



Women's Caucuses

**Joint AGORA – iKNOW Politics Virtual Discussion
May 9th – May 20th 2011**

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LAUNCH MESSAGE

Women's caucuses have been created with the aim of increasing women's impact on political decisions. It is generally believed that the building of cross-party caucuses can help provide the peer support necessary to promote a gender equality legislative and policy agenda.

While the number of parliaments with a women's caucus is growing fast, there are also researchers and politicians who doubt the effectiveness of women's caucuses to influence political decision-making.

This Virtual Discussion focused on the following sets of questions:

- Are women caucuses effective? Have they made an impact on decision-making, and are there best practices that can be shared and learned from? If not, what alternatives exist?
- Framing this debate in the wider development context, are there indications that women caucuses have had a tangible impact on national development in their respective countries? Have women caucuses contributed to development-sensitive legislation, or positively influenced development indicators? In short, have national development strategies benefited from the presence of these groups?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The key question tackled in this e-discussion is if and how women's caucuses weigh on a parliament's legislative output and oversight. Do caucuses push issues onto the legislative agenda that otherwise would not have found their way there? Is there a noticeable difference with respect to the gender-sensitivity of the legislation produced, and what effects does this have on national development strategies? In short, are women's caucuses effective?

The general response to this question appears to be largely positive, although virtually all participants had some reservations. In terms of a women's caucus tangible impact on legislation, some success stories present themselves (Rwanda being the main one), but in the majority of cases (Indonesia, the US, Nepal, Ghana and so forth) the concrete benefits derived from having a women's caucus remain somewhat limited.

This does not mean that women's caucuses in these countries are not effective, or have not in one way or another helped shape more gender-sensitive legislation. Rather, experience indicates that women's caucuses just largely operate on the sidelines, not in the limelight – they help channel legislation, but they are not (yet) in a position to shape the legislative agenda.

To an extent, this apparent weakness is intentional. Their perception as relatively 'weak' organs is one of the unique institutional traits of a caucus: their soft positioning is exactly why parliamentarians view them as a safe venue for cross-party legislation drafting. As the views shared in this discussion illustrate, a women's caucus offers the kind of supportive and welcoming environment that fosters the creation of cross-party allegiances and

cooperation. At the same time, however, the soft nature of these caucuses does come with its limitations: to date, few if any women's caucuses have managed to firmly steer their parliament towards gender equality law-making.

What can be done to overcome this? When discussing the difficulties women's caucuses face in impacting legislation, participants largely pinpointed three vital issues: (1) the low numbers of women parliamentarians in most parliaments, leaving the women's caucus as too small an organ to enact significant change; (2) the inherent difficulty in working across party lines and the pervasive presence of party loyalties, making it hard to find common ground on which to join forces; and (3) the organizational aspect, in particular the leadership issue and the additional workload that comes with establishing or joining a women's caucus.

None of these issues are easily fixed, but none are insurmountable. The increase in implementation of gender quota for parliamentarians means that the number of women parliamentarians is on the rise – this should help, in the coming years and decades, to bring to parliaments that much-needed 'critical mass' of women legislators that can carry these caucuses forward successfully. In terms of practical organization and leadership, running a caucus is a process of trial and error. Experiences from Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Nepal illustrate that, with a strong commitment from a large enough group, initial barriers can be broken and sound compromises can be found.

Addressing the complex dynamics of 'party vs caucus' relationship within a parliamentary setting is perhaps the most challenging task, but it is arguably also the most fruitful one. It can be helpful to define a very narrow 'must be achieved' agenda on which all parties agree; if this proves successful, wider fields can be tackled and cooperation can be broadened. Ultimately, however, cross-party law-making remains a difficult balancing act for all involved. Provided enough women are engaged in these efforts, and supported by an efficient organization, successes can be booked. From there, it is a relatively small step to extrapolate these positive experiences to the parliament as a whole, and use the established allegiances and working relationships for law-making beyond the caucus.

