. When women have equal rights, access to resources and influence in agriculture, it strengthens food security for families and local communities.

# Women's participation – data from five countries

The Development Fund conducted surveys in 2023 and 2025 across grassroots organisations in Ethiopia, Guatemala, Malawi, Nepal and Somalia / Somaliland. Results show that the share of women in decision-making roles increased from 43% to 49%.

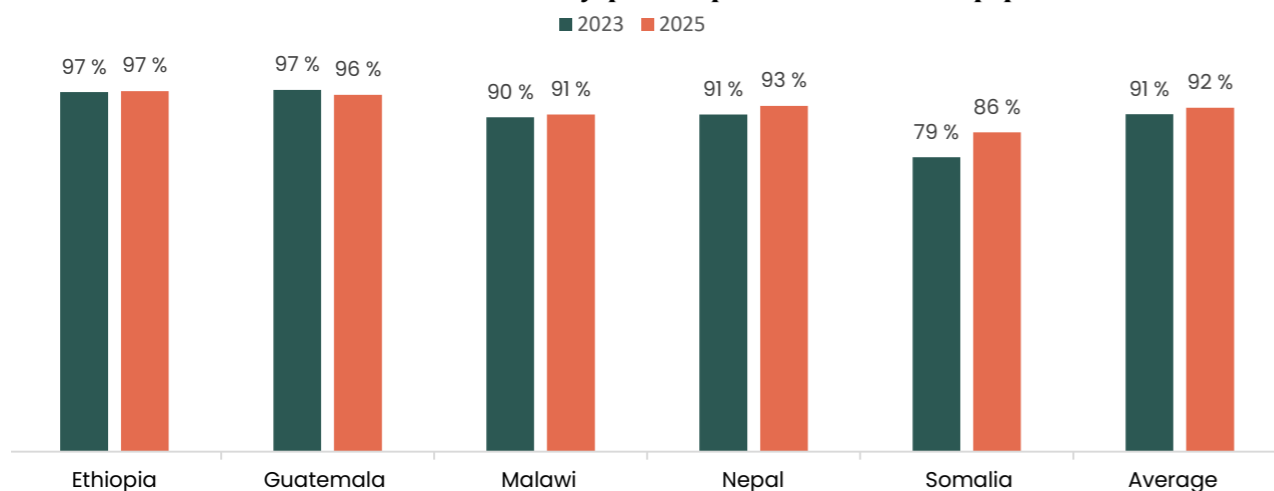
Women report that participation in these groups strengthens both their self-confidence and the support they receive from other women. At the same time, many still face barriers to active participation, such as their opinions being undervalued, responsibilities at home, and a fear of speaking up in meetings. This highlights both the progress that has been made and why long-term efforts to strengthen women's rights and gender equality are still needed.

During this period, The Development Fund worked with **23 partner organisations** in Ethiopia, Guatemala, Malawi, Nepal and Somalia. Together, they support **200 grassroots organisations** where farmers and local communities organise to strengthen food security, climate adaptation and local rights.

The 2025 survey shows that women are playing an increasingly important role in the leadership of these organisations. **Today, 48.8% of leadership positions are held by women, up from 43.2% in 2023.**

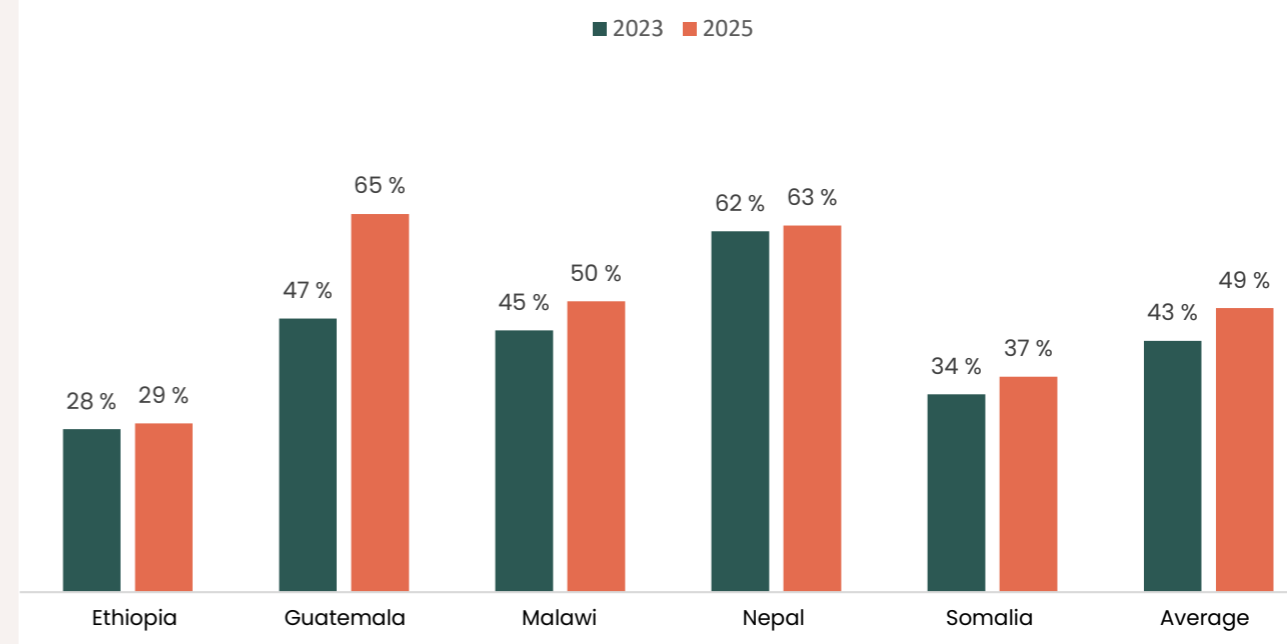
At the same time, women in leadership roles actively participate in decision-making processes. **On average, 92.3% of women report that they attend meetings, share their views, and feel that their opinions are taken seriously.** Among the countries, Somalia has seen the greatest increase in active participation among women, rising from 79% in 2023 to 86% in 2025. When measuring changes in attitudes and participation over time, even small improvements can have a significant impact.

