CONSOLIDATED RESPONSE: PROFILE OF WOMEN ELECTED TO LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN LATIN AMERICA

This consolidated response is based on research by the iKNOW Politics team and contributions from the following iKNOW Politics experts: Martha Barriga, member of the UN-INSTRAW team on women's political participation; Alejandra Massolo, consultant on gender equity and local governments and associate researcher at the Interdisciplinary Group on Women, Work and Poverty (Grupo Interdisciplinario sobre Mujer, Trabajo y Pobreza, Gimtrap A.C.); and María Eugenia Rojas Valverde, general manager of the Association of Councilwomen of Bolivia (Asociación de Concejalas de Bolivia, ACOBOL).

Question:

Do women in local public office have a different work style or profile? Susana Campari, Argentina.

Characteristics of Women in Local Public Office

In recent years, various factors, including the expansion of quota systems, have led to an increase in women's participation in elections, especially at the local level. However this does not necessarily mean women have been more successful in getting elected. It is difficult to point to individual character traits that make some women more successful than others. However, there are significant trends and barriers that force women to modify their behaviour in particular ways in order to be elected and re-elected. These include the need for women to meet additional demands and expectations, such as portraying oneself as a good wife and mother, or adhering to social norms about moral behaviour; while at the same time meeting the male-dominated definitions of "leadership" traits. This consolidated response will focus on the ways in which the political environment forms the expectations of women's behaviour in politics, in order to understand better the "work style" of women in public office in Latin America.

Background on Women's Electability at the Local level

The increase in women's candidacies is not reflected in increased access to local public office. Throughout Latin America, there is a marked difference between the percentage of women mayors and women legislators. This is because the quota system guarantees that women will appear on candidate lists for Parliament and local councils, but has no impact on mayoral seats. Often in an electoral district, all mayoral candidates are men (even if the list of candidates for the local council complies with the quota system).

Filters and traps

These results are directly related to what are sometimes called "filters and traps" for women in electoral systems.

To get elected, a woman participating in a municipal election must pass various formal and informal selection mechanisms that operate as "filters." It is not enough to be a citizen to be "eligible," and it is

not enough to be "eligible" to be a "potential candidate" of a party, movement or citizens' group. For each phase, it is necessary to demonstrate certain "leadership" traits that are shaped according to the *machista* authoritarian patterns that dominate in society. To become a candidate, and especially to win an election, one needs material and social resources that are usually associated with existing power in society: money, patronage networks, etc.

The Bolivian case

"In Bolivian legislation, the rules that promote parity are found in the law on civic groups and indigenous peoples (which called for 50 percent participation by women as of 2004), not in the political parties law (which sets the figure at 30 percent). The result, however, which is far from parity demonstrates that women are being left behind in all areas, from electability to access to public office through electoral mechanisms. The barriers to access begin with recruitment of women as electable citizens (potential candidates within parties or movements) and continue through their election and integration into the political elite."

(Excerpts from Rojas Valverde, M. Expert Opinion. 2008.)

The "filters" are the result of structural and individual barriers in the political system and social structure, not just in political parties, but also in grassroots and community organizations that reproduce informal patterns of discrimination. One of the most significant individual barriers, especially for lower-income women, is the woman's triple work day. This means that, in general, politics — even at the local level — is a relatively unfriendly arena for women, as our expert Alejandra Massolo explains:

> "Another reason why women do not stay in office or do not seek to continue their political career to reach higher office is that they seem unwilling to give up their family responsibilities and dedicate themselves exclusively to the long years of service required for appointment to important government offices. Politics is therefore relatively unfriendly to the differentiated situation faced by women. Politics is based on masculine ways of seeing and being, and women rarely feel connected, or even comfortable, occupying a seat on a municipal council" (Massolo, 2007, p. 67.)

Women who make it through these "filters" are exposed to many "traps" along the way. The most serious involves the standards for judging their performance. According to Alejandra Massolo:

> "Research by the Federal Electoral Institute (*Instituto Federal Electoral*, IFE) in Mexico concluded that municipal politics is more selective with women than with men. The requirements imposed on women are more demanding, the costs of participating in local government are greater than for women than men, and a sort of "androcentric benevolence" prevails, subjecting women to stricter requirements that are not formally established" (Massolo, A., 2007, p. 75.)

On the one hand, women are expected to be more efficient and honest than their male counterparts; on the other, they are expected to behave according to society's stereotypes of women. *They must demonstrate not only their public administration skills, but also their qualities as a good mother or wife, or, if single, behaviors corresponding to social mandates for women* (Massolo, 2007, p. 67.)

Characteristics and expectations of successful women candidates

Martha Barriga comments that "closeness" to the community is one of the characteristics that sets women's performance in local public office apart:

> "It is said that women tend to be closer to their communities, and this contributes to a different type of leadership than that of men. The woman mayor of San Isidro de Heredia in Costa Rica, who was re-elected with the highest number of votes, recently said she owed part of her success to her close ties with her community (see testimonial at: http://www.un-instraw.org/en/proyecto-participacion-politica/general/rutas-de-aprendizaje.html). A similar comment was made by the woman mayor of San Juan de la Maguana in the Dominican Republic (see testimonial at: http://www.un-instraw.org/es/proyecto-participacion-politica/mapa-conceptual/liderazgo-y-mujeres-en-los-gobiernos-lo.html)" (Barriga, M. Expert Opinion. 2008.)