Finally, a view shared by a large number of participants is that a women's caucus can only be truly effective when it branches out and is able to embrace male parliamentarians, ministries, regional and local organizations, civil society and others who share their interest in furthering gender equality. A women's caucus is an ideal focal point for the promotion of gender-sensitive legislation, but without input from outside the caucus a lot of potential, power and ideas will be lost. Similarly, a women's caucus should make a priority of communicating its goals, efforts and achievements – only by keeping the lines of communication open, in both directions, can a women's caucus be truly effective.

DISCUSSION SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

From May 9th to May 20th 2011 AGORA, the Portal for Parliamentary Development and iKNOW Politics, the International Knowledge Network for Women in Politics, held a joint E-Discussion on the subject of 'Women's Caucuses'. The discussion took place on both Portals, drawing comments from parliamentarians, parliamentary staff, practitioners and academics.

This Discussion Summary presents the points discussed in this debate and offers further food for thought for those interested in this subject.

1. WOMEN'S CAUCUSES: ACHIEVEMENTS, CHALLENGES AND ALTERNATIVES

The key question concerning women's caucuses is if and how they impact on the work of a parliament, and more specifically to what extent they manage to weigh on a parliament's legislative output. Do caucuses push issues that would otherwise not have found their way on to the legislative agenda? Is there a noticeable difference with respect to the gender-sensitivity of the legislation produced, and what effects does this have on national development strategies? In short, are women's caucuses effective?

Reviewing the comments received to this particular question, the response of participants is largely positive. **Soulef Guessoum** (UNDP, Cairo Regional Center/GPPS) points to Rwanda as an example of a model women's caucus with an impressive, tangible effect on parliamentary politics:

"In Rwanda le Forum des Femmes Rwandaises Parlementaires created in 1996 has advanced women legislators. Women at the parliament of Rwanda represent today more than 50% and they were able to pass several laws in favour of equality and developing the legal framework related to gender-based violence."

Juliana Katengwa (MP, Rwanda)'s experiences as Member of Parliament in Rwanda support these views:

"Women caucuses are important and an effective mechanism through which to easily make an impact in decision-making. Since the creation of the Rwanda Women Parliamentary Forum in 1996 as a cross-party caucus, a lot has been achieved in terms of influencing both legislative and policy agendas. In 1996, there were only 16% women before the introduction of quotas; after 2003 elections, we were 48% and after 2008 elections we climbed to 56%. This rapid increase was partially due to constitutional quotas and electoral mechanisms that were advocated for by the women's caucus."

Finally, **Kamillus Elu** (Parliamentary Expert, Indonesia) expresses similar ambitions for the Indonesian women's caucus:

“The Women’s Caucus in parliament is an important group within the Indonesian Parliament that voices the concern and convey the message of women. It is expected that the Women Caucus will be actively involved in political decision making. Through the Caucus, women politicians should transform their opinion into regulation or political decision making related to gender equality, improving women capacity and expanding women’s role in politics. The Women Caucus should also continue to strive for 30% quota in parliament.”

Ratu Diane Hatifah (MP, Indonesia) is less positive when discussing the concrete results the Indonesian women’s caucus has achieved, and attributes this to the relatively low numbers of women in parliament:

“With regard to legislation, based on our experience, the impact of the women’s caucus is not as high as we expected. This is because women’s representation in each level of decision making positions, particularly in parliament, is not that high.”

Women’s caucuses, however, do not only seek to impact the number of women in parliament. Rather, they seek to highlight the gender dimension in all issues placed on the parliamentary agenda. There are no such things as ‘gender and non-gender issues’; rather, women’s caucuses aim to highlight the gender dimension in every piece of legislation. Because of this, the range of issues tackled by women’s caucuses is often broader than one would expect, as **Nansata Yakubu** (Parliamentary Center, Ghana) describes:

“Women’s caucuses are a positive force for advancing progress in the gender dialogue, and thereby enhancing the passage of gender sensitive laws in Parliaments. They act effectively also as a bridge for articulating issues raised by women and men differently on new development trends and how they impact both sexes differently, for instance debates on climate change and the environment, oil exploration and domestic violence.”