% of women who actively participate in leadership positions



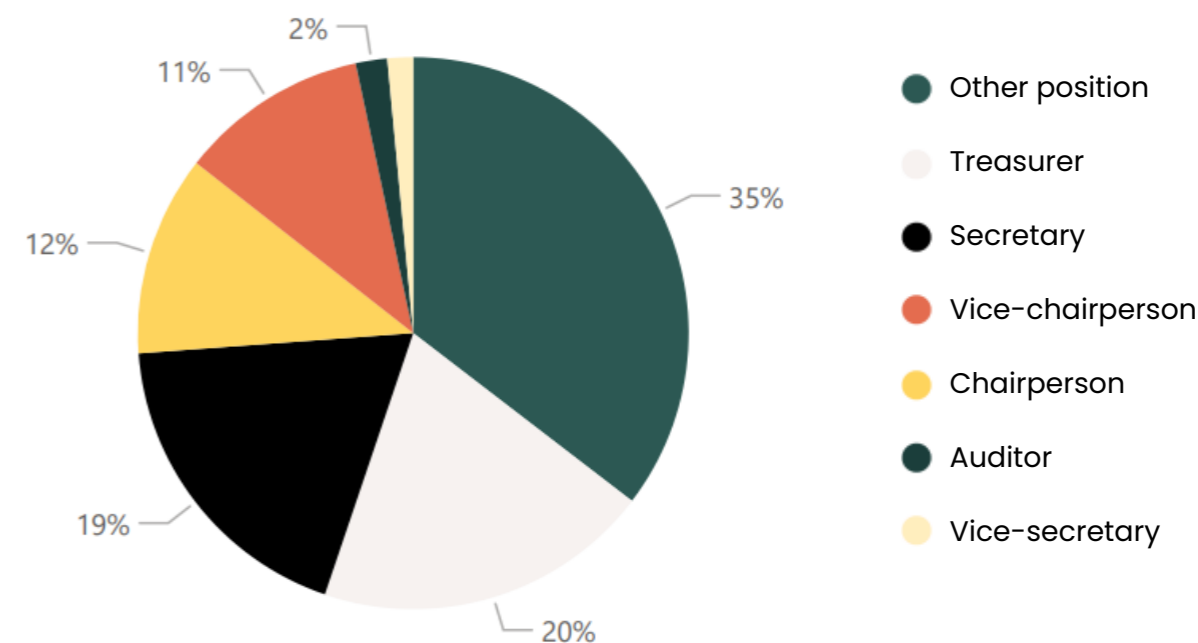
On average, 92.3% of women in decision-making roles participate actively. This means that they have attended some, most or all meetings, express their views to others, and feel that their opinions are taken into account.

% of women in leadership positions



On average, 48.8% of leadership positions are held by women in 2025. This means that out of 2,107 leadership positions, 969 are held by women.

What decision-making position the women hold



Across all five countries, women report holding the roles of treasurer (20%), secretary (19%), vice chair (12%), chair (11%), auditor (2%) and vice secretary (2%).

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION:

# Ethiopia

- During this period, The Development Fund worked with 5 partner organisations and 47 grassroots organisations in Ethiopia.
- Women in the sample hold 29% of leadership positions.
- 96.8% of women in leadership roles participate actively in decision-making processes.

The surveys have collected both quantitative and qualitative data from selected grassroots organisations that The Development Fund works with. The results apply to the grassroots organisations included in the survey. The texts below are anonymised quotes from the 2025 survey.

## What do the women in Ethiopia say?

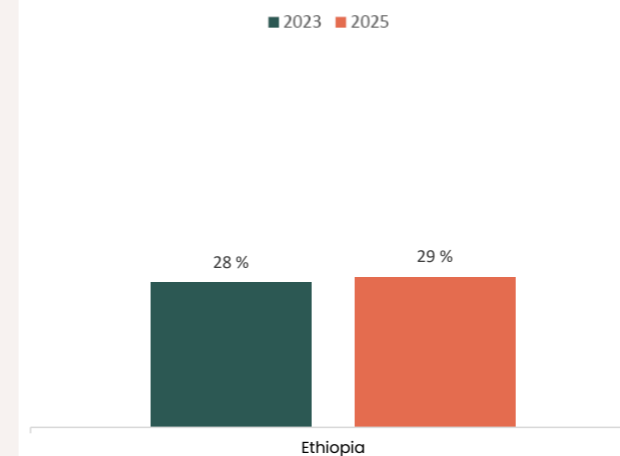
“All committee members support women’s ideas and our voices are heard equally. We women discuss our idea separately and reach common understandings, and the committee mostly accepts our ideas.”

Treasurer, Ethiopia

“We participate in the meetings together with men and our participation is equal. We also participate in mobilisation equally.”

