Consolidated Response

The Modalities, Conditions, Advantages, Disadvantages and Experiences of Setting up an All-women Political Party.

iKNOW politics

International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics

Background

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 insufficient, five international organizations came together to enhance women's political participation their collective priority and devise a strategy that would fall in 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 five years, iKNOW Politics has become a leading website on women's political participation. Building on a library of over 7319 resources, iKNOW Politics has captured the combined experience and knowledge of its 92 global experts and 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 the Modalities, Conditions, Advantages, Disadvantages and Experiences of Setting up an All-women Political Party.

This consolidated response is based on research conducted by iKNOW Politics staff, Skye Christensen, UN Women; Susan Markham, Allison Muehlenbeck and Meredith Katz of of National Democratic Institute; Cathy Allen, Journalist and International Political Parties and Campaigns Expert and Niamh Bhreathnach Cllr, Former Irish Minister for Education.

Based on a question received by iKNOW Politics on the benefits and pitfalls of setting up an all-women political party, the following question was formulated.

Question

What are the modalities and pre-existing conditions (socioeconomic and legal) that facilitate setting up an all-women's political party? What are the advantages and disadvantages of initiating an all-women party? Can you share experiences of countries/regions that have had all-women political party?

1. Introduction

Women's political parties have been observed in countries across the globe such as Afghanistan, Armenia, Belarus, Croatia, Czech Republic, Georgia, Greece, Iceland, Iran, India, Lithuania, Northern Ireland, Poland, and Russia. While their success has been limited, in many places they have prompted a discussion on women's rights and roles in a country's political system[1].

Several theories revolve around their success and failures, some institutional and structural, and other cultural and social. A journal article on Women's Parties in Post-Communist Politics by John T. Ishiyama finds that, first, political/institutional factors rather than socio-economic or cultural factors better explained the emergence of women's parties in post-communist countries, and second, that the women's parties attracted different voters than other parties and that they differed from each other as well.

But what would necessitate this strategy for women in politics?

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[1] NDI, 2011. Powerpoint presentation with input from ; Susan Markham, Allison Muehlenbeck and Meredith Katz of of National Democratic Institute on Women's Political Parties presented at the Women's Political Participation Brown Bag Lunch, Tuesday June 14, 2011

2. Why All-women political parties?

Some reasons that stand out in a review in support of forming All-women political parties are:

Under-representation and Inequality

Women feel they are not getting the kind of governance they deserve. Not only are women under-represented in the Legislature, but also, where they have come into power due to party allegiances, their level of authority to address issues close to women is curtailed.

The first national all-women political party (AWPP) in India, the United Women Front (UWF), was launched in October 2007 by Suman Krishan Kant. Its main aim was to boost women's representation in traditionally male-dominated Indian politics[2]. Mrs. Kant was previously a social worker and the wife of a former vice-president. Commenting on the formation of the party Prem Ahluwalia, the UWF's national general secretary and director of the Delhi-based Institute for South Asian Women said,

> *"It is for the first time in the history of India that a national political party has been formed by women. In fact it is the only party of women in the world. We need to ensure that the issues of priority concern to half of its population remain in the forefront of the pressing issues on India's national agenda."*

Lack of a voice

They are not the only ones seeking to be heard in a male-dominated landscape. Ahead of the Lebanese elections next year (2012), Lebanese-American journalist Raghida Dergham said 'we need to dare to think differently. Nobody is preventing us from forming a women's political party" [3]. Sudha Sundararaman, Delhi-based general secretary of the All India Democratic Women's Association say's:

> *"One can understand why some women have found it necessary to come together as a political party because the whole of society is gender-biased,*

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[2] Womensenews.org. Women in India Form Their Own Political Party. News Article from January 7, 2008. Available at: http://womensenews.org/story/080107/women-in-india-form-their-own-political-party

[3] Daily Star, 2012. Women's spring: Is Lebanon ready for a feminist political party? News Article from February 24, 2012. Available at: http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/2012/Feb-24/164431-womens-spring-is-lebanon-ready-for-a-feminist-political-party.ashx#axzz1nHsrCpus

discriminatory, and patriarchal," says "We feel that having a separate party may not necessarily serve the purpose of gender equality."[4]

Cathy Allen in an Expert Response, says,

In these countries [in the Middle East] especially, there is a great deal of lip service to women: the parties all want them around but they are not giving them a chance to be heard. When you are not heard then it is your right -- even your responsibility -- to create a place where your voice can be heard -- and as such creating a new party makes sense.

