

Consolidated Response

Women's Participation in Local Governments

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International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics



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 Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women)

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 5300 resources, iKNOW Politics has captured the combined experience and knowledge of its 92 global experts and close to 10,000 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**.

Consolidated Response on Women's Participation in Local Governments

This consolidated response is based on research conducted by iKNOW Politics staff and contributions submitted by the following iKNOW Politics experts: Rumbidzai Kandawasvika Nhundu, Senior Programme Officer at International IDEA; Sonja Lokar, Chair of the Stability Pact Task Force; Orria Goni, Program Officer at the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)/ Turkey; and Nevin Senol, Manager of the United Nations Joint Programme to Protect and Promote the Human Rights of Women and Girls (UNJP).

Question

How do women participate in local governments and incorporate gender perspective in politics?

– Wawis Loyola.

Overview of Women's Representation in Local Governments:

Women's equal participation in local governments and decision-making processes is critical for creating gender sensitive policies and for promoting sustainable development. Unfortunately, women are not well represented in local governments around the world and they face a number of barriers that range from cultural exclusion to the resistance of key political institutions and machineries to creating gender balanced local administrations. For instance, in communities where women's roles as politicians and decision-makers are not well accepted, women face strong cultural barriers entering local governments. Furthermore, women in local governments may have to overcome institutional barriers. In many cases, male-dominated political parties are not willing to involve women in their local branches and, subsequently, in local politics. According to the UN- Habitat, most local governments are inherently patriarchal institutions. Their structures and procedures are designed for and by men and they do not take into account women's multiple responsibilities in their homes and communities, or differences of communications and decision-making styles existing between men and women. (Khosla, P. And Barth, B. 2008. p.57.)

According to UN-INSTRAW, in 16 Latin American countries only 5.3% of governments at the local level are headed by women mayors, which implies that in most Latin American municipalities women are not well represented in decision-making posts. (2008) Speaking

about women's participation in local governments in the former Soviet republics of Central and Eastern Europe, Sonja Lokar, iKNOW Politics Expert and Chair of the Stability Pact Task Force, mentions:

“Clientelism is the way of doing local politics in post socialist countries, which by definition makes local politics too hostile to women and highly ignorant and resistant to women needs and priorities in politics.” (Expert Opinion. 2008.)

Furthermore, Orria Goni, Program Officer at UNDP, and Nevin Senol, Manager of UNJP, highlight that in Turkey women's participation in local elected offices stands only at 2%. They also mention that despite the fact that many local policies on housing, security, transport, education, and health directly affect women, the planning and implementation of such policies have traditionally been handled by men. (Expert Opinion. 2008.)

The comparative analysis of Women in Local Governments in Asia and the Pacific published by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific shows that women were more successful in gaining access to decision-making positions in local governments than to those at central government level in the region. The study points out that women are successful because they fit easier their family responsibilities with work requirements in the local governments, and because there is less competition in local government elections. The study also highlights that women are more accepted in city and community governments since it is seen as an extension of their involvement in communities. Despite the achievements of women in local governments, the study also describes cultural, financial and relational barriers that women face entering and participating in politics in Asia and the Pacific. For instance, the study highlights that:

“Barriers limiting women's participation in both Australia and New Zealand fit within four broad categories – attitudinal, financial, competing responsibilities and personal characteristics. Among survey respondents, attitudinal barriers were frequently mentioned with women pointing to the aggressive political culture, combative debate and personality conflicts as well as male colleagues who had difficulty coping with women and so belittled and personally attacked them.” (2000. p. 41.)