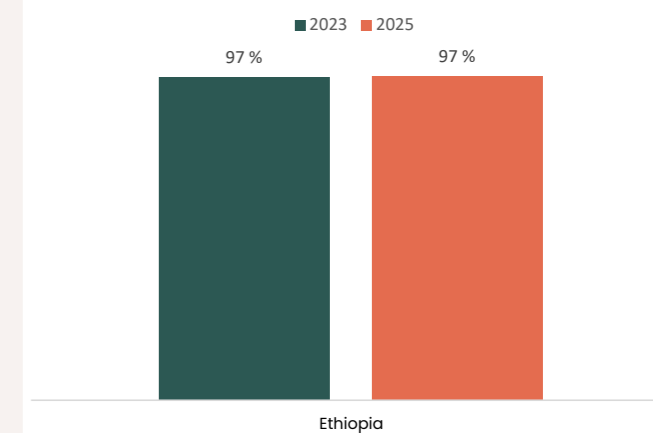
Organisation member, Ethiopia

### % of leadership positions held by women



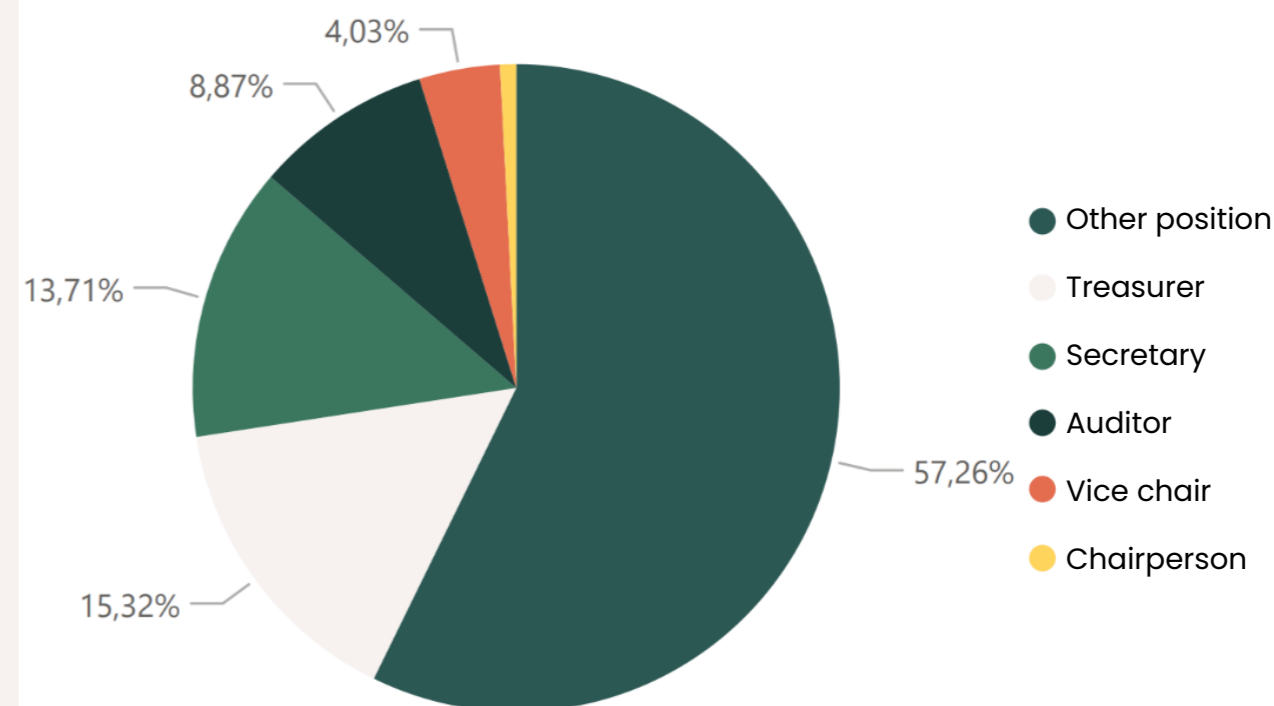
The share of women in leadership positions in Ethiopia has increased from 28% in 2023 to 29% in 2025.

### % of women who participate actively in leadership positions



In Ethiopia, the share of women in leadership positions who participate actively has remained at the same high level in both 2023 and 2025, at 97%. This means that they have attended some, most or all meetings, express their views to others, and feel that their opinions are taken into account.

### What decision-making position the women hold



In Ethiopia, women report holding the roles of treasurer (15.32%), secretary (13.71%), auditor (8.87%), vice chair (4.03%) and chair (1%).

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION:

# Somalia / Somaliland

- During this period, The Development Fund worked with 4 partner organisations and 24 grassroots organisations in Somalia / Somaliland.
- 37% of the women in the sample hold leadership positions in 2025.
- 85.7% of women in leadership roles participate actively in decision-making processes.

The surveys have collected both quantitative and qualitative data from selected grassroots organisations that The Development Fund works with. The results apply to the grassroots organisations included in the survey. The texts below are anonymised quotes from the 2025 survey.

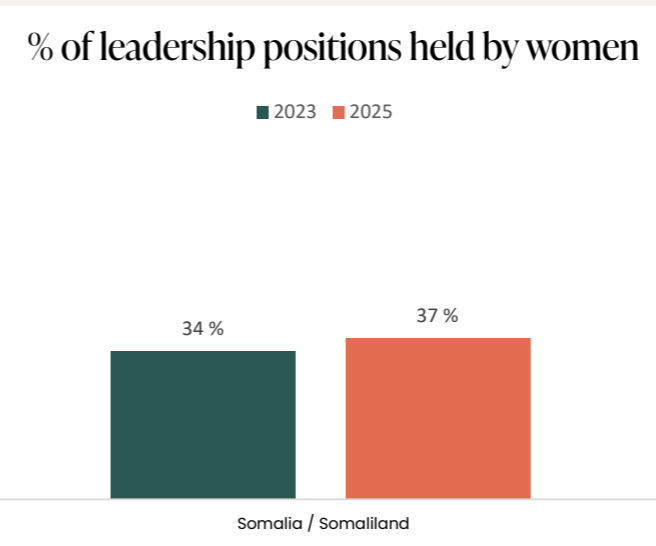
## What do the women in Somalia / Somaliland say?

"I'm proud to see women taking active roles in meetings and influencing key decisions."

