

# Strengthening Women's Roles in Parliaments

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The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) has supported democratic institutions and practices in every region of the world for nearly three decades. This article provides an overview of strategies used by NDI for improving democratic governance by increasing women's representation and men's awareness of the value of women's participation in the parliaments. Best practices include providing support to women legislators, strengthening the institution, promoting cross-party caucuses and working with gender affairs committees.

## 1. Introduction

The world is wasting a precious resource today. Tens of thousands of talented women stand ready to use their professional expertise in public life; at the same time, they are dramatically underrepresented in positions of leadership around the world (Madeleine K. Albright)

Governance is the way in which governments and public sector institutions guarantee the rule of law, promote economic growth and provide some measure of social protection to citizens. Generally, the term 'democratic governance' refers to a government's ability to deliver on these promises while adhering to the democratic values of transparency, representation, pluralism and accountability [National Democratic Institute (NDI), undated]. Governance programmes promote effective public sector institutions and processes that operate in a manner consistent with these democratic values by working with legislatures, executive offices and local governments (NDI, undated). NDI delivers technical and institutional support to these bodies, while acknowledging their political nature.

Working with individual members, parliamentary leadership, committees, staff and political party caucuses, NDI governance programmes are tailored to help overcome the hurdles commonly faced by developing legislatures. On-going training and advice are offered on a number of issues including

committee structure and operations, constituency relations, executive–legislative relations, legislative and constitution drafting, negotiation skills, legislative agenda development, party caucus operations, legislative analysis and research, legislator roles and responsibilities, and legislative budget processes.

All these areas are relevant to the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women. Gender mainstreaming requires paying attention to how governance programming affects men and women who may react differently to certain legislation or government norms. Since such reactions may perpetuate disparities between men and women, they are important to consider as programmes are implemented. Moreover, the opportunities and constraints to developing equitable legislation and gender-sensitive budgets need to be discussed with those involved in governance programmes.

## 2. Why women?

When women are empowered as political leaders, countries experience higher standards of living, and positive developments are evident in education, infrastructure and health (Beaman *et al.*, 2007). Women's participation positively affects communities, legislatures, political parties and citizens' lives and helps democracy deliver improvements to citizens' lives. Several studies show that women's political participation results in tangible gains for democratic governance, including greater responsiveness to citizen needs (Cammisa and Reingold, 2004), increased cooperation across party and ethnic lines (Rosenthal, 2001) and more sustainable peace (Chinkin, 2003).

Women are deeply committed to peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction, and bring a unique and powerful perspective to the negotiating table. Research and case studies suggest that peace agreements, post-conflict reconstruction and governance enjoy a better chance of long-term success when women are involved (Chinkin, 2003). Furthermore, strong evidence suggests that establishing sustainable peace requires transforming power relationships, including achieving more equitable gender relations (Strickland and Duvvury, 2003).

Research indicates that the gender of legislators clearly affects their policy priorities (Moccia and Anthony, 2006). For instance, as more women are elected to office, evidence points to a corollary increase in policy-making that emphasises the priorities of families, women, and ethnic and racial minorities. Women must be actively engaged in governance to represent the concerns of women and other marginalised voters, and to suggest policy alternatives.

Research specifically examining gender styles in legislative committees shows that women's leadership and conflict resolution styles embody democratic ideals and that women tend to work in a less hierarchical, more participatory and more collaborative manner than male colleagues (Rosenthal, 2001, p. 2).

Women are also more likely to reach across party lines and strive for consensus, even in partisan and polarised environments (NDI, 2011).

Moreover, women law makers interviewed in studies say that they see issues such as health care, the environment and combating violence more broadly as social issues (O'Connor, 2003), and that women more than men view government as a tool to help serve under-represented or minority groups (Cammisa and Reingold, 2004, p. 5). Women law makers are often perceived as more sensitive to community concerns. In recent focus groups convened by NDI in Kenya, for instance, both women and men rated female members of the parliament higher than men in terms of constituent representation.

### 3. Best practices

Democratic governments that fail to deliver the basic levels of stability and services risk losing their legitimacy. NDI programmes address these issues through programmes that assist governments in listening and responding to the most pressing citizen concerns. NDI programmes target legislators, legislative staff, executive offices and local governments, and build the capacity of representative institutions. Programmes are designed to help legislators shape laws and policies that reflect national and constituent interests—both men's and women's—and oversee the work of the executive branch, particularly with regard to the national budget.