In general, research shows that the countries that have the highest number of women in local governments are the ones that implemented some kind of affirmative action measures, such as gender quotas. Good examples in Africa include Lesotho and Namibia that introduced affirmative action measures in their legislative frameworks. In Lesotho, the Local

Government Act reserves 390 out of 1,272 (30%) electoral divisions exclusively for women, which resulted in the election of 58 % women in the local governments in the 2005 local elections. (Quota Project. 2007.) Another positive impact of introducing an affirmative action measure is relevant to the case of Namibia, where the high representation of women in local governments is largely attributable to the legislation requiring political parties to include at least 30% women on their party candidate lists. As a result of this affirmative action provision, 44% of local councilors in Namibia are women, including some women mayors or deputy mayors. (Ballington, J. 2001. p. 190.) In the Asia region, India is considered another successful case of the implementation of quotas in local government elections, where the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution adopted in 1993 reserved 33% seats for women in local self-government institutions such as panchayats and municipalities. This has led to the creation of over 1,000,000 seats for women in local governments. (Nanivadekar M. 2005. p.2.)

Women Promoting Gender Sensitive Policies and Changing Women's Lives

Research and case studies indicate that involving women in politics has a positive impact on incorporating gender equal perspective in policies and social programs. Rumbidzai Kandawasvika-Nhundu, iKNOW Politics Expert and Senior Programme Officer at International IDEA, mentions:

“Women’s different life experiences and priority issues consequently result in perspectives that facilitate the placing of issues affecting both women and men on the policy agendas at local government level. The physical presence of both women and men in local government positions is a conduit for interests and needs of women and men being incorporated in politics and policies and therefore the numbers of women in politics matter if gender perspectives are to be incorporated in politics and policies in a sustainable way.” (Expert Opinion. 2008.)

To get elected in local governments, many women politicians work closely with their communities and local interest groups, including women's groups. Women are good community mobilizers for a broad range of initiatives, including community based activities and projects aimed to support political parties. (Kandawasvika-Nhundu, R. Expert Opinion. 2008.) Due to this involvement, women are aware of problems and issues that other women face in their local communities, and they can communicate these problems to their colleagues in government and find solutions through policy decisions. Chandra Ranaraja, former Mayor of Kandy town in Sri Lanka, in her interview to UN ESCAP mentions that her

work for improving the status of women in her town was based around organizing women's groups, especially in low income settlements. She highlights that these women groups have

UN ESCAP's Profiles of Women in Local Governments:

Adisorn leasakul, Mayor of Nong Khai Province, Thailand

"During my time as Mayor, I have proposed several policies to the municipality on women's issues, for example, policies to increase women's cooperation and participation in municipal matters and policies to provide opportunities and alternatives to women other than being housewives. To improve the status of women in general, I have set up community housewives groups, with the intention of increasing women's roles in the community. I have also initiated short term career training to increase the income of women. Another programme we have worked on, is to set up women volunteer groups for public health to train women to train in public health so that they can take their knowledge and publicize it in their communities."

<http://www.unescap.org/huset/women/profiles/a>
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created a greater awareness among women on many subjects, such as, dealing with the municipality and government institutions, improving access to housing loans, building new community facilities and improving health standards in local communities. Ms. Ranaraja mentions that during her tenure a full settlement with 185 households was improved. (Ranaraja, C.) Sonja Lokar also mentions that the success of women in Central and Eastern Europe in engendering politics at the local level depends on women's abilities to coordinate their activities with national women's movements and on the process of national democratization. She highlights that new nation-wide women's movements rely on the international support of their activities and joint campaigns promoting gender equality issues. (Expert Opinion. 2008.)

Furthermore, women politicians are motivated to address women's issues and bring a gender perspective into policies because of their need to gain support among voters, especially among women voters. Having a solid and reliable voter base help women politicians push for their policy agendas and to get re-elected. In her interview to iKNOW Politics, Winnie Byanyima, iKNOW Politics Expert and former Member of Parliament from Uganda, mentions:

"I reached out to poor people in their communities and homes, going door to door. While other politicians shunned those who lived in the slum areas, I visited women in their kitchens everywhere and listened to them.... This excited women and made them feel that they had power through voting." (Byanyima, W. 2007.)