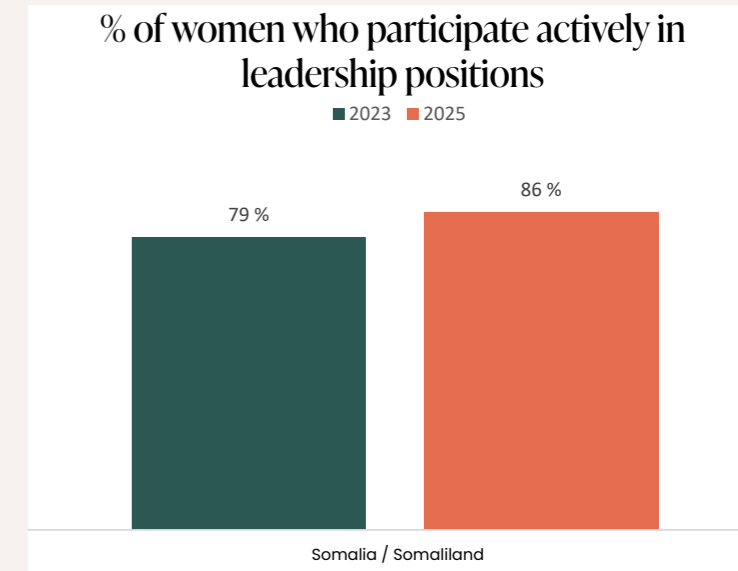
Secretary, Somalia

"My participation is good. I take part in decision-making and share my ideas. As mothers, our main challenge is lack of time because household duties make it hard to attend cooperative activities."

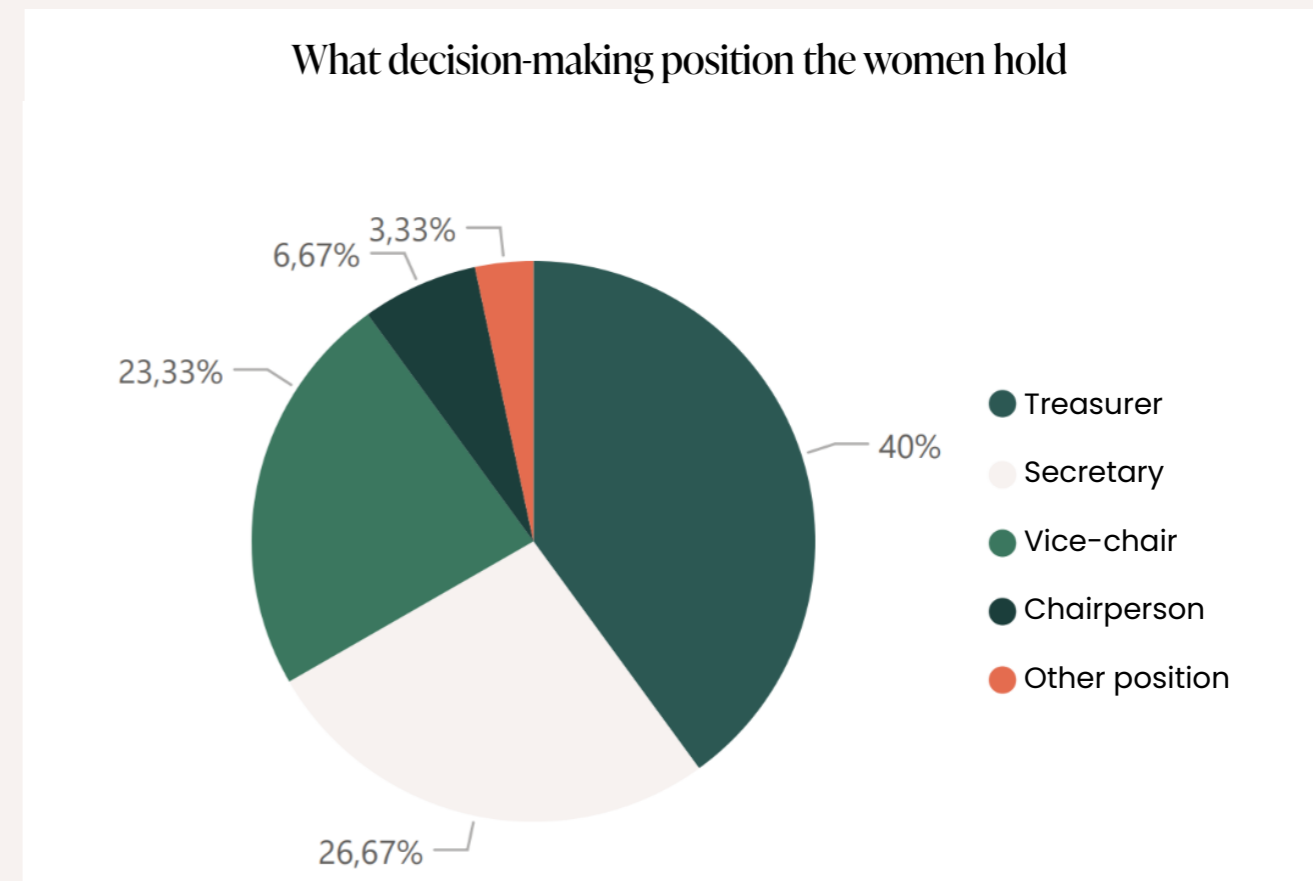
Chairperson, Somalia



The share of women in leadership positions in Somalia / Somaliland has increased from 34% in 2023 to 37% in 2025.



In Somalia / Somaliland, the share of women in leadership positions who participate actively has increased significantly, from 79% in 2023 to 86% in 2025. This means that they have attended some, most or all meetings, express their views to others, and feel that their opinions



In Somalia / Somaliland, women report holding the roles of treasurer (40%), secretary (26.67%), vice chair (23.33%) and chair (6.67%).