Lack of implementation of parity and quota laws

Another reason is lack of implementation of parity laws at party level, resulting in being sorely under-represented in government positions. This is the case of Lebanon where in 2009, only four women were elected to Lebanon's 128-member Parliament: Nayla Tueni, Strida Geagea, Bahia Hariri and Gilberte Zouein. Of 587 parliamentary candidates, only 12 were women. Indeed the first two female ministers in Lebanese history were appointed as recently as 2004. In addition, Prime Minister Najib Makati's 30-member Cabinet announced in June 2011 did not include a single woman. Despite calls by women's rights activists to remedy this and replace male ministers with female counterparts, nothing has been done to remedy this lack of female representation.

Ineffectiveness of Women's Party Sections

Sacchet, in a report on political parties and when they can be said to work for women[5], indicates that since the early 1990s, women's departments (secretariats) have become a common form of organization of women in political parties. Some women's department work as arms of political parties and are mainly concerned to gain them support among the female electorate.

However, these secretariats don't always achieve the desired result, leading a few among those encountering this situation to set up all All-women's political parties (APPs).

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[4] Womensenews.org. Women in India Form Their Own Political Party. News Article from January 7, 2008. Available at: http://womensenews.org/story/080107/women-in-india-form-their-own-political-party
[5] UN, 2005. Political Parties: When do they work for Women. Available at: http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/eql-men/docs/EP.10_rev.pdf

This leads us to the question on what it takes to set up an all-women political party

3. Setting up of an All-women's Political Party

Preconditions

Before choosing to start an All-women's political party (APP), it is useful to assess the future effectiveness and success of the party in fostering support among citizens. In this way a convener can carry out a cost-benefit analysis of taking this route. NDI staff identified some preconditions for success based on their worldwide review of All-women political parties that have had relative success. Some pre-conditions synthesized from their case studies include[6]:

- Where citizens can identify with strong personalities and personal characteristics, such as the gender, of candidates, as was seen in the success of APPs in the political environment of post-communism. Here the depoliticized citizenry were unlikely to identify intensively with all-encompassing ideologies and party symbols and more likely to identity with candidates.

- Where there exists an electoral system that emphasizes the personal characteristics of candidates (esp. candidates gender).

- Where there are powerful presidencies.

NDI maintains that these institutional features are by no means causal factors, but rather created openings for political formations that had the capital to compete. In case studies of Russia, Armenia and Lithuania, there were connections to previous political regimes and/or receiving the backing of political notables, which helped the Women's parties succeed.

Practical considerations in setting up All-women's political parties

Legal System

The legal landscape that must be navigated in order to set up an APP varies and the various modalities around setting up of a party may be a hindrance or enabling factor. In cases where there are no gender limitations, then the party is only faced with ensuring they hold a certain minimum number of electors as members, a minimum number of confirmed candidates for the elections and seats in Parliament. An example in Canada shows that a party must hold 12 seats in the House of Commons to be recognized federally, and a

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[6] From Women's parties in Post-Communist Politics by John Ishiyama

minimum number of seats in the Provincial Legislature, such as 4 seats out of 83 given for the Alberta Legislature[7].

Electoral System

Skye Christensen of UN Women[8] comments on the electoral system implications. These, according to Christensen, would have an impact on the success and perceived legitimacy of an all-women party in terms of representation and some considerations would need to be taken into account. He maintains that all women parties would seem to have the most advantages in proportional list

> **Electoral Systems** are defined as the laws and policies that govern how votes are translated into seats in any given country.

systems. In most proportional representation systems – what are known as list proportional representation – the seats in parliament are filled by parties according to their share of votes received.

> *In such systems the members are generally seen as representing those voters who supported that party – rather than representing all of the constituents of the district. In such a system, an all-woman's party should not have any systemic legitimacy issues, since they would be representing the interests of their voters.*

Elaborating further, he says that,

> *[I]n single-member district systems and some other non-proportional systems such as party block vote, one candidate or block of candidates represents the district. In these cases the representatives are seen to represent all the citizens of a district – male and female, including those who voted against the party. In such a case, an all-woman's party would have similar legitimacy issues to that of an all-man's party – could they represent the interests of all constituents both male and female? In such a case an inclusive feminist party*

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[7] See: http://www.electionsalberta.ab.ca/
[8] Skye Christensen, UN Women. Contribution for Consolidated Response on All-Women Political parties.

might be better positioned to represent the interests of all constituents than would an all-women party.

In countries where gender-quotas are written in a gender-neutral fashion, the quotas themselves might limit the ability of an all-women party to compete for seats. Where gender quotas require a certain minimum percentage of candidates to be of each gender, then all parties must include both men and women amongst their nominees.

Parties that do not include men on principle could violate legal non-discrimination restrictions in many countries. In many countries organizations are not legally able to discriminate against certain protected classes – of which sex is often one.