Alejandra Massolo's research shows that women tend to be more successful where the dominant political culture is participatory rather than authoritarian and centralist:

> "In the latter [participatory], besides having good relationships with male colleagues and feeling valued as women, councilwomen had the possibility of working, participating in decisions and eventually, depending on economic resources, putting their plans into practice" (Massolo, A., 2007, p. 69.)

However even where the local political culture is welcoming, women face boundaries based on the expectation that they will be morally superior to men:

> "Associated with discourse about power and authority is a subjective element: "women can do things better than men." They believe they can transform politics, even though the objective conditions they face are adverse. This is the stereotype that identifies them as morally better, a virtue by which they can transform politics, even though objectively they lack the power to do so. This stereotype is designed to establish the socially permissible boundaries for women when they participate in politics" (Massolo, A., 2007, p. 70.)

Women public officials are also expected to be "disinterested". While people demand efficiency of male authorities, regardless of the interests motivating them, women are expected to also be "disinterested," because they are mothers/sisters/daughters who "care" for others at no cost. Meanwhile, because of their "fragility," women do not receive real decision-making power, which remains in male hands.

In some cases, women have been more successful in situations of crisis. For example, in Oaxaca, Mexico (according to the study by Alejandra Massolo), and some places seriously affected by political violence in Central America and the Andes. Under these conditions, it would seem that appealing to the traits of "honesty and disinterestedness" attributed to women results in greater social and political prestige for women. The renewing effects of change tend to dissipate quickly, however, because the institutional mindset remains predominantly authoritarian and patriarchal.

Women tend to do better where they have their own political base of support. Otherwise, whatever gains they make are easily reversed. On the one hand, women's mere public presence helps change attitudes toward women and modifies the prevailing mentality. On the other, the fragility of their base of support seriously limits their ability to stay in power, as Alejandra Massolo points out:

> "If women do not have a political base of women to support their presence in political arena, they become "puppets" of male politicians and their way of doing politics. By

obeying the current governor, the party president, the local deputy or the male politician who put them in office, no matter how good their work is, in the end the political capital that they accumulate goes to their promoter, not to them" (Massolo, A., 2007, p. 74.)

Challenges

Growing interest in Latin America in local spaces as scenarios for democratic renewal undoubtedly provides a window of opportunity for women to advance in the exercising of their political rights. In many cases, this process goes hand in hand with the crisis of traditional political systems and the quest for new forms of representation.

In this context, there are increasing possibilities for access to local public office, despite the filters and traps. At the same time, new challenges are emerging.

The traits that are usually identified as characteristics of women in public office have ambiguous origins and effects. On the one hand, they stem from a stereotypical view of women as intrinsically disinterested, dedicated to caring for others, compassionate and moderate, far from the uses and abuses of "politicking." And it is on the basis of these traits that their performance in public office will be judged.

On the other hand, they are expected to be as effective as or more effective than any male authority, which assumes that they will know how to negotiate the intricacies of public administration, which implies resorting to the styles and connections typical of traditional, patriarchal power. There is no doubt that they have not been prepared for this (either in formal education or through socialization from girlhood), so they must turn to or delegate these procedures to "masculine" hands or quickly learn the uses and abuses of traditional power.

Soon or later, these demands will undoubtedly collide. This largely explains the enormous frustration of women who get involved in local politics. What Alejandra Massolo learned from interviews could explain this:

> "Interviews found that many women did not expect to continue their political careers. In fact, there was a deep resistance to continuing in politics because of everything they had encountered, and there was a general tendency to return to community work or even to private life. Holding a council seat is not always what they expected before they got there, not only because they find their expectations limited, but also because of what they consider "politicking" by men, which in their opinion reduces the council's effectiveness. Women frequently imagine themselves as removed from the traditional practices of local politics, and this leads them to abandon their political careers and return to community work as a sphere in which practices — actually or in their imagination — are more "honorable" (Massolo, A., 2007, p. 68.)

Overcoming stereotypes

Though the opinions and experiences gathered in this consolidated response confirm the existence of multiple obstacles to women's participation, there are also opportunities to overcome them, such as successful cases of women who have secured their positions in the public sphere by using their own style.

In order to prevent women from being disillusioned with participating, innovative strategies must be reinforced, such as:

- To address the stereotypes by which women's public administration performance is commonly judged, discern which *abilities and skills acquired in the private sphere will give women certain characteristics that would enrich the political sphere with a different way of*

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looking at things that is more communitarian, more vital, more marked by solidarity (Massolo, A., 2007, p. 68.) It is then crucial to identify and share good practices so that women demonstrate a different model of management.

- By partnering with organizations, movements and networks that promote participatory local democracy, link women's access to public office with the promotion of proposals and forms of participatory democracy as alternatives to the old, decrepit styles of authoritarian, centralist administration.

- Maintain open dialogue with promoters of participatory democracy so they include a clear gender approach in the analysis and design of new policies.

- Help women who reach local office develop their own grassroots base to ensure that they can continue working in the public sphere.

Conclusion

Women are still faced with filters and traps that exclude them from politics or obligate them to modify their behavior in order to stay in politics. But these experiences also teach us that the most successful women are close to their communities and have a strong base of political support. The existence of a more participatory political culture also helps women to keep their positions in the public sphere and advance. However, the key to a greater change remains in women's hands.

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