

iKNOW politics

Consolidated Response

Women's Political Participation in Traditional and Conservative Societies



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Introduction

Despite comprising more than 50 percent of the world's population, women continue to lack access to political leadership opportunities and resources at all levels of government. Women's equal participation in decision-making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy, but a necessary pre-condition for women's interests to be taken into account. Governance structures which do not result in the equal participation of men and women, or their equal enjoyment of benefits from state interventions are by definition neither inclusive nor democratic.

In 2007, recognizing that over the last century women's gains in the political arena have been slow and inadequate, five international organizations came together to make women's political participation their collective priority and devise a strategy that would scale-up each of the organization's efforts to foster gender equality in politics:

- International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA)
- Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)
- National Democratic Institute (NDI)
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
- United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)

The International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics (www.iKNOWPolitics.org) is an online network, jointly supported by the five partner organizations, that aims to increase the participation and effectiveness of women in political life by utilizing a technology-enabled forum to provide access to critical resources and expertise, stimulate dialogue, create knowledge, and share experiences among women in politics.

In just three years, iKNOW Politics has become the leading website on women's political participation. Building on a library of over 1500 resources, iKNOW Politics has captured the combined experience and knowledge of its 74 global experts and 6000 members from over 150 countries. iKNOW Politics has documented and disseminated the lessons and best practices of women as voters, candidates and elected legislators.

The following is a printed version of one of the most frequently-cited iKNOW Politics knowledge products, based on the combined input from experts and members worldwide. Please visit the iKNOW Politics website to pose a question of your own, contribute to the online discussions, browse the resource library or read additional iKNOW Politics consolidated expert responses, E-discussion summaries, interviews with women leaders, or contact iKNOW Politics at connect@iknowpolitics.org to get in touch with a staff member in your region of the world. iKNOW Politics is available in **English, French, Spanish and Arabic**.

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CONSOLIDATED RESPONSE ON WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN TRADITIONAL AND CONSERVATIVE SOCIETIES

This consolidated response is based on research conducted by iKNOW Politics staff and the contribution submitted by Seema Kulkarni, Research Fellow and Governing Board Member at Society for Promoting Participative Eco-system Management; Cristina Palabay, Secretary-General of Gabriela Women's Party; Doris Ravenhill, iKNOW Politics Expert and Founder of the Women's Lobby; and Amal Sabbagh, iKNOW Politics Expert and former Secretary General of the Jordanian National Commission for Women.

Question:

How can women overcome traditional and conservative stereotypes in society that poses barriers to women's political participation, especially in the cases when women face resistance to be elected through quotas or any other affirmative action measure? What are the important dimensions to measure women's political participation in a society where women voters outnumber male voters, yet has no women legislators?

Introduction

Women are still underrepresented in politics virtually in all parts of the world, with the exception of a few countries. Women face more barriers and resistance to enter politics in traditional and conservative societies that have a limited view of women's roles in public life. In such societies, women often face resistance both from their families and the society as a whole to their participation in political processes. In some cases, women do not have access to sufficient information to make an informed political decision and they are pressured by their families to vote for a male candidate. Furthermore, women in such societies do not receive equal support from political parties, as they are not viewed as viable candidates, and have greater difficulties mobilizing voter base during election campaigns.

This consolidated response highlights types of positive action measures, advocacy campaigns, women's movements, and educational opportunities that help women in

traditional and conservative societies to overcome some of the barriers that they face in politics and public life.

Women's Movements and Advocacy Campaigns

Women's movements and organizations have been one of the key entry points and successful advocacy tools for women candidates entering politics. A number of case studies from around the world, specifically from Asia and Africa, indicate that involvement in women's organizations and community works lay the ground for future political involvement by making women candidates known for their hard work and dedication to their constituencies. In the Inter-Parliamentary Union's survey of 272 parliamentarians from 110 countries, women parliamentarians indicated participation in non-profit organizations and social work as important channels of entry into politics. Nearly twice as many women (20% as opposed to 11%) as men entered politics through civil society and non-governmental organization (NGO) activity. Additionally, about 16% of women parliamentarians used social work as a channel to enter politics. (Ballington, J. p.16. IPU. 2008.)