4. What Has Worked for All-women Political Parties and What Doesn't?

A practical consideration of what has worked in the implementation of APPs brings to light several possible strategies to adopt and challenges to look out for. The following are some expert opinions of the successes that have been realized and the challenges that exist.

Successes

Several strategies exist to promote the success of APPs. According to NDI, based on case studies researched, women's political parties can gain success by drawing on traditional stereotypes associated with women:

> *In Russia, the women's party capitalized on the public opinion that they were "motherly figures" that could save the country. In Northern Ireland, the women's party was seen as being apart from the violent conflict. The women's party in Lithuania played on the idea that they were not involved in the "destruction of Lithuania's economy".*

One big trend that is highlighted in NDI's case studies is that these women's parties would do incredibly well in the first election that they participated in, but found that their electoral fortunes declined rapidly (e.g. Russia- 1993 with 8.1% of the vote, 1995, 4.7% of the vote; Armenia - 1995 with 16.9% of the vote, 1999 with 0.6% of the vote)

Cathy Allen outlines the factors that would make for a successful All-women's Political Party

The key here is not to have the party only as one catering to women. To the contrary, it must emulate the characteristics that make women more viable and better for these times. In consulting with the Al-Umma[9], we speak of "the party for the rest of us"; for those who value honesty and transparency; those unwilling to let corruption be the rule of the day; those who value listening, inclusion and demanding answers to the tough questions of emerging new governments.

[In setting up an All-women's party in Libya] we have tried to talk of issues that are especially important to women, such as equal pay/equal work opportunities, a voice at the table when issues that affect us are discussed, education opportunities, etc. What we say, however, is that democracy means more than freedom of speech, it means the freedom to seek opportunities with a fair chance of competing for them regardless of your status, who you know or your gender.

What has been happening [in Libya] is that we are using both women and men models of unfair action that is not based on equal opportunity -- say in the Universities where insiders are promoted and the people with the most talent and hard work seldom considered whether it is a man or a woman…

Women have more opportunity to rally support not from women (which is typically thought to be their base of support) but rather from young adults under the age of 35. This group of better educated who are more familiar with working moms more equal at home than a generation ago also sees women as more of a natural partner in power circles. After all neither is the status quo -- and right now we have more men who are considering women, as "at least they could be no worse than the men we have now."

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[9] An All-women's political party being set up in Libya

Challenges

NDI states that women's Political parties fail because they are unable to gain independent legitimacy. They are seen as attempts to mobilize women voters towards the ideology of pre-existing political parties.

> *"I believe there have been attempts to float a women's party before in Bihar, Rajasthan and West Bengal, but they failed to sustain the effort because they were offshoots of main political parties," -Varsha Kale*

Cathy Allen[10], despite her overall positive outlook on APPs has some misgivings andmaintains that

> *[T]he history and successes of women's parties have been spotty and basically unsuccessful… As someone who witnessed the National Organization of Women try to put together a woman's party thirty years ago, I have been very skeptical of ever venturing into such an effort again…*
>
> *[T]here are disadvantages: people will see this as "only for women and children's issues" and among the most critical will be women. Some of the women think: "who are these women to set themselves up ahead of anyone; what do they have that is so special that makes them ahead of us?" And there are still other women who will say that the point of equality is not to make things separate but equal, but to integrate and have us as part of the whole where talent will rise eventually that will allow women to be represented at the same rate as men.*

According to NDI, women's Political Parties struggle to gain votes in elections because of their inability to obtain independent legitimacy and/or to diversify their platforms.

> *Armenia - The Shamiram Women's Party was too connected to the ruling party to succeed once the government failed.*

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[10] Cathy Allen, 2012. Expert Opinion on All-Women Political Parties. Available at: http://www.iknowpolitics.org/node/44095

India - It was alleged that the Womanist Party had tacit support from NCP's Sharad Pawar and was established to split a traditional voting block. Others charge that the Womanist Party is an offshoot of BJP so it has trouble distinguishing itself as entirely independent.

In many of the countries mentioned, the parties did not diversify their platforms and move past issues of women's participation, causing them to resonate with a select portion of the population. In cases where they did, their platforms were seen as similar to parties already in existence, apart from their concentration on women's participation in politics (Lithuania ex).

The presence of Women's Parties in elections helps to increase the vote for women running as candidates of mainstream parties.

In Russia, it was observed that the decline in the support for the Women in Russia Party during the 1995 elections correlated with an increase in support and success of other female candidates[11].

5. The End of the Road for All-women Political Parties

APPs often evolve into alliances or merge with existing parties once their lifetime is over, pointing to the fact that as a strategy they serve a more temporary rather than permanent role. This is not to say that they are not effective in achieving their objectives of getting the other parties to take notice. Past experiences have shown that women's parties were used as a shock tactic in Europe in the late 70s and early 80s and then in the nineties in Central and Eastern Europe (Lithuania).