In some countries, women's perspective and interests are mainstreamed into policies and government's work through women working in local government machineries. In

Bangladesh, a number of programs and training sessions on gender sensitization have been conducted for local government representatives, including women ward commissioners. Women ward commissioners mainly work with women's issues at the local level such as micro-credit programs, handicrafts and professional training programs for women. These programs positively impact women's lives and provide incentives for women to fight for their rights. (Islam, F.)

Another means for involving women in the work of local governments is through creating gender sensitive budgets and engaging women in the process of creation of such budgets. A gender sensitive budget does not exclusively target women's needs, but rather includes a gender perspective into budgetary provisions ensuring that both men and women benefit equally from social policies and public goods. A successful example of engaging women in creating gender sensitive budgets is the municipality of Rosario, the third largest city in Argentina. For the past few years, the municipality of Rosario has successfully worked with UNIFEM and the local community to create participatory budgeting that ensures women's participation in the budgetary decision-making and planning processes. According to UNIFEM's report, the gender sensitive budgets adopted in Rosario brought gender perspective in many areas of social development, including transportation, youth development, employment, health and social services, etc. (Regional Programme of Gender Responsive Budgeting – Good Practice Systematization. 2008.)

Furthermore, having women in local governments serves as an encouragement for other women to enter politics and leads to breaking stereotypes of women's roles in society and public space. Sharada Kolli, Mayor of Guntur City in India, in her interview to UN ESCAP highlights her experiences as a mayor and mentions that people had gained confidence in women as good public administrators and local government representatives after seeing women making a difference in other women's life in Guntur city. She points that people acknowledged the sincerity and commitment of women to their duties and their resistance to criminalization of politics. (Kolli, S.)

Orria Goni and Nevin Senol point out the importance of promoting gender perspectives into policies and programs not only through increasing the number of women local administrators, but also through building awareness and sensitizing local authorities in general, which helps to mainstream gender and consider specific women's needs in the local planning and work. They mention that through the "Women Friendly Cities" project implemented within the United Nations Joint Programme to Protect and Promote the Human Rights of Women and Girls (UNJP) about 500 local government officials and representatives of women non-profit organizations underwent training on gender sensitization and

awareness building. The beneficiaries of this training created Local Equality Action Plans (LEAPs) that were consequently approved by Local Assemblies and led to the establishment of the Gender Equality Commissions in the Municipal and Provincial Assemblies. (Expert Opinion. 2008.) Another interesting example is South Africa, where the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) instituted Gender Working Group (GWG) with the mission to promote the achievement of gender equality and protect the rights of women, both as councillors and as part of the municipalities they serve. According to Julie Ballington:

“If all local councils implement GWGs and conform to a national gender policy, real changes can be expected with regard to the representation and participation of women councillors at the local level in South Africa. The initiative by SALGA Gender may prove to be an effective strategy that will benefit the effective participation of women in other southern African countries.” (Ballington, J. 2001. p.193). The Asian Development Bank (ADB) also highlights the importance of providing training to local government representatives to promote women’s perspective in politics. Through its Training Elected Women Representatives project, ADB builds the capacity of elected women officers in Village Development Committees in Nepal and creates a more informed local community that will result in more demands for transparent and fair village-related administration and increased numbers of women in local governments. (ADB. 2008.)

Conclusion

Including women in local governments is an essential step towards creating gender equal governments and gender sensitive policies. Since women have different needs and perspectives on social and political issues, it is important to involve women in governments to incorporate all of the societal viewpoints in policy and decision-making processes. Through their active involvement in community work and women’s groups, local women politicians are well aware of issues faced by women in their communities. Due to this and the necessity to create a voter base to run in elections, women politicians can be active advocates of women’s issues among their colleagues in the local government and of mainstreaming gender perspectives in policies. iKNOW Politics experts also highlight the importance to realize that gender perspectives should be mainstreamed into policies and government planning not only by women politicians, but also by their male counterparts. To do this, the iKNOW Politics experts recommend sensitizing and training local government employees.

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