An interesting example is the political career of Liza Largoza Maza, Member of the 13th Congress of the Philippines. Before entering politics, Ms. Maza actively participated in women's movements, specifically in GABRIELA, a national alliance of women's organizations. When in 2000 GABRIELA decided to set up a party-list organization, Gabriela Women's Party (GWP), Ms. Maza, due to her hard work and dedication, became the natural choice for its president and number one nominee for the 2000 parliamentary elections in the Philippines. Since then, Ms. Maza successfully ran three times and won seats in the national Congress. (Libres,B., Stakeeva, B. et al. APWLD. 2005)

Furthermore, women's organizations can play a twofold role by holding their own public awareness campaigns and promoting existing campaigns at the grassroots level. Doris Ravenhill, iKNOW Politics Expert and Founder of the Women's Lobby, mentions that public awareness campaigns should reach out not only to national organizations and machineries, but also to institutions at the local level. Ms. Ravenhill points out that

creating public awareness through grassroots organizations and women's groups will lead to a stronger presence of women in male-dominated societies and sectors. (Ravenhill, D. Expert Opinion. 2009.) Given the impact and outreach of women's movements and organizations, it is important that they work with women candidates and with one another to educate the population about the benefits of women's equal access and participation in public life.

While holding public awareness campaigns it is important to tailor each campaign to the cultural and social background of each country and region. Tailored campaigns not only help deliver messages to target groups and ensure that they are culturally sensitive, but also help to identify key messages and issues that will make the campaign successful. Some interesting strategies on advocating for women's political participation emerged during the iKNOW Politics [E-Discussion Forum on Gender Quotas as a Mechanism to Promote Women in Politics](#). For instance, one suggestion was to hold advocacy campaigns based on economic arguments illustrating how a country can benefit as a whole from women's involvement in politics and decision-making, and without equal participation the country will not be able to make any progress. (Pellizeri, A. Resistance to Quotas and How to Overcome It. 2008) Another suggestion was made by a contributor from Burkina-Faso who suggested advocating for quotas and for women's political representation by building alliances among women's organizations and institutions promoting human rights. The contributor highlighted that such cooperation and alliances could lead to developing a common strategy to increase the number of women in politics. (Kasse, A. Comment on Stratégies. 2008.)

Another strategy for public advocacy and lobbying can be providing positive and realistic interpretations of traditional and religious norms. Often, radical political movements negatively interpret religious and traditional norms, which results in legislation discriminating against women's right to participate equally in socio-economic and political life. One way to overcome such misinterpretation is to advocate for societal equality through revisiting the religious and traditional norms and showcasing the positive lessons that they offer to society as a whole. For Instance, a women's

organization in Malaysia, Sisters in Islam, conducted research on the interpretation of the Qur'an and Islamic norms, which they used in public and press statements to argue against contentious issues promoted by the conservative religious authority or the Islamist movements. Sisters in Islam was successful in campaigning against the T'gganu Hudood Bill by generating widespread public debate that brought together a number of women's groups, political leaders both in government and in opposition, and Islamic scholars who spoke up against the bill. The organization also lobbied the Minister of Women's Issues with detailed arguments suggesting that the cabinet take a position against the bill. This advocacy effort forced the government to backtrack and propose amendments to the discriminatory provisions in the bill. (Mehra, M. p.37. 2008)

Quotas and Positive Action Measures

In the recent years, adopting positive action measures, such as quotas and reserved seats, has become a popular and successful tool to promote women in politics. According to the Quota Project, there are approximately 100 countries around the world that have some kind of constitutional, electoral or political party quotas for women. The average level of women in politics in countries with quotas is 20%, which is higher than world's average of women in parliaments that stands at 18.4%.

In countries where governments resist adopting official quotas for women, it is key to advocate for voluntary quotas through political parties. In many countries establishing voluntary party quotas has become a first step toward creating gender equality in politics and setting examples for governments and other political institutions in involving women in public life. Drude Dahlerup, iKNOW Politics Expert and Professor of Political Science at Stockholm University, mentions:

“If it seems impossible to pass a law on electoral gender quotas, voluntary party quotas may be an alternative. Nothing prevents any political party from introducing gender quotas for its internal boards and electoral lists – tomorrow! Usually it is easier to make a center or a left political party make this first move. If successful, a process of contagion may lead other political parties to start recruiting more women as candidates.” - (Dahlerup, D. Expert

Opinion on Several Routes to Increase Political Representation of Women.
2008.)

