CONSOLIDATED RESPONSE ON
THE IMPACT OF ILLITERACY ON YOUNG WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

This consolidated response is based on research conducted by iKNOW Politics staff and contributions submitted by Julie Ballington, Gender Advisor at the United Nations Development Programme; Nkoyo Toyo, founder of Gender and Development Action; Jerome Leyraud, ACE Network; Keith Jennings, President of the African American Human Rights Foundation; Barbara Hutton, National Democratic Institute; Alomiza Ennos-Barr, Liberian Representative and Chair of the Women Legislative Caucus; Mr John Tabwali, National Initiative for Civic Education in Malawi; and Stephanie Lynn, Resident Senior Program Director, National Democratic Institute for International Affairs.

Question:

What measures should be taken to engage the youth in electoral processes in the context of a country where female literacy rate is abysmally low and the females are restricted to their four walls doing domestic chores without any access to School/College/University.

Introduction

In electoral and decision-making processes, women - and especially young women - often find themselves spectators rather than active participants. While there are many factors at play, non-education stands out as one of the key reasons for the lack of young women's political participation. Women remain disproportionally affected by illiteracy in all parts of the world, but in Africa and Asia in particular girls face considerable difficulties acquiring basic reading and writing skills. This consolidated response will first discuss how illiteracy and non-education affect political participation for young women. It will then examine how these issues can best be tackled by reviewing a number of strategies, policies and special programmes that have been used around the world to tackle illiteracy and help girls and young women engage in politics.

1. YOUNG WOMEN, ILLITERACY AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: KEY CHALLENGES

In many societies, girls and young women face challenges regarding access to health, education and employment and, of course, political participation. It is important to underline that the experiences girls and young women have in these arenas are shaped by their circumstances, which may differ quite strongly across different regions and continents.

While a convergence between boys and girls is taking place in the developed world, developing countries still harbour a strongly defined gender gap: young men are still primarily engaged in paid labour, while many young women are relegated to the household and unpaid work. According to Mariam Diallo (iKNOW Politics regional coordinator), many girls in Mali get married at the age of thirteen and, consequently, stop attending school. This follows from their social and cultural context: from childhood, girls are educated to be good wives and mothers and are confined to their household, whereas the public sphere, education and employment remain reserved for men. Consequently, without the skills and background to understand political processes, these young women are often alienated from politics altogether and have little or no opportunity to further their own political participation.

In many instances, young women also face double discrimination of age and gender. The Inter-Parliamentary Union's survey of Members of Parliaments indicates the following:

> *"The aggregate responses to the survey confirm the common belief that parliamentarians tend to be older than middle age. Nearly 60 percent of respondents were over 50 years of age, with no significant variations between men and women. However, of the three percent of parliamentarians between 70 and 80 years of age, all were male. Just over 10 percent of respondents were aged between 30 and 40 years, and less than one percent were aged between 20 and 30 years. This may suggest that parliamentary politics holds little interest for young people, or perhaps that they encounter many obstacles to winning a parliamentary seat."*
> *(Ballington, J. p. 8. 2008)*

This 'double discrimination' is not limited to developing world, but its effects are exacerbated by the lack of education, training and skills of many (if not most) of the women in these regions. Tackling illiteracy cannot remove all the barriers young women face, but it stands out as a crucial step on the road to political participation. Referring to the situation in Somaliland, iKNOW Politics Expert and founder of Gender and Development Action organization, Nkoyo Toyo observes that

> "It is important to promote education among women and girls and raise their literacy level across the country. Once a woman is literate and competent, it is easier to negotiate a leadership position for her."**(**Toyo, N. Expert Opinion. 2008)

Illiteracy: facts and figures

According to data presented by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, literacy rates for young people (aged 15-24 years) around the world have been increasing steadily. The proportion of non educated youth worldwide declined from 25 per cent in 1970 to 13.2 per cent in 2000,

and is projected to drop further, to about 9.5 per cent, in 2015. There has been a persistent general tendency at the global level towards higher illiteracy rates for girls than for boys. The inequality, caused by both cultural and economic factors, is obvious, and improvements in girls' literacy rates are only occurring slowly: in the 1970s, girls were 1.8 times more likely than boys to be illiterate; by 2000 the ratio had dropped only slightly, to 1.6 times.