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION:

# Malawi

- During this period, The Development Fund worked with 3 partner organisations and 69 grassroots organisations in Malawi.
- Among the women in the sample, 50% hold leadership positions in 2025.
- 90.5% of women in leadership roles participate actively in decision-making processes.

The surveys have collected both quantitative and qualitative data from selected grassroots organisations that The Development Fund works with. The results apply to the grassroots organisations included in the survey. The texts below are anonymised quotes from the 2025 survey.

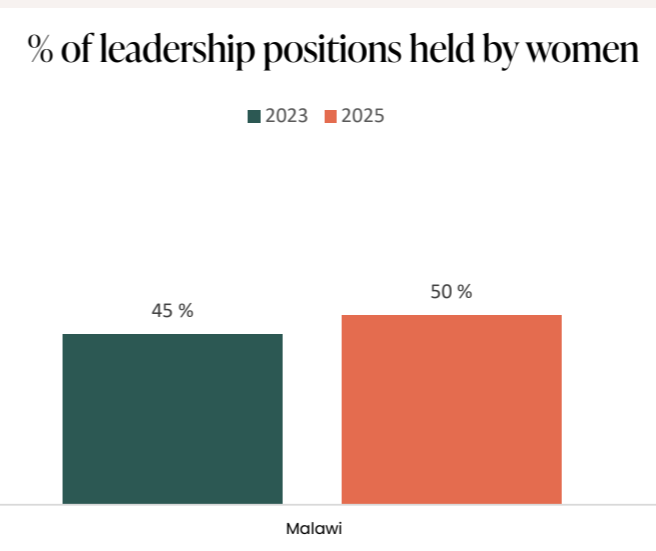
## What do the women in Malawi say?

"In our group, women are actively participating in all activities involving the group, and our decisions are very often being taken into consideration and used. This has empowered us to keep on participating."

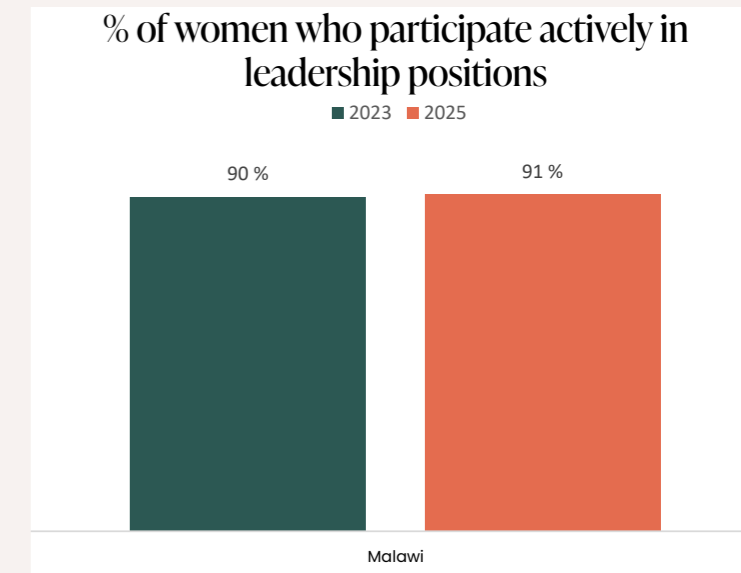
Vice-chair, 30 years old, Malawi

"There is only a challenge of being looked down on by society. A lot of women are considered weak, so it is hard sometimes for us to be heard when we are holding decision-making positions."