Charmaine Rodrigues, iKNOW Politics Expert and UNDP's Regional Legislative Strengthening Expert in the Pacific Region, in one of her comments described Australia's experience promoting women in politics. Ms. Rodrigues highlights that in Australia instead of lobbying for electoral or constitutional changes, efforts were focused on lobbying political parties to introduce voluntary quotas. The adoption of a voluntary quota by the Australian Labor Party (ALP) in 1994 was a turning point for women in politics in the country. The quota initially called for 35% of women candidates and was later raised to 40%, which in 2008 made it possible for ALP to elect 36 % of its women candidates to the Lower House seats in all Federal State and Territory parliaments and 37% in the Upper House seats. (Rodrigues, C. Comment on the Affirmative Action Measure in the Pacific Region. 2008.)

Empowering Women through Access to Education and Economic Opportunities

Increasing the numbers of women in politics is directly linked to the empowerment of women in social, economic and political spheres. Scarce access to knowledge, information and financial resources are cited among the key obstacles to women's political participation. When combined with stereotypes against women's role and status in society, these obstacles further lessen the chances of women to enter and succeed in politics. Amal Sabbagh, iKNOW Politics Expert and former Secretary General of the Jordanian National Commission for Women, points out that:

"Women can never overcome barriers and the stereotypes on their own. There needs to be concerted efforts at various levels and from different actors (state, society, media, educational systems, etc...) to bring lasting change. Women themselves also need to go through a paradigm shift to overcome their own deep beliefs in the traditional roles assigned to them and, more importantly, the total confusion between traditional and religious norms that are consequences of patriarchal traditions often co-opt religious teachings." (Sabbagh, A. Expert Opinion on Overcoming Barriers in Traditional Societies to Promote Women in Politics. 2009.)

To overcome societal and traditional barriers both within themselves and within the society as a whole, women need to have access to knowledge and skills empowering them to successfully compete with their male colleagues. Nkoyo Toyo, iKNOW Politics Expert and Founder of the Gender and Development Action (GADA), in her response on Overcoming Clan Barriers to Women's Political Participation in Somaliland indicates that it is difficult for clans and male headed groups to prevent women with skills and knowledge from holding leadership positions. Ms. Toyo stresses the importance of promoting education among women and girls since an educated and literate woman can more easily negotiate a leadership position for herself. (Toyo, N. Expert Opinion. 2008.) This is particularly relevant in the case of developing countries where women and girls are disadvantaged in receiving education. In some countries, the disadvantage is due to poverty and cultural stereotypes that motivate families to invest their time and scarce resources in their son's or male relative's education as he is viewed as the future breadwinner.

Research shows that not only formal education is important to increase women's contribution to politics, but also informal adult education and training are key for women's empowerment. iKNOW Politics experts reiterate the fact that empowering women candidates through training on fundraising, working with the media, building voter contact programs, running an effective political campaign, and confidence-building are important steps toward advancement of women in politics. Such training can be provided by local and grassroots women's groups, international organizations, political parties, and other educational institutions. For instance, Anne Marie Goetz, Chief Advisor of Governance, Peace and Security at the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), in her study illustrates the importance of public and political education of women through political parties interested in creating or strengthening a support base in politically inactive communities. Ms. Goetz mentions that adult literacy campaigns and popular civic education have in some instances resulted in a marked shift in the level of women's activity in civil and political society. Ms. Goetz outlines the role of the Indian Total Literacy Campaign as one of the most celebrated examples of adult education.

This campaign mobilized women in the anti-arrack campaign in Andhra Pradesh, India, in the early 1990s to fight for the prohibition of alcohol. The campaign incorporated critical stories about men's alcohol abuse into its post-literacy primers to reflect rural women's intense concerns about this subject, which later on led to boycotting liquor shops and efforts to control men's drinking. Once it was found out that the ruling party raised illicit campaign finances by granting liquor sales licenses, the opposition parties, particularly the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), immediately started supporting the women's campaign and exposing the corruption of the incumbent party. By 1994 TDP won the state elections, partly on a promise of prohibition. (Goetz, A. p.16. 2003.) Although the campaign did not lead to an increased number of women in politics, it activated women's participation in civic life, at least during the campaign period.

