

Changing the Face of Leadership: NDI's Women's Leadership Institute in Bolivia

Thirty-five Bolivian women representing a variety of political parties, citizen groupings (*agrupaciones ciudadanas*), labor unions and NGOs came together in La Paz in



September to launch the groundbreaking Women's Leadership Institute. NDI partnered with the Simon Bolivar Andean University (*Universidad Andina Simon Bolivar*, UASB) to host the participants ranging in age from 25-55. The Institute helped to strengthen women's skills in a variety of areas from working with the media to building conflict negotiation skills, thereby increasing their confidence

and ability to participate in politics. For four nights a week over the course of six weeks, the Institute offered a program for women to gain practical skills to transform their communities, political parties, and civil society organizations.

Although a broad spectrum of political leaders have promised to encourage greater women's participation in politics, women remain seriously under-represented in Bolivia's political sphere. Entrenched male leadership, low literacy rates and traditional roles that tie women to the home have sidelined many women from the political arena. The Women's Leadership Institute was designed to equip women leaders with the tools and training necessary to meaningfully participate in politics by assuming leadership roles in civil society organizations, political parties and elected office.

A high-profile group of Bolivian experts employed interactive training techniques to share their expertise on topics including strategic planning, conflict resolution and negotiation, advocacy, and internet communication technologies. Participants then put this training into practice through a four-week practicum in which they applied their newly acquired skills within their respective organizations.

The Leadership Institute incorporated into its curriculum iKNOW Politics, the premier online portal for women's political participation. The iKNOW Politics website was presented in detail to the women at the Institute as a tool they could use to further hone their skills and build a network of women leaders outside the walls of the Leadership Institute. Participants posted essays to [iKNOW Politics](#) in celebration of Bolivian Women's Day and participated in the site's discussion circles. Additionally, the participants held an online conference with colleagues in Washington, DC and Peru.

The Institute culminated in a December 7th graduation ceremony, which proved to be a moving experience for participants and instructors alike. Graduation special guests included keynote speaker Esther Balboa, former education minister and indigenous activist, and a videotaped message of congratulations from Rigoberta Menchu, Nobel Prize winner and former presidential candidate from Guatemala. Each participant had the opportunity to describe how the tools she had gained from the Institute and the

relationships she had formed with the instructors and students had changed both her professional and personal life. Of her experience at the Institute, one participant stated, “For me, it was a new experience in my life to get to share with brave women of different ages, with different perspectives, and each with great wisdom, because the things we learn in this world don’t just come from books or universities, but from one’s experiences with the common goal of seeking the advancement of women.”

By strengthening the capacity of women leaders in Bolivia and building a national network of trained women, NDI continues to support Bolivian women in achieving gender parity in political processes.