Hon. Bernadette Lahai (MP, Sierra Leone)’s experiences in the Women’s Caucus of Sierra Leone have been quite ambiguous. While she sees huge potential for a women’s caucus to deliver great work, she warns that a caucus can only be effective if all the pieces are in the right place:

“On the whole, based on my experience, caucuses can have an impact on national legislation but it depends on the leadership, resources, entrenched cultural and institutional values discriminating against gender equality, existence of their laws on equality, a vibrant women’s organization, linkages with female parliamentarians, availability of prompt and accurate data to based policy decisions on etc.”

A point made by both **Bernadette Lahai** and **Ratu Diane Hatifah** is that having enough people in the right place is a necessary precondition for a women’s caucus to work – if there is a lack of women in parliament, establishing a strong and effective caucus is nearly impossible. To an extent, this is a ‘catch 22’: without enough women in parliament, the women’s caucus will not be strong enough to advocate for quotas that could inflate the number of women parliamentarians. As more and more countries are adopting quotas and, as a result, are witnessing a rise in the number of women parliamentarians, the potential for larger and stronger women’s caucuses is gradually increasing.

The difficulty in establishing a successful women's caucus lies not just in numbers, however. A more subtle problem, as Lahai points out, are the *'entrenched cultural and institutional values discriminating against gender equality'*. While such values are stronger in some places than other, it does not need repeating that advocating for gender equality or women's issues still meets a great deal of resistance. Joining a women's caucus – let alone creating one – can be a step too far for women parliamentarians. Drude Dahlerup (Professor of Political Science, University of Stockholm, Sweden) suggests that in such cases, informal caucuses may offer a solution:

"Women parliamentarians may also form informal networks with good effect. This may be a good, alternative strategy in parliaments with strong party discipline and/or where a considerable number of the female parliamentarians do not want to engage themselves, at least not openly, in gender issues.

In such an informal network, the participants may agree upon simultaneously bringing a burning issue onto the agenda in their individual party fraction or party group. During the discussions in each party group, maybe after several further consultations in the network, consensus might be reached in the end, and the proposal even supported by male colleagues."

Cedric Jurgensen (UNDP/GPPS)'s experience in the French Parliament leads him to similar conclusions, underlining again the subtle cultural differences that exist across countries and continents:

"I agree with Drude on the idea that women caucuses do not need to be formal institutions in order to be effective, and informal networks have the advantage to avoid party discipline or theoretical statements. But as many other francophone persons I am not completely comfortable with the notion of caucus itself, even if it is broadly used in many countries where dedicated structures have been created. I think the main point is to create a specific venue or group where challenges that women are facing in politics and strategies for gender equality can be discussed."

Alternatively still, **Dame Jennifer Smith** (Minister of Education, Bermuda) argues that women's caucuses are not necessary as long as issues that concern women are sufficiently contextualized; when it is clear to men that these issues concern them too, if only indirectly, they are willing to engage:

"We have not had women's caucuses in Bermuda. [...] What we have learned is that the best way to get government buy in is to point out that so-called women's issues are actually family issues. Man is born of woman – therefore they are concerned about their mothers, their wives, their daughters, their sisters; when we put issues of direct impact in this context – the men become involved."

2. BREAKING BARRIERS AND BUILDING CONFIDENCE

While 'contextualising' issues to make them more appealing to male parliamentarians can be a useful strategy, one of the key added values of a women's caucus is that gender issues are treated 'in full'; acknowledging, that is, that gender equality merits special attention. Rather than 'disguising' gender issues, the presence of a women's caucus can help embrace these issues and put gender equality firmly on top of the legislative agenda. Where women

parliamentarians are ready to move from informal to formal settings, a women's caucus can signal the next step on the road to legislative gender equality:

"In more traditional and conservative societies such as Pakistan, women's caucuses can play a large role in helping women parliamentarians break barriers to the introduction of gender-sensitive legislation. Working together on these issues means that individual women parliamentarians are less likely to be singled out by their male colleagues." (iKNOW Politics Moderator)

