



## **SUMMARY - E-DISCUSSION: Challenges for women in politics: the glass ceiling – stereotypes in terms of portfolio assignments, open from September 9th to September 27th, 2013.**

*Prepared by the iKNOW Politics Team*

iKNOW Politics organized an online discussion on stereotyping portfolio assignments for women in politics, available in Arabic, English, French and Spanish. The discussions went on for a period of 3 weeks and received contributions from 13 members from different countries including Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mexico, New Zealand, Nigeria, and Peru as well as from an international expert on this issue.

This E-Discussion ran from September 9th to September 27th, 2013.

### **LAUNCH MESSAGE:**

*“The principles of gender-sensitive parliaments can be advanced if women occupy leadership positions as parliamentarians and as key members of parliamentary staff, as they are in a position to influence policy directions, change parliamentary procedure and practices, serve as role models to other women and provide a different perspective in debates” - Plan of Action for Gender-sensitive Parliaments, IPU, 2013*

Women everywhere are breaking the glass ceiling in politics but their voices still go unheard and their contributions are too often sidelined. In many places women are still seen as incapable of taking on responsibility in what are perceived as male-oriented areas, such as finance, energy, economic development, climate change, foreign affairs, defense, trade and infrastructure. This is often the case in parliaments where women are given ‘women’s only’ portfolios or only allowed to sit in women committees and are being pushed away from the other committees because of their gender.

Not just parliaments but all levels of government need to adopt affirmative action measures and amend the internal rules so as to give preference to women over men (according to their capabilities) for decision-making positions (including ministerial positions, committee chairs and leadership positions in the Parliament Bureau) in cases where qualifications are equal or commensurate with their representation in the government.

According to the IPU Plan of Action for Gender-sensitive Parliaments, parliaments need to encourage the proportional and equitable distribution of women parliamentarians across all committees, not just those relating to women, children, families, health and education.

- Should parliamentary committees and ministries be gender balanced (even to the point of appointing a man and a woman as co-chairs in each committee)? Or do you believe that this would increase men's animosity towards women's participation? How would you address this?
- Do you agree that affirmative action measures are needed to change women's participatory and leadership role in parliaments and ministries?
- Does your country have such measures in place? If so, have they proven successful?

The iKNOW Politics team has compiled a brief summary of country specific data and information extracted from the E-discussion, which was held on all 4 language platforms. The complete discussions can be viewed in [Arabic](#), [English](#), [French](#) and [Spanish](#).

## **Argentina**

Argentina has the highest level of women's legislative representation in Latin America and laws regulating gender equality are being followed. However, having more women does not necessarily mean that they are able to fight for a gender agenda in long-term policies. The democratization of political parties is still a pending issue, especially in the provincial areas of the country, where it is clear that policies implementing gender equality are weakest<sup>1</sup>.

## **Bolivia**

In Bolivia, gender parity is established at 50% at all levels: local, regional and national. There are female presidents in the two legislative chambers as well as some female ministers in the government. But society is still sexist, since there is no parity in real life and many women have to work under men's shadow to continue working in politics. The lack of political education, corruption and lack of access to campaign finance are factors preventing more women from participating in politics<sup>2</sup>. The problem is not about implementing positive action measures for equal representation as Bolivia already has such laws. What is needed is the economic empowerment of women so they can campaign for decision-making positions. Once that is accomplished, women will have a real chance of accessing these positions and take part in the country's leadership<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://iknowpolitics.org/en/comment/8183#comment-8183>

<sup>2</sup> <http://iknowpolitics.org/en/comment/8173#comment-8173>

<sup>3</sup> <http://iknowpolitics.org/en/comment/8182#comment-8182>

## **Chile**

Despite the fact that Chile has had a female president - Michelle Bachelet, who is now running again for presidency in the 2013 elections and has contributed to cultural changes in society towards gender issues - women still have little access to positions of responsibility due to a culture that confines women to their private space and political parties that undermine the possibility of women to run in a given election. Women also often suffer from a lack of financial support for campaigning. It is felt that candidates should be elected based on their capacities and women should be encouraged, motivated, supported and empowered to become representatives and to occupy political positions. The media has an important role in this matter. Women are under-represented in the media; therefore, journalists should collaborate and enhance the political visibility of women. The situation of women politicians in Chile is similar to that all over Latin America<sup>4</sup>.