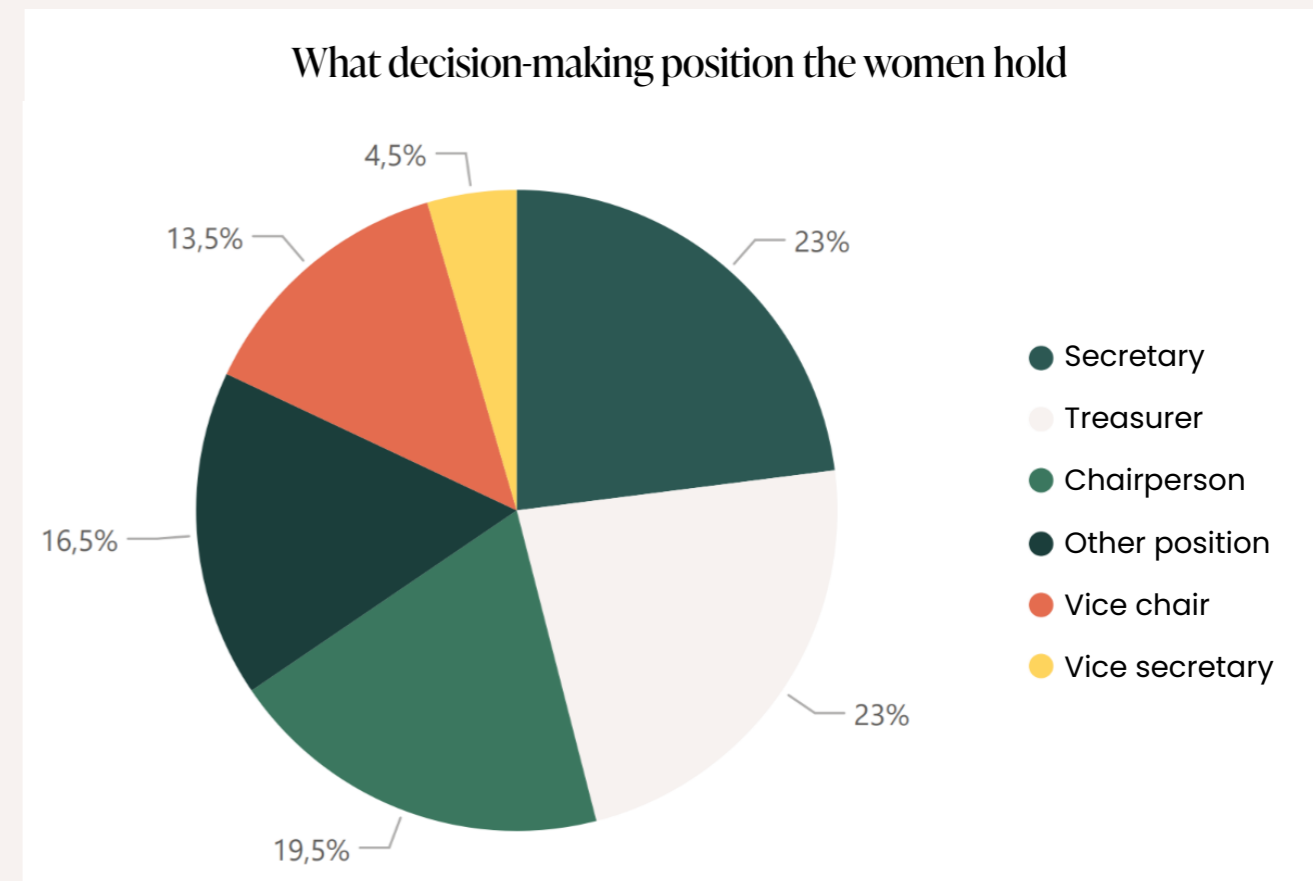
Chairperson, 34 years old, Malawi



The share of women in leadership positions in Malawi has increased from 45% in 2023 to 50% in 2025.



In Malawi, the share of women in leadership positions who participate actively has increased from 90% in 2023 to 91% in 2025. This means that they have attended some, most or all meetings, express their views to others, and feel that their opinions are taken into account.



In Malawi, women report holding the roles of secretary (23%), treasurer (23%), chair (19.5%), other positions (16.5%), vice chair (13.5%) and vice secretary (4.5%).

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION:

# Guatemala

- During this period, The Development Fund worked with 3 partner organisations and 13 grassroots organisations in Guatemala.
- Among the women surveyed, 65% hold leadership positions. This is the highest share among the programme countries.
- 95.8% of women in leadership roles participate actively in decision-making.

The surveys have collected both quantitative and qualitative data from selected grassroots organisations that The Development Fund works with. The results apply to the grassroots organisations included in the survey. The texts below are anonymised quotes from the 2025 survey.

## What do the women in Guatemala say?

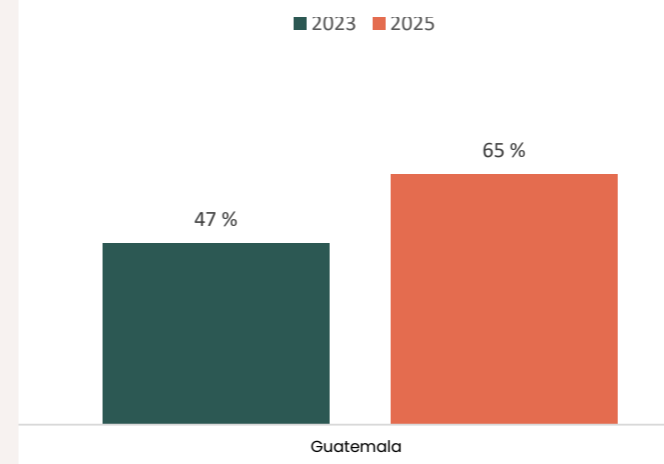
"It's been very good for me! I have learned many things that have helped me in my personal and familiar life. I have learned to draft minutes and make decisions. I think that women should participate and prove that we have the capacity to hold a management position, no matter that we are married; that is not an obstacle to hold positions in decision-making spaces."

Chairperson, Guatemala

"In the meetings I've attended, the women's groups have grown stronger, and that motivates me to be actively involved. There are women who are shy, who have been afraid, but women's groups have helped them to become stronger. It has helped me a lot to know how to express my opinion and also to be able to support other women, to motivate them to keep going. (...) We are undoubtedly important in any position we are given."