In 1995, 13 women's organizations founded the Lithuanian Women's Party, headed by the female former Prime Minister Kazimiera Prunskíené. The party quickly became very popular in the polls and definitely contributed to changing public attitudes. They showed that women didn't need the quota favors of the communist past to be independent political actors. This was an important lesson in the Eastern European transitional context, where citizens were suspicious of group identities and the label 'feminism'. Although the party only elected one

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[11] Ishiyama, Women's Parties in Post-Communist Politics

member and did not get the required 5% needed to cross the representation threshold, it was 7th among 24 parties in the 1996 elections to the Seimas (parliament). [12] Speaking about the situation of women in political parties, K. Prunskíené said: "*this is the way when in the society dominated by patriarchal though only jug-handled, always changing, useless decisions are chosen, without taking into account their affect to a human, family and society*[13]". Today the party itself has evolved with a new name and statutes that specify gender balance among the representatives, and is now actively seeking allies with more traditional parties on platforms of equal opportunities.

6. All women Political parties and the Women's Movement

The gauge of the effectiveness of All-women's political parties can be seen to come from the reason the party was set up in the first place. APPs may be set up in line with the different approaches to the women's movement, i.e. from a largely feminist standpoint or from a women's right standpoint.

The women's movement around the world takes many stances, including women's rights, feminism, women's research, women's auxiliaries of political and religious organizations, and socialist feminism. In North America and Europe, there is a strong radical feminist stance as well. Drawing on the Brazilian case, Hahner[14] has developed a way of differentiating feminism from women's rights. "Feminism embraces all aspects of the emancipation of women and includes any struggle designed to elevate their status socially, politically, or economically; it concerns women's self-concepts as well as their position in society. Feminism includes the reorganization of personal life, dealing not only with questions of the economy and the polity, but of sexuality and the family. Identification as a feminist means confronting men. Feminism deals directly and personally with the problem of patriarchy-- machismo in strongly patriarchal settings. In contrast, women's rights . . . tend to define, more narrowly, the emancipation of women as the winning of legal rights." Women's rights involves including women in existing structures. Those with a women's rights stance see the problem as unequal access to resources. Men are not an enemy or even a competitor for resources, but potential allies to be won over.

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[12] Kazimiera Prunskíené,1999. Presentation by Prof. Kazimiera Prunskíené, Member of Parliament, at the Conference: Women and Democracy at the Dawn of the New Millennium,Reykjavik, 8-10 October 1999.
[13] http://dublinas.lvls.lt/en.php/about-a-party/party-after-regain-of-independence-1990-2005/,print.1,key.3
[14] Hahner, June E. "Feminism, Women's Rights, and the Suffrage Movement in Brazil, 1850-1932." Latin American Research Review XV, No. 1 (1980):65-66.

Not all choose to go down the road of APPs. Niamh Bhreathnach Cllr, former Irish Minister for Education says[15]

> *Ireland did not go down the women's' only party route. We had a Women's Progressive Association set up in the '70s which morphed into the Women's' Political Association by the end of that decade… At times I envied countries were there were list systems operating or where women's parties were in existence.*

In the end, the outcome is what matters as Niamh Bhreathnach Cllr says

> *How will democracies benefit from greater participation of women? What policies come up the priority list? Why are a majority of women still convinced that governing is best done by men? Good outcomes need to be shared, problems discussed and targets set and achieved. Whether women only parties would have achieved more is a moot point, at some stage whether participating in Government or a coalition opposition, perhaps a women's party's clout could have achieved more but I ... wonder whether their experience could inform ours*

Conclusion

When All-women Political Parties set out with an aim to get women's voices heard, to bring women's rights to the negotiating table, and to promote alliances and working together, they inevitably die when their objective is achieved and they are absorbed into these alliances. This is not necessarily a failure where their overall aim has been achieved. However, not all instances of alliance-formation may prove effective in achieving sustainable results for women's representation, and with the party's autonomy lost, there remains no path for redress.

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[15] Niamh Bhreathnach Cllr, 2012. Expert Opinion on All-women Political Parties. Submitted 30 March 2012 by Niamh Bhreathnach Cllr, Former Irish Minister for Education. Available online: http://www.iknowpolitics.org/node/44096

A good understanding of what makes for sustainable outcomes as far as women's representation in political parties is needed. This would entail a look at the all factors affecting such an outcome including electoral systems, the role of other political parties including those in power, overall outlook of the electorate towards adopting versus changing the status quo, and socio-cultural attitudes to women and women's rights.

Further Reading

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