## **Ethiopia**

When the party leaders (mostly men) or the government (also men), impose policies of affirmative measures to increase the participation of women, they expect loyalty and adherence to party rules. Outspoken women are often co-opted and silenced. Affirmative action measures work against women and create humility and muteness. Most women enter politics because of the government's affirmative actions and are often more interested in maintaining their careers rather than bringing about change for women. Many of these women are also expected to represent the country's women at all levels abroad. However, the majority among them have no clue what gender issues are (due to a lack of training and education in the field). Being a woman is often taken as sufficient to represent the interest of women in the country, with disastrous outcomes. The current situation is the monopolization of gender and women's rights agenda by the ruling party's women's ministry (after harshly silencing and repressing all civil society activism in the field).

The ruling party (EPRDF-TPLF) tried to implement the recommendations from CEDAW and other international and regional treaties and adopt affirmative action measures. In reality, this is merely a façade for the international community. Such forms of affirmative action measures are only used for show and lack sustainability. When the party will leave, so will the women and their posts. The opposition parties in the country, regrettably, have not embarked on affirmative measures to get women on board or even think of a gender programme in their election agendas.

In order to make progress, the role and activism of civil society women's organizations is crucial. They can advance strong civil society women leaders to enter politics and keep them there through continuous consultation, mentoring, support and training. This will not only make those political women

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<sup>4</sup> <http://iknowpolitics.org/en/comment/8165#comment-8165>

more assertive and outspoken, but also increase their political knowledge ability and contribute to the sustainability of women in politics<sup>5</sup>.

## **Kenya**

The current constitution stipulates that in all appointments, not more than two thirds of the appointees should be from the same gender. But a one third ceiling has been fixed for women. The cabinet of eighteen secretaries for example has six women. The supreme court of seven members has two women and this is the scenario at all levels of government and political appointments. One county governor did the reverse by appointing a cabinet that had a majority of women and he was threatened with removal from office by county assembly members.

Chairmanship of parliamentary committees in Kenya is not gender balanced. Most constitutional commissions are chaired by men. The same goes for the parliamentary committees, with some having a chair and vice chair who are men. Chairmanship is basically reserved for men. This kind of stereotype hinders women's struggle for gender equality.

The contributor from Kenya believes that affirmative action would not create any kind of animosity towards women if it is unilaterally applied by all departments. It would give women the strength and power to fight for their rights and men would eventually learn to live with the reality of gender balance. The kind of animosity we see now is because no country has the political will to practice gender balance in portfolio assignments.

While affirmative action measures would change women's participation and leadership role in parliament and ministries, cultural beliefs remain a great hindrance. In Kenya there are 42 different communities. Some of these communities still believe the place of a woman is in the kitchen. Women themselves are also entrenched into these beliefs so much so that they cannot step out to be counted and compete for the various political opportunities.

The introduction of the county woman representative to parliament is what has brought women from some of these communities to parliament since its mandatory. While affirmative action and policies are important, women should not passively wait for the government to bring about change but rather go out and call for it themselves<sup>6</sup>.

## **Mexico**

There is a visible increase in women's political participation in Mexico. A greater number of women are showing interest to run for elected office and are seeking the resources to do so. Additionally, there

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<sup>5</sup> <http://iknowpolitics.org/en/comment/8172#comment-8172>

<sup>6</sup> <http://iknowpolitics.org/en/comment/8189#comment-8189>

have been major changes to the electoral procedures, such as quotas. However, while the presence of women has increased, women parliamentarians are not part of commissions of strategic interest within parliaments, such as economy, budget, technology, national security, foreign policy, etc. The same applies to the ministries, where three or four women are part of the Government but in non-strategic areas. Only three or four women were appointed in the present cabinet and are responsible for the areas of Social Development, Tourism and Health. Until today, there has never been a woman occupying a strategic secretariat within Government, such as Interior, Treasury, Defense, Economy, etc<sup>7</sup>.

In many cases elected women do not necessarily contribute to progress in women's political participation. And while large percentages of women's representation are often quoted by politicians – both male and female – most fail to mention that these women were employed at very low levels, never in leadership positions or let alone in positions of medium responsibility.

In the parliament in the State of Guanajuato, Mexico, there are 36 Members of Parliament in total, of which only 8 are women, even though the law stipulates that there must be 40% women<sup>8</sup>.