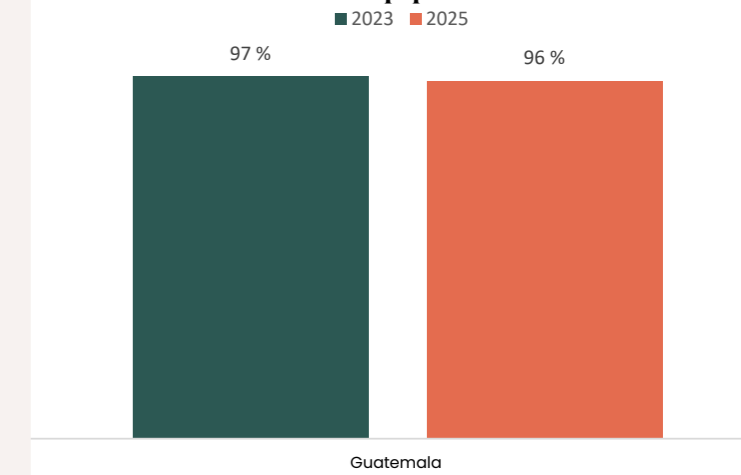
Chairperson, Guatemala

### % of leadership positions held by women



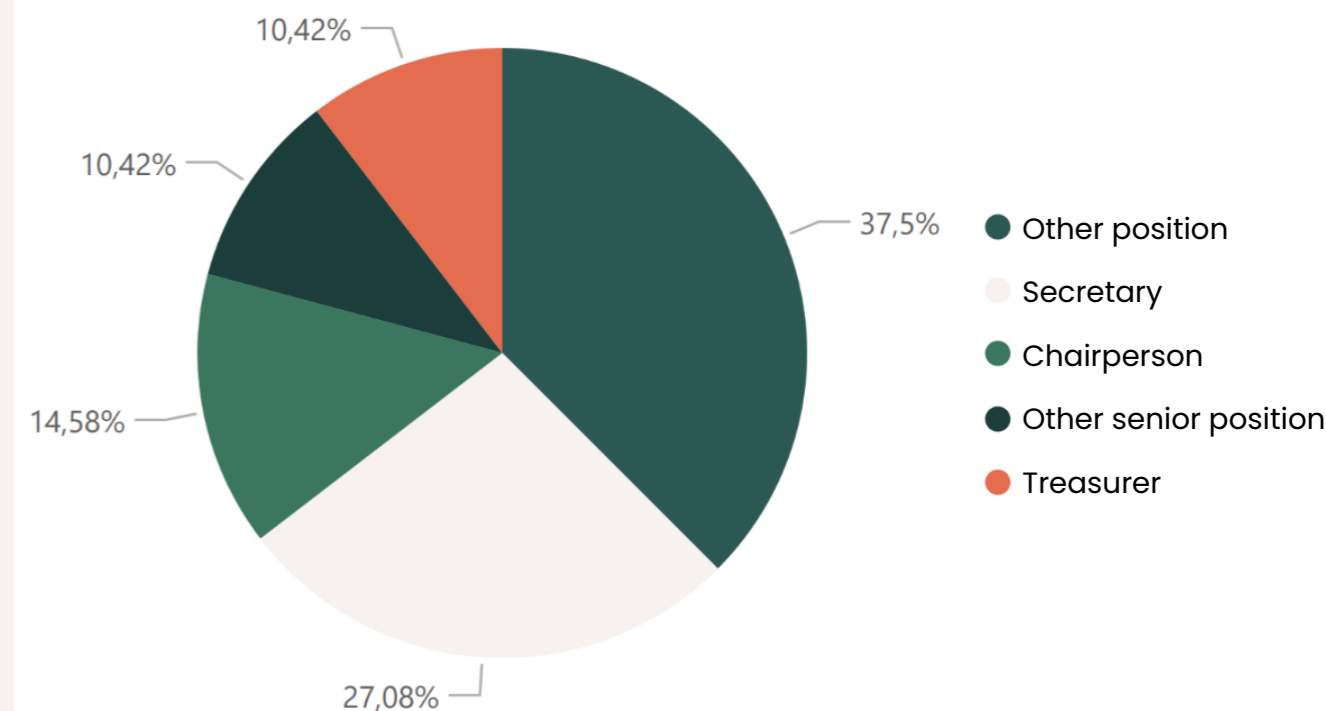
The share of women in leadership positions in Guatemala has increased from 47% in 2023 to 65% in 2025 – the highest among the five countries.

### % of women who participate actively in leadership positions



In Guatemala, the share of women who participate actively has decreased slightly, but remains among the highest at 96% in 2025. This means that they have attended some, most or all meetings, express their views to others, and feel that their opinions are taken into account.

### What decision-making position the women hold



In Guatemala, women report holding the roles of secretary (27.08%), chair (14.58%), other senior positions (10.42%) and treasurer (10.42%).

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION:

# Nepal

- During this period, The Development Fund worked with 8 partner organisations and 47 grassroots organisations in Nepal.
- Women in the sample hold 63% of leadership positions.
- 92.8% of women participate actively in decision-making processes.

The surveys have collected both quantitative and qualitative data from selected grassroots organisations that The Development Fund works with. The results apply to the grassroots organisations included in the survey. The texts below are anonymised quotes from the 2025 survey.

## What do the women in Nepal say?

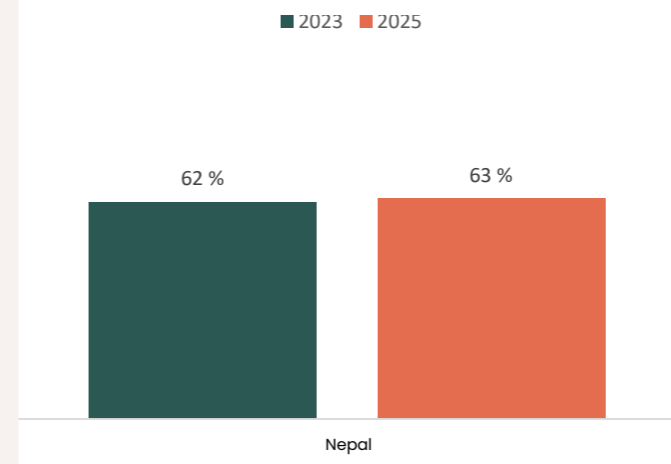
"This cooperative has become an important platform for us to share our happiness, sorrow and challenges. After being engaged in this cooperative, we feel proud, confident and motivated in every aspect of our lives."

Other position, Nepal

"I have been involved for the past nine years. During this time, my decision-making skills and confidence have improved. I regularly attend cooperative meetings and participate actively in quality contributions. However, managing time and household responsibilities remains a challenge. I suggest regular meetings and continued capacity-building support to strengthen women's leadership and effective participation."