In the 2005-2008 period, Africa and Asia had the highest rates of illiteracy among 15- to 24-year-old girls, at 30,4 and 13,1 per cent respectively. These figures, while high, represent a major improvement for the two regions over the past 30 years: in 1970 the illiteracy rate for girls was 71.7 per cent in Africa and 50.3 per cent in Asia. In one generation the risk of illiteracy for girls has been reduced by more than half on both continents. Nonetheless, in the 2005-2008 period the literacy rate for boys in developing countries was 90,3 per cent, versus only 84,1 per cent for girls. In the developed world, the difference between both sexes is negligible at 99,5 per cent for boys and 99,6 per cent for girls. Although the situation in developing countries has been improving steadily, the gap between developing and developed countries remains dramatic. Persistently low levels of education keep young women from engaging politically, both as voters and as potential candidates.

Also impacting on the situation of illiterate women is family voting, a phenomenon that is witnessed across the globe but stands out in particular in highly conservative societies:

> "*Family voting is a practice where a family member casts votes on behalf of the entire family or where one member of the family pressures other members to vote for a certain candidate.* (Family and proxy voting in Macedonia. ACE Network.)

According to Jerome Leyraud, family voting in the Macedonian context refers to the practice of (male) heads of family influencing other family members, in particular women, in the course of voting. Mr. Leyraud identifies three types of family voting: a) male family member accompanying one or more female relatives into a polling booth; b) family groups voting together in the open; and c) a male family member obtaining ballot papers on behalf of other family members and marking them as he sees fit. Leyraud also states that family voting has been documented in newly-democratizing Central and Eastern European countries since the early 1990s. (Family and proxy voting in Macedonia. ACE Network.)

In rural areas, the village leadership (which can be a senior male figure or a council of male family heads) often decides who to support, after which the whole family, clan, or village is expected to conform to this decision. This is aggravated in areas where there is a history of

violent conflict between ethnic or religious groups. Until individuals in the community feel that they are no longer 'under threat', the pressure to stick together electorally remains strong. Guaranteeing secrecy of the ballot is not enough to eliminate these social pressures. Tackling the illiteracy of young women could go a long way in reducing this phenomenon and empowering them to cast their own vote.

2. SOLUTIONS AND PROGRAMMES

Illiteracy does not only make it difficult for people to cast their vote on election day, it makes it harder for them to engage with the subject, understand the processes behind it, and trust in the integrity of the political system. When citizens are not familiar with the electoral process, and not able to familiarise themselves with it, levels of participation will remain low; additionally, a large number of improperly cast ballots or a dearth of confidence in the integrity of the elections or in the legitimacy of the results will follow. Such cynicism toward elections is especially likely to develop when election officials or political competitors have not fulfilled past promises.

When looking to overcome the negative effect of illiteracy on the political participation of young women, two approaches present themselves. Firstly, voter education programs can assist illiterate men and women in becoming politically active. Secondly, and more fundamentally in this case, providing young women with proper access to education will substantially reduce, if not eradicate, the issue of an illiterate female electorate that remains (partially) disenfranchised due to a lack of basic skills. Ideally, countries facing these issues should employ a combination of both strategies in order to maximise the level of young women's political participation, both for the current generation and for those to come.

Voter Education

Voter education is defined as follows:

> "It is *the process by which citizens are educated on how to register and vote, develop a sense of civic duty to participate in the electoral process, and learn to respect the outcome of legitimate elections"*. Jennings, K. Education for Participation. NDI. P.4 1999)

Without a solid basis on voting principles, the conduct of voting operations can, at best, be ineffective or at worst become manipulated by partisan political or corrupt forces, leading to the undermining of public confidence in voting processes. The increasing numbers of organizations working to strengthen democracy helps non educated people and young women in particular to learn about their civic rights.

Barbara Hutton underlines the importance to train non educated people on the way to use a ballot. The process is about using all material needed to vote: poster ballot, envelopes, pencils, voting bout etc. It is important to indicate, while carrying out this training, that it is not a campaign telling people who to vote for. Its one and only purpose is to show examples to non educated voters.

> "Most non educated people do not know that there are organizations that teach adults to read and write". (Hutton, B. Voter Education Manual for Community Educators. NDI, P.6 1993)

Among tools used to interest young people to politics, mobile phone technology is one of the best. Voice messages can be sent in local languages to inform people on elections or a candidate. People with low education levels may still be able to read or send text messages to communicate on the election. Without access to internet (facebook or twitter), in some parts of the world – and especially in rural areas in Africa - mobile phones are considered a way of giving a voice to everyone across the continent. Through mobile phones, members of marginalized communities are touching on issues that directly affect their lives; this is especially true for young people, who use text messaging to communicate among themselves.