## **New Zealand**

In the early 1980s a group of Labour Party women decided that they needed to have better representation in Parliament. Starting at grass roots level there was a decree that each branch had to have a woman committee member. A second tier of governance within the party was established to make women's policy – by women, for women. Women's policy for women took precedence over other policy unless it conflicted with general policy. A woman was appointed as the President of the Labour Party – much to the shock of the male dominated party. Furthermore she managed to garner the votes even though she lived in the most isolated part of New Zealand. Considerably more women gained seats into Parliament in the following years, mostly because they felt empowered by the changes at the top level. New Zealand then finished up with a woman Prime Minister – although from a different party, and later a woman Governor General, a woman Finance Minister and a woman Attorney General. Many people thought women had broken through the glass ceiling. However, this is sadly not the case and in this regard a number of recommendations can be put forward, including the following: <sup>9</sup>.

- Women politicians must be prepared to take the hate and anger that accompanies a shift in power;
- Celebrate the success of other women;
- Acquire negotiation skills;
- Develop strong networks;

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<sup>7</sup> <http://iknowpolitics.org/en/comment/8159#comment-8159>

<sup>8</sup> <http://iknowpolitics.org/en/comment/8206#comment-8206>

<sup>9</sup> <http://iknowpolitics.org/en/comment/8157#comment-8157>

- Have a fund of money available to support women in their election campaign. This is essential and is possibly something that women from wealthy countries can do for their less well-resourced comrades in other countries. A few hundred dollars could make a huge difference to whether someone can put their name forward and fight a good battle;
- Teach women how to make policy. Policy is a jigsaw of items that have to fit together to a larger whole. Knowing where your ideas fit into the governance of the country is critical;
- Learn "governance" skills;

## Nigeria

Equal representation does not necessarily lead to a gender responsive parliament/executive. Also it is often not feasible. The Nigerian parliament, for example, is made up of 2 chambers - House and Senate. There are about 80 committees in the House and about 70 in the Senate. Meanwhile, there are only 24 women out of 360 members in the House and only 8 women out of the 109 senators in the Senate. It would be practically impossible to have women chair or co-chair all these committees. As such it is vital to ensure women's visibility (whether at parliament or executive level) as well as their inclusion in strategic positions that would enable them to implement initiatives that will make both male and female parliamentarians custodians of gender equality principles<sup>10</sup>.

Few female parliamentarians get what they lobby for in terms of parliamentary committees. The important factor is political party affiliation and degree of interest by others in the particular committee and level of support for the senate leadership when they contested for their posts.

On the discussion floor, there are issues that are considered "women's issues" which practically every woman is called upon to comment on even if she doesn't indicate that she wants to. However, if the issue is considered serious and "male" and a female raises her hand she is generally ignored. And with so few women in many parliaments, equal representation does not seem possible<sup>11</sup>.

In Nigeria, civil society, development partners and the Parliamentary committees on women affairs established the Gender Technical Unit which is physically located within the Parliamentary complex. The Gender Technical Unit is saddled with the responsibility of not only building the capacity of female parliamentarians to deliver on the job but to ensure that gender responsiveness is mainstreamed into ALL legislative processes. GTU does this by providing one-on-one training for female legislators and recruiting male gender champions who are opinion leaders in the two chambers as well as other ways of engagement with the legislative processes/structures. One good example was the involvement of the Unit in the review of the House rules/House Standing Orders. The Unit submitted to the review committee the need to have house rules that can ensure parity in representation of committee members. Although the recommendation was not taken by the review committee, the initiative paved

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<sup>10</sup> <http://iknowpolitics.org/en/comment/8170#comment-8170>

<sup>11</sup> <http://iknowpolitics.org/en/comment/8178#comment-8178>

the way for other advocacy efforts, such as the first advocacy visit to the newly elected Speaker with a demand for more visibility for women in committees amongst other things, which have led to more women being given choice committees, such as Foreign Affairs and Aviation.

Therefore, advocacy efforts are very critical and especially at strategic times when positions are to be shared or appointed within any arm of government. Female parliamentarians should also ensure they contest for legislative leadership positions so as to be among the first 6 in the House/Senate. The woman who contested for Speakership of the House (Hon, Mulikat Akande Adeola) became the first female Leader of the House.