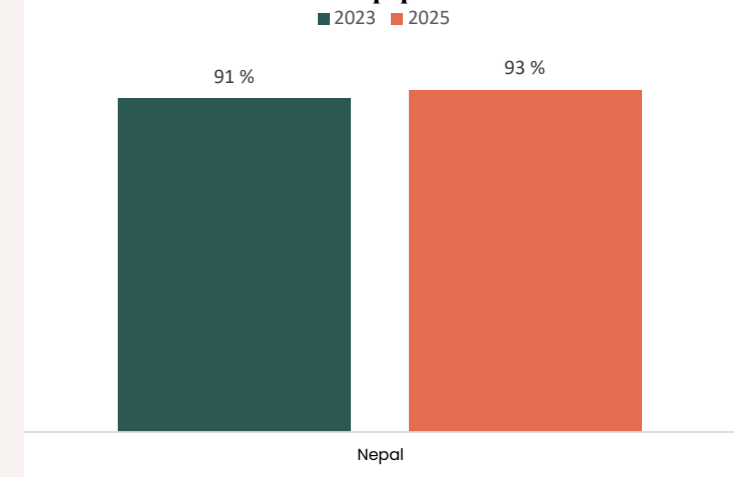
Vice-chair, Nepal

### % of leadership positions held by women



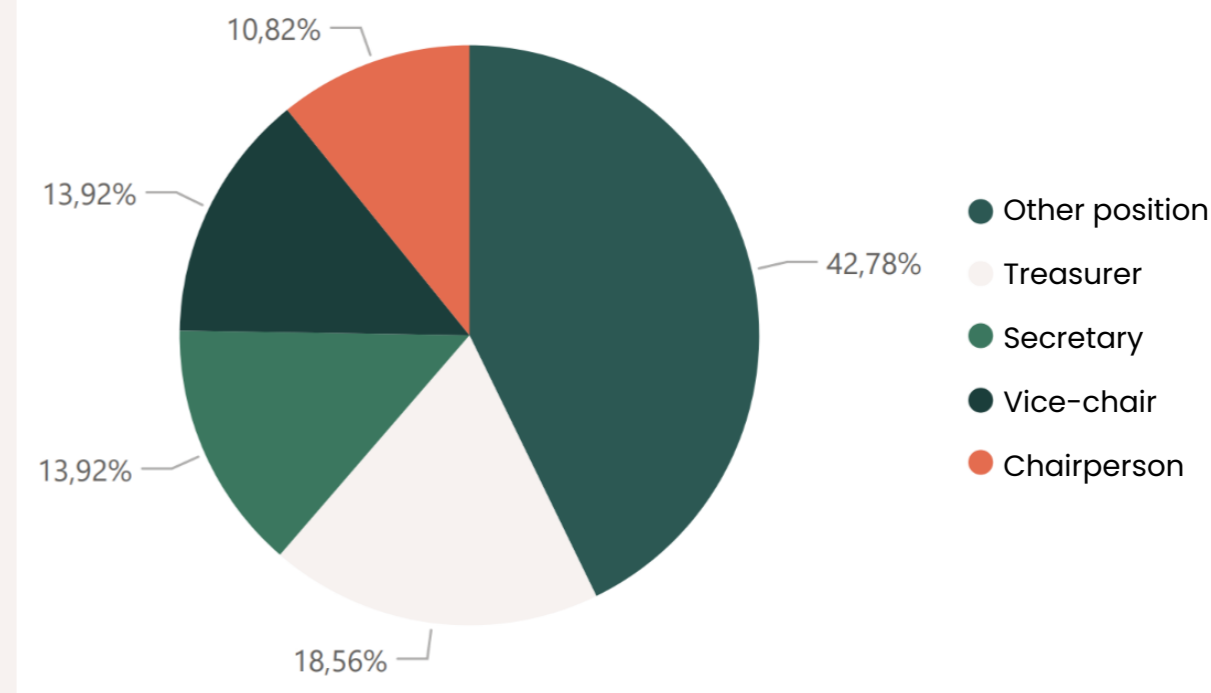
The share of women in leadership positions in Nepal has increased from 62% in 2023 to 63% in 2025.

### % of women who participate actively in leadership positions



In Nepal, the share of women in leadership positions who participate actively has increased from 91% in 2023 to 93% in 2025. This means that they have attended some, most or all meetings, express their views to others, and feel that their opinions are taken

### What decision-making position the women hold



In Nepal, women report holding the roles of treasurer (18.56%), secretary (13.92%), vice chair (13.92%) and chair (10.82%).

## WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION:

# Key points from the report

- Women's rights in an uncertain world:** In an increasingly unstable world, marked by climate crisis, democratic backsliding, war and conflict, many women and girls are experiencing a reduction in their rights and a worsening of their living conditions. Climate change and conflict have particularly severe consequences for access to agricultural land and natural resources, and thus for nutrition and food security. This reinforces existing gender inequalities and threatens women's health, safety and livelihoods.
- The Development Fund's work on women's participation:** Through the work of The Development Fund and our partner organisations, women are given the opportunity to participate actively in decision-making processes that are important for their communities and personal lives. Efforts to ensure equal access to agricultural land and resources are essential for empowering and strengthening women, and also have positive effects in reducing gender-based violence and increasing women's decision-making power.
- Main findings from the surveys:** From 2023 to 2025, the percentage of women in decision-making roles increased from 43.2% to 48.8%. Over the same period, the average level of active participation among women in decision-making roles within the selected grassroots organisations increased from 90.6% in 2023 to 92.3% in 2025. Among the countries, Somalia experienced the greatest increase in active participation, rising from 79% in 2023 to 85.7% in 2025.
- Women experience increased recognition and confidence:** Many women report experiencing greater recognition of their skills among men and increased motivation to participate in decision-making processes within grassroots organisations, despite ongoing social barriers. A key factor highlighted is the sense of community among women and the strength they find in one another, which gives them confidence and determination in spaces where important decisions are made.
- Gender equality requires long-term efforts:** Strengthening women's rights and active participation, and challenging discriminatory gender norms, is a long-term investment that is fundamental to sustainable societies. Progress for women and girls strengthens food systems, contributes to improved food security, and makes women and their communities more resilient in the face of climate change and geopolitical uncertainty. In an increasingly unstable world, it is even more important to strengthen this work in the years ahead.



A village group meeting in Nepal, march 2023.



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