Mobile phones are quickly changing the face of democracy, as they are giving rural communities a voice. AfricaNews was the first to introduce mobile reporting in Africa as a way of enabling everyone on the continent to have their say. In Kenya for example, during the last general election, issues such as corruption, women in electoral politics, and the role of youth in politics was avidly discussed through text messaging. Not only it is a good way to engage young people, it helps to reach a broader audience. Especially rural communities are often very eager to provide information on the various candidates. Mobile phones and radios are essential parts of networking and have become central to the participation of voters in the electoral and decision-making process (Ennos,B, Expert Opinion 2009).

According to Keith Jennings, civic education and the promotion of democratic values through 'non-traditional means' must also include influencing the draft of school texts and of democratic elections of student representatives, the promotion of internal democracy of political parties, and the conduction of union elections where appropriate. Depending on the composition of the population and contemporary circumstances, it may be necessary for electoral commissions to go even further: for instance, a participatory voter education approach and outreach plan, which seeks the full involvement of all major stakeholders, could be adopted in ethnically divided or multinational states as an essential part of the election commission's work.

Voter apathy has proven to be a difficult challenge in transitional and developing societies, especially among young people. In this respect, the image of the Election Management Body is also directly tied to its style and work methods. The commission can use the electoral process to build institutional trust among citizens for its work and the electoral system generally, if it operates in an open and transparent manner. Conversely, it can be the prime culprit in eroding citizens' trust in the entire democratic process, for example if there is constant public bickering among commissioners, if the commission refuses to share information with key stakeholders, or if the commission is so dominated by the executive that its credibility has been compromised before it even begins its work.

To be most effective with regards to people with low education levels, it is important to start voter education activities much earlier than what studies and experience currently reflect. Sufficient resources, financial and human, should be allocated by government to the election management bodies so that they can adequately undertake nation-wide voter education activities. In addition, especially in rural areas, more systematic attention should be given by electoral commissions to their grassroots communications strategies and the proper utilization of the media, print and electronic, with an eye on reaching young people.

Education for all

Alongside these voter and civic education initiatives, tackling illiteracy directly remains a key strategy in drawing more young women to politics. As demonstrated in the figures presented earlier, literacy rates for girls lag behind on those for boys, but in general positive trends towards greater gender parity appear to be showing. With respect to 'education for all', the Millennium Development Goals offer an excellent frame of reference. While the projected

targets are far from reached and the 2015 deadline is drawing closer quickly, this initiative has placed education at the top of the development agenda and is already showing some promising results. What should be pointed out, however, is that for young women to engage politically, primary education is not enough. Young women need to be able to stay in school longer, gain more skills and experience, and be accepted into the public sphere. Safeguarding primary education for all girls is a necessary step, but it is only a first one.

In short, the best way to promote and encourage young women's political participation is to combine voter education programs with general schooling. The case studies below illustrate a range of programs and activities designed to promote the political awareness and activity of women and offer some insight into how these goals may be achieved.

Mali

In 1991, when Mali first became a democratic country, many people were not educated so it was difficult explain their new rights as free citizens. Political parties that emerged in that period decided to develop television and radio ads with a famous Mali comedian (Processus Electoral du Mali, PNUD Mali.p11.2002). There was also segment on TV and radio called "éclat de rires" where people were taught their civic roles and rights in a more light-hearted and accessible way. Famous singers have taken part in the training process by performing songs about

> **Importance of networking**
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> *"Networking is very important. It is essential to the empowerment of women. I have used it to gather advice from different sources when I need to solve problems. When I see a problem, I can call my colleagues and say, "I have this problem with my district; what do you think I can do?" They'll tell me how they addressed similar problems. Networking means helping each other, especially because gender empowerment is a new issue in the world, particularly in Africa. I need my international women colleagues to watch my back while I watch my front. And I will watch their back while they watch their front. That is networking, and that is caring."*
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> ***Quote from the iKNOW Politics Interview with Alomiza***
> ***Ennos-Barr, Liberian Representative and Chair of the***
> *Women Legislative Caucus.*
> *http://www.iknowpolitics.org/en/node/9077*

multiparty, democracy and freedom. At the moment, there is a program " A nous la citoyennete" which aims to educate young people on electoral processes. They show a model ballot with candidates' pictures and party logos on TV, so that voters can familiarize themselves with the ballot form and will not need much assistance in the ballot box. .

UNICEF and programs targeted at schoolchildren

For a better understanding of voting mechanisms, and a greater participation of young women in politics, it is important to start teaching civic rights at an early age, in schools. In developing countries, government and civil societies work together to provide the basic education for every child and equip pupils and students with basic knowledge to allow them to function as competent and productive citizens in a free society. As stated in the UNICEF strategies for girls' education, school must be child friendly (Strategies for girls education UNICEF).