In these situations, women's caucuses do not just further women's issues; they also further the women parliamentarians they bring together. The idea that a women's caucus is an ideal venue for training is not new, but has not been embraced as widely as it perhaps should have been. Caucuses are by nature cross-party organs where women with often highly divergent opinions coming together. In addition to focusing on *content* (ie gender equality and gender-sensitive legislation), caucuses inspire *confidence*. **Juliana Katengwa** (MP, Rwanda) describes how, in her view, a women's caucus can make a critical difference to women parliamentarians:

"The caucus functions as a space through which women build and reinforce each others capacities to deliver on their parliamentary function through building measures and organising actual training programmes aimed at enhancing individual capacities in a way that is tailored to fill in their skills and knowledge gaps. That way a critical mass of able women legislators evolves through caucus organised specific programmes like gender budgeting, budget analysis, gender concepts and analysis, the art of public speaking, constituency mapping etc."

Additionally, **Soulef Guessoum** points out that women's caucuses can act as a sounding board for first-time MPs, helping them get their bearings:

"Women who are serving their first mandate might find the caucus more useful for supporting them to be in contact with other MPs. The caucus is also privileged space for networking with other entities, parliaments and international organizations."

The support provided by a women's caucus can make a difference to the individual parliamentarian, but it is first and foremost intended as a mechanism to further gender equality through the output of more gender-sensitive legislation. As Juliana puts it, women's caucuses can create that tipping point needed to establish a '*critical mass of able women legislators*'. This way, the support offered to women parliamentarians through a women's caucus translates into support for the women's caucus' goals, once these parliamentarians rise up in their own party ranks:

"Women members of parliament are also members of political parties; the enhanced capacities gained/acquired through the medium of the caucus have propelled us within the higher leadership hierarchies of these political parties; effectively allowing women in different political parties to access tables of influence and to shape political party ideologies, policies and programs."

This, essentially, is the central aim of a women's caucus: to help women parliamentarians find the knowledge, tools and support to promote a gender-sensitive legislative agenda, all the while furthering women's representation and participation in politics. As **Susan Markham** (Director of Women's Political Participation, NDI) puts it:

“Women’s collective efforts in the legislature are crucial not only because of their impact on public policies that effectively respond to citizens’ demands and interests, but also because of their effect on the consolidation and progress of women’s leadership.”

Another aspect in which caucuses provide barrier-breaking work is the field of cross-party legislation drafting. Working across party lines, especially in a parliamentary system based on strong party discipline, is potentially the most challenging task of any caucus. As **Kevin Deveaux** (UNDP/GPPS) highlights:

“The challenge is to use the space created by a multi-party caucus to empower women MPs to be strong advocates within their parliamentary groups. As suggested previously, a less formal caucus may be a good way of creating the space for information sharing and discussions. I think it is also important for a newly-formed caucus to have ‘quick wins’ that show that it has some political capital, as it is important to send a signal to all MPs that the format can work and have an impact. But in a system with strong party discipline, in the end, the parties in parliament will have to adopt any initiatives as their own and work to deliver within the parliament.”

It can be particularly tricky for women parliamentarians to preserve a positive balance between their work as member of a women’s caucus and their work as member of their party, whose mission may not be as gender-oriented. Cindy Hall highlights the evolution of the Women’s Caucus in the US, describing how the changing nature of bipartisan cooperation has made the task of the Women’s Caucus considerably more complex:

In the United States, our women's caucus was very successful in spearheading major legislation to advance women's rights twenty years ago when it was a more homogeneous group and its bipartisan agenda was very clear. Since then, the Caucus has expanded to represent a far more diverse group of legislators, and is working in a very partisan political environment. [...]

Our women's caucus continues to believe that it is important to try to work across party lines on behalf of women's issues, even if in a more limited way than earlier years. For caucus groups working in very partisan environments or for those that are just starting, it can be more effective to develop a narrow, achievable agenda so that there can be early victories. It may be best to put together a "must-pass" limited agenda for a current legislative session and then a longer-term agenda where the groundwork still needs to be laid for the future.