Scholars also point out that political empowerment of women is often correlated to their status within the family and society, including the rights to inheritance and equal economic development. For instance, speaking of the South Asian experiences, Professor Bina Agarwal mentions that women's direct ownership and control of land can be crucial for enhancing their well-being, their bargaining power within and outside the household, and their overall empowerment. Ms. Agarwal points out that although women's participation in decision-making in local social and political institutions would be mostly linked to their class and caste, granting women land rights can play a significant role in such participation. (Agarwal, B. p.41. 1994.) In general, women's economic empowerment and ability to climb the economic ladder may change not only women's status within their families, but also strengthen their roles and perceptions in society.

Measuring Women's Political Participation

To comprehensively measure women's political participation, it is important to observe women's behaviors in political processes in general and to research whether women are well informed and free in their decision-making. Anne Marie Goetz, Chief Advisor of Governance, Peace and Security at the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), in the Background Paper for the Education For All Report suggests looking into

women's voting behavior, lobbying activity, associational activity, and membership in political parties as indicators for measuring women's political participation (Goetz, A. UNESCO. 2004.) In her Expert Opinion, Seema Kulkarni, Fellow and Governing Board Member at the Society for Promoting Participative Eco-system Management, also underlines the importance of measuring women's participation in politics at various levels, including participation of women in political processes as voters. Ms. Kulkarni highlights that although it is important to know the numbers of women in politics, for instance the number of women legislators, it is even more critical to know the content that women contribute to politics and public life. She suggests looking into the awareness of women about issues that they vote on, their understanding of gender justice, and their ability to run as candidates and express their positions on gender equality. (Expert Opinion. 2009)

Experts also recommend evaluating whether women represent women's interests and needs once they get elected and whether elected women have real impact on policies and legislation at different levels of politics. Julie Ballington, iKNOW Politics Expert and Program Officer for Partnership between Men and Women, Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), suggests looking into how women participate in decision-making processes i.e. whether women parliamentarians sponsor any pieces of legislation, how they vote on legislation, and how active they are in committee or plenary debates. She also underlines the importance of measuring the types of positions held by women within parliaments i.e. the office of speaker/presiding officers, heads of committees, Secretary General, and looking at which portfolio assignments women hold. (Ballington, J. Expert Opinion 2008). The suggested assessment tools can be utilized not only to measure women's participation in parliaments, but also in other types of government institutions. In the past decade, the behavior and impact of women as voters has also become a centerpiece of research on measuring women's political participation. Amal Sabbagh, iKNOW Politics Expert, suggests analyzing women's behaviors and electoral biases based on existing electoral systems. As an example, Ms. Sabbagh mentions that some women may be pressured by their families to vote only for male candidates that eventually would lead to male-dominated politics, specifically in majoritarian electoral

systems. (Sabbagh, A. Expert Opinion. 2009) Another interesting opinion is expressed by Julie Ballington who suggests considering:

“voter turnout and voter registration data to analyze how women have participated in elections over a period of time. For example, data from a decade ago suggested that there was a gender gap in terms of the political participation of women in elections. That gap seems to have diminished in recent years, and women are at least as likely, perhaps more likely, to vote than men in several countries.” (Ballington, J. Expert Opinion. 2008)

Some studies recommend assessing the participation of women in politics through the impact of deterrent factors on women’s entrance into politics. For instance, the Survey of Women and Men in Parliaments published by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) highlights domestic responsibilities, cultural perceptions about the role of women, lack of support from family, and lack of financial resources as deterrent factors to the participation of women in politics. (Ballington, J. IPU. 2008.) Analyzing these deterrent factors may provide information on the real participation of women in politics and obstacles faced by them.

Conclusion

Although women have made big achievements in politics in recent years, they are still under-presented in public decision-making offices. In some regions of the world, women face strong resistance from society and government to their participation in public life. To overcome some of these barriers, women and women’s organizations need to advocate for the implementation of positive action measures, hold public awareness campaigns, establish strong collaboration networks with women candidates and leaders, and provide women new opportunities in education and economic life.

To have an accurate measurement and understanding of women’s political participation, it is important to have a comprehensive approach that goes beyond only counting numbers of women represented in political institutions. Such an approach may include looking into the level of women’s participation in political processes, behaviors of

women voters, readiness of women to represent women’s interests in public policies and legislation, ability of women politicians to participate in decision-making processes, and factors that deter women’s advancement in politics. Employing any or all of the above mentioned measures needs to be contextualized in the cultural, social and political milieu of a country.



Further Reading:

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