A child friendly school is:

💬 Is gender-sensitive for both girls and boys

💬 Protects children; there is no corporal punishment, no child labor and no physical, sexual or mental harassment

💬 Ensures that children are learning and not being preached at

💬 Involves all children, families and communities; it is particularly sensitive to and protective of the most vulnerable children

💬 Is healthy; it has safe water and adequate sanitation, with separate toilet facilities for girls

💬 Teaches children about life skills and HIV/AIDS

💬 Involves children in active and participatory learning

💬 Develops children's self-esteem and self-confidence free of bias from teachers

Strategies for girls education UNICEF, 2004, p4

http://www.unicef.org/publications/files/English_Version_A.pdf

Malawi

Malawi's National Initiative for Civic Education (NICE) was established in 1999 and aims to entrench core democratic values at the grassroots level through the provision of civic education. According to its mission statement, "the unique approach of NICE is that, contrary to other civic education projects in Africa, it is a country-wide program, operating throughout all districts and villages"[1]. One of the most original initiatives promoted by NICE is the

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[1] http://www.nicemw.org/

establishment of rural libraries, offering rural people access to information. At the moment about 80 of these libraries exist. At the very beginning, there was no space for these facilities; slowly but steadily, however, communities got mobilised and built their own structures. Many people come every day: teachers, villagers, women, but also students whose schools do not have such facilities. The rural libraries have also become a venue to discuss public issues in everyday life.

Alongside this library project, a major role has been played by NICE in view of Malawi's elections. NICE, which contributed to the high voter turnout during the 1999 elections, has been working to ensure that every Malawian participates in free and fair elections. "NICE produces and circulates voter education materials and analyzes the manifestos of the different parties so that people can make an informed choice", explains Mr John Tabwali, one of the para-civic educators. NICE faced some constraints and challenges in its initial phases, but is now a well-established organisation that continues to expand its efforts in the field of voter education. It has established, among others, a popular internship programme and volunteering scheme, as well as several training programmes for youth in the areas of leadership, civic education and democratic governance.

Afghanistan

According to Stephanie Lynn, iKNOW Politics expert, in Afghanistan, the Education and Higher Education Ministries (separate ministries in Afghanistan) are best placed to push through voter education for illiterate men and and. However, the MoE does not include the electoral process in its curriculum. The Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) has departments in every province and could be very valuable in outreach to women regarding elections and political participation. The Independent Election Commission (IEC) in Afghanistan has an Electoral Education Center (IFES supported) that does outreach specifically to students/youth could to provide background on the electoral system. This is one way to deal with these problems, but the resources (human and financial) need to be well in place for it to be effective.

One of the primary roles of the Independent Election Commission (IEC) is to do public outreach/civic education on the electoral process. Efforts are made to hire equal numbers of female and male civic educators. Unfortunately, this has been extremely difficult. However, the female civic educators who do public outreach work through mullahs and village elders to gain access to women. This is a necessary first step. They conduct face to face meetings

in women's homes, and public spaces that women have access to such as health clinics and schools. Face to face meetings with men are held by male civic educators. They can encourage men to take information home that will educate women. Mullahs are provided with information that can be shared during Friday teaching.

Additionally, the IEC Public Outreach Department develops PSAs for both radio and TV. These may be less effective in providing in-depth information about the electoral process but, coupled with other civic education efforts by NGOs, women may come to understand the importance of their role in the process. So, at the institutional/governance level, partnering with appropriate agencies would be a critical mechanism. Civic Education is obviously a critical aspect of creating awareness of the electoral process. For a non-literate audience, radio programming can be the best means when face to face is not available. In Afghanistan, far more people have access to radio than TV. Roundtable discussions are often used to present information on the process, different viewpoints, roles of women, etc. Radio stations that do their own drama programming weave election and political processes into their story lines, and this has been shown to be really popular.

Conclusion

Illiteracy levels alone cannot explain young women's low levels of political participation, but promoting education will go a long way in encouraging their political awareness and activity. In addition, voter education targeted at those with little or no schooling is developed by many organizations to ensure an independent, fair and secret voting. A wide range of programs, approaches and methods exist; what is most important is to find and implement those that have most chance of success in a particular social, political and cultural context. A general first step for all countries, however, is the provision of education for all. To truly promote the political awareness and engagement of girls and young women, governments need to ensure equal access to education for boys and girls, and encourage the acceptance of young women as independent actors in the public sphere.

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