Without affirmative action policies/laws, it is difficult for women to climb into any leadership positions in Nigeria. Such measures are needed because there are other systemic causes of low representation of women in public life and this involves changing a mindset, which is a transformational and generational task. Before this can be achieved, an interim measure of affirmative action policy or law will be useful.

Nigeria has a National Gender Policy which stipulates a 35% quota for women in all positions. However, this is just a policy document and it has been very difficult to hold government accountable to it. Also, some political parties have policy statements that give specific positions to women within the party structures but this has been mainly tokenistic.

In countries like Nigeria where political parties still remain the only legitimate route for either elective or appointive positions, it may be more strategic to get more women into political parties as authentic card carrying members of the party and mentor them to vie for positions within the parties. Often, the decision of who becomes a minister or which individual gets a party ticket to contest for elections is determined by the party leaders. Because women are confined to lower levels within the hierarchy, they often lose out in appointments and elections. Interestingly, even within the parliamentary structures, the party has a huge influence on the parliamentary/legislative leadership composition and if women are not in decision making positions within the parties, they cannot have a say in what the party determines for the legislative houses/chambers<sup>12</sup>.

### **Non-region-specific contribution**

Development partners themselves are often at fault for targeting women MPs to work on "women's issues" - with the result that many parliaments then decide that the remaining committees/issues are the purview of the male MPs. This then results in an already marginalized group of MPs being responsible - and looking self-interestedly so - for promoting and protecting women's rights. All committees should be as gender balanced as possible - noting the limitations though, of having smaller numbers of women MPs in all parliaments, except Rwanda. In reality, many parliaments simply do not have sufficient women MPs for it to be practical to have women on all committees or women as co-chairs of all committees (see for example, the Pacific which has 2 Parliaments with no women and 5 Parliaments with only 1 woman MP each).

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<sup>12</sup> <http://iknowpolitics.org/en/comment/8170#comment-8170>

Lessons learned around the world support affirmative action for women, both in the legislature and in the public service. There clearly is a glass ceiling and such measures are necessary to enable women to break through. That said, we should focus on TEMPORARY special measures - noting that quotas should never been seen as permanent, but as a temporary "quick fix" while we continue to work away on addressing more complex cultural/social reasons for women's challenges in breaking through to public leadership positions. As an advocacy approach, it is particularly useful to talk about the importance of quotas resulting in "role models" for other women - seeing even a handful of women in parliament encourages other women to feel that it is possible for them to be in similar leadership positions. Conversely, quotas are also helpful because where women may look at male-dominated parliaments and feel that they have little chance of ever winning a seat (especially in countries with "big men" cultures), if they know that they will only be competing against other women, they may feel that they have a better chance and will be more willing to take the risk of running for election (noting full well that they will have to expend time and financial resources on campaigning and possibly even their job if they work in the public service)<sup>13</sup>.

## Conclusion

All participants in the discussion agreed that there was a typical confinement of women to particular portfolio assignments. The majority of the contributions we received pointed out that while affirmative action for increasing women's representation in the decision making process and institutions is necessary, it does not by itself guarantee sustained progress in terms of women's political participation. Most participants stated that gender mainstreaming efforts in the political sphere have focused on increasing the numerical presence of women in relevant institutions while overlooking the need to guarantee effective participation in strategic decision making processes.

Participants from countries where quota laws were effectively implemented asserted that quotas did not guarantee the involvement of women in the more strategic/important decisions and that there is a need for a deeper change on the social level. It was also reiterated throughout the discussion that as long as women's participation was guaranteed only by deliberate measures, women would remain confined to a certain echelon of portfolios in both the executive and legislative branches of government. Some users contend that women elected to office on the basis of affirmative action policies only satisfy a symbolic purpose rather than effectively contribute to the advancement of women's rights.

There seems to be a consensus that political parties are key stakeholders in changing the status quo and moving towards merit-based candidacy, which would in turn translate into more balanced, representative and effective governance structures. Several recommendations came across from the discussion. Economic independence was mentioned repeatedly as an important factor in women's access to the decision making process as was the necessity of access to campaign finance. Several users referred to the need for skill building and training of women candidates. Recommendations regarding

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<sup>13</sup> <http://iknowpolitics.org/en/comment/8162#comment-8162>



increasing the visibility of women's work and achievements and the need for the establishment of strong networks were also made.

**Finally, we would like to thank all our members who contributed to this discussion!**