As this example from the US Women’s Caucus suggests, the challenges of working across party lines can and have been overcome. A similar – if perhaps more moderate – success has been achieved in Indonesia, where women coming together from different parties do manage to find common ground on which cross-party cooperation can be founded:

“Based on our experiences, a women’s caucus is effective since the members who come from different parties or organizations can sit together and be able to have the same vision and mission in gender equality in general or increasing women’s participation and representation in politics in particular. [...]

As member of the Women Parliamentary Caucus of Indonesia, we are even able to incorporate more intensively women’s issues and interests in the process of legislative development. Through

the caucus, we can develop a recommendation or policy paper for certain issues which may or may not be an interest of our party group in parliament.” (Andi Timo Pangerang, MP, Indonesia)

This exchange works both ways: women coming together through the women’s caucus take their shared viewpoint back to their parties, looking to find common ground on which true cross-party cooperation can be founded:

“The women’s caucus is very effective in conveying our message and advocating our cause to the party’s elites. Doing this through the organization such as women’s caucus is more effective than doing it individually. With the women’s caucus, everything we do will be more powerful or have more impact. The women’s caucus will be even better if it has a good and clear vision mission that we can translate into good program activities and implement them with full commitment of its members. (Ratu Dian Hatifah)

3. ORGANISATION AND LEADERSHIP

The difficulties associated with working across party lines, and in a context that is not always open to gender-sensitive action, also result in a number of stumbling blocks when it comes to practical organization. Who takes leadership of the caucus, and who is in charge of its daily running? **Deepti Khakurel** (MP, Nepal) describes the struggle of Nepal’s women parliamentarians to establish their caucus:

“In Nepal, we have an informal Women’s Caucus in the Constituent Assembly (CA). [...] Most of the women had demanded and anticipated a Women’s Caucus in the rules of procedures of the CA; they were disappointed when they learned of its rejection on the grounds that including Women’s Caucus in the rules of procedures will raise demand for other caucuses (Indigenous-Janajati/Madeshi/Dalit/Muslim) which would be impractical for the CA.”

Nepal’s women went ahead by organising an informal rather than formal caucus, but even within such a seemingly flexible organ many organizational challenges remain. **Bernadette Lahai**’s experience in the Sierra Leone women’s caucus illustrates how the issue of leadership blocked the work of the women’s caucus for years:

“For three and a half years the caucus did not function [because of poor leadership]. Whatever was achieved in the way of gender-sensitive legislation was as a result of individual efforts and conviction.

Efforts at revitalization, due to pressures from both the women outside parliament and need to work with Commonwealth women Parliamentarians of the CPA, were forestalled for two years for lack of agreement on who would be the chair. One group of women were of the view that because they are in the ruling party they should chair while the other group held the view that because they formed the majority of women in the party in parliament, they should chair the caucus. At the end the compromise was to have the chair in rotation every two years.”

Nepal’s women’s caucus faced a similar leadership problem and came up with a similar solution, rotating its leadership every 4 months, based on the parties’ hierarchy. This indicates just how difficult it is to work across

party lines, and to strike a balance between the shared commitment to gender issues and the inevitable competition between parties.

Additionally, the extra work that comes with a caucus (setting the agenda, sorting out the logistics, internal communication and so forth) takes time that parliamentarians are often unable or unwilling to commit. **Susan Markham** stresses it is helpful to find a person or team that can work permanently on caucus affairs, preparing technical input as well, so that legislators can debate them and place them on the political agenda. **Deepti Khakurel** explains how this is done in Nepal, where “*the women’s Caucus is run from its office at the official parliament building. They have a steering committee including 24 members from 21 political parties and a team of committed Secretariat staffs.*”

This kind of organization is important if a women’s caucus is to be effective. Essentially, women’s caucuses should make the task of women parliamentarians lighter, not harder:

“Having a women’s caucus in place allows women parliamentarians to efficiently channel their commitment to these issues, with the support of their female colleagues behind them and without gender becoming an exclusive and too time-consuming part of their political agenda. Women’s caucuses make that women parliamentarians can deal with issues beyond gender, while still rallying for gender-sensitive legislation and providing solid checks and balances throughout the law-making process.” (iKNOW Politics Moderator)

4. BEYOND THE CAUCUS

Close to half of all participants stressed that building strong ties beyond the women’s caucus is absolutely central to its success. Common among these points is the need for a good relationship with male parliamentarians:

“When a formal entity is created within a Parliament, such as the Delegation au droit des femmes within the French national assembly, it is very important that men can also participate, because the goal is to overcome sexist approaches, reach equality and guarantee the same rights and opportunities for all parliamentarians, whatever their gender is.

In the case of the French national assembly, the head of the Delegation is a woman and its gathers 36 parliamentarians, including 8 men (some of them drafting reports and supporting bills to improve women’s situation). [...] Fighting all kind of gender-based discrimination or gender-based violence is not only an issue for women, but for all the citizens – as it is for other discriminations, based on race or religion for instance.” (Cedric Jurgensen)

Julia Katengwa explains how the great success of the Rwandan women’s caucus eventually led to the inclusion of male parliamentarians, demonstrating that caucuses do not need be exclusive mechanisms:

“The caucus has been so successful in its organization, programming and resource mobilization that male colleagues have requested membership to the forum so that we have quite a number of male parliamentarians in Rwanda who are associate members of our caucus. Again this has

created a critical mass of male sympathizers who are knowledgeable and appreciative of issues that affect women and their socio-economic development/empowerment, rights and social justice. This has enabled Rwanda in a short space of time to do away with discriminatory laws, policies and practices as well as culturally embedded gender based stereotypes. [...] By extending membership to male associates, the proportion of parliamentarians sensitive to women issues has expanded.”

Cedric Jurgensen applauds the Rwandan case but urges that a next step should be to offer these men full membership to the women’s caucus, embracing them as equals when it comes to furthering a gender-sensitive agenda. **Susan Markham**, too, stresses that a caucus is more effective when it is able to build alliances and have support from male politicians or men from other fields. She further adds that branching out beyond the caucus is vital to its success:

“In a winning formula, the women’s caucus is not simply a forum for coordination and alliances within the legislature, but develops relationships with other women in public office as well as territorial and sub-regional organizations to channel their demands and proposals.”

This point is stressed by several other participants. A women’s caucus does not exist in a vacuum; its strength lies in its ability to communicate with its members’ constituents, with civil society, with ministries and so forth. As **Adinda Tenriangke Muchtar** stresses, the only way for a caucus to positively impact and steer national development is if the lines of communication are open:

“Based on research last year, a women’s caucus in one of the cities in Indonesia had difficulty in maintaining a good relationship with parliament and local government to work collaboratively on gender issue. The communication among those groups has to be conducted more intensively, so that they know each other better. A good political communication between the policy maker and the related stakeholders will contribute to a good implementation of National Development. A good communication needs to be built between the women caucuses (in parliament and in civic society) and government or other stakeholders through public hearing, radio or TV talkshow, constituents visit or workshop on research/survey result. This effort will result in a good connection between policy discourse and implementation.”

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the view shared by most participants is that a women’s caucus can indeed be effective, but in order to achieve its potential it needs to set a realistic agenda and be willing to embrace male parliamentarians, ministries, regional and local organizations, civil society and others who share their interest in furthering gender equality. A women’s caucus is an ideal focal point for the promotion of gender-sensitive legislation, but without input from outside a lot of potential, power and ideas will be lost.

PARTICIPANTS

- Soulef Guessoum (UNDP, Cairo Regional Center/GPPS)
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- Ratu Dian Hatifah (MP, Indonesia)
- Nansata Yakubu (Parliamentary Center, Ghana)
- Juliana Katengwa (MP, Rwanda)
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- Andi Timo Pangerang (MP, Indonesia)
- Bernadette Lahai (MP, Sierra Leone)
- Cindy Hall (Minnesota Women's Caucus, USA)