Programmes that specifically promote women's participation in each of these areas of governance are critical for enabling legislatures to better respond to citizen needs and for narrowing the gap that exists in all societies between women and men, in terms of access to resources, decision-making authority and political power. Gender mainstreaming in governance programmes guarantees equality at all levels—in research, legislation and policy development. It also helps ensure that women as well as men shape, participate in and gain from such equitable involvement. While separate, stand-alone women's programmes can be extremely effective, too often they are an after-thought or an 'add-on.' Frequently, they are under-funded and not integrated into overall programming goals. Divorced from day-to-day political realities in which male leaders dominate, they fail to change the power dynamic. Programmes to support women's participation should, instead, be an important component of a comprehensive strategy to build democracy and improve governance.

#### 3.1 *Provide support to women legislators*

Once elected, women and men legislators need support, training and advice on navigating the institution of parliament. Training should focus on the core

responsibilities of legislators: constituent relations, legislative duties and executive oversight, including the consideration of national budgets. In addition to providing standard technical assistance such as tutorials on rules of procedure, committee structure and operations, legislative roles and responsibilities, and executive–legislative relations, training programmes for newly elected legislators should consider specific gender contexts. For instance, women legislators are less likely to have previously served as politicians than their male colleagues and more likely to have a background in civic organising and advocacy, which should be factored into programme itineraries at the planning stage.

For women to be effective parliamentarians, they must clearly understand the functions of the legislature and they must learn the rules of the game—both the written and unwritten codes, and the procedures and mechanisms for getting things done. They must first learn the internal practices of the parliament to better equip themselves to successfully utilise these rules and to devise effective strategies to change the rules to advance women’s interests and goals.

Training programmes should address the gaps in women’s formal and/or political education, while seeking to maximise or translate their existing skill sets in areas such as service delivery, advocacy, and household business and management skills into the political realm. Training should be conducted in a supportive, positive environment that allows for growth and learning. Trainers should consider conducting mixed-sex and single-sex sessions. Single-sex sessions for women have proved useful in building self-confidence because they provide a non-threatening learning environment in which women are more likely to actively engage (NDI, 2008). Given that women must interact with male counterparts to achieve success, training should also include forums of mixed audiences where men and women are exposed to the skills of their peers. Training on gender analysis and gender budgets, in particular, should include male and female participants. Also, training programmes should be on-going and progressively more advanced with sequential training sessions offered that allows legislators to continuously apply what they have learned to more rigorous problem-solving.

At this point, it is useful to distinguish women’s issues from women’s perspectives. Women’s issues are those that mainly affect women, either due to physical concerns (e.g. breast cancer screening, reproductive rights) or for social reasons (e.g. gender equality, childcare policy). Women’s perspectives are women’s views on all political topics. New women legislators, because of their gender and/or their previous experience, are often urged to focus on ‘women’s issues’ and other soft topics such as education and health. Women legislators need to gain knowledge and understanding of both women’s issues and women’s perspectives, and therefore, should be offered training in an array of subjects such as

finance, security and defence so that they are able to access influential parliamentary committees where women are traditionally under-represented.

In Mexico, NDI collaborated with Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres (INMUJERES, National Institute of Women) and the Gender and Equity Commission (CEG) to design and implement skills-building workshops for congresswomen-elect. The workshops began with a discussion of the principal disparities between men and women in Mexico's economic, political and social realms. The executive secretary of INMUJERES presented the Institute's gender agenda for the upcoming legislative session. This was followed by message development training, a panel of women who discussed lessons learned in the current legislature, and a half-day legislative consensus-building workshop based on best practices. The day ended with the presentation of a case study that described the benefits that local non-profits garnered in establishing a working alliance with the CEG to monitor the budgetary process in terms of gender. The second day featured a political negotiation and advocacy workshop, including skills such as building alliances, and using political mapping to identify allies and opponents.

Women legislators also gain from mentoring and networking with women who have previously served in elected office (NDI, 2008). Such connections provide quick access to rules and procedures, especially informal norms that enable effective legislating and invaluable support to new Members of Parliament (MPs) entering the institution. The study tour is another type of training programme that has been used successfully with women legislators who are able to experience first-hand the law-making institution of another country (NDI, 2011, p. 1). These programmes provide an education in comparative democracy and an opportunity to see how women in other countries have influenced the legislative agenda. They also foster international parliamentary networks and build the confidence and credibility of women legislators.

Several years ago, the Somali women were seeking to play a greater role in government and the political process. To aid in this effort, NDI organised a study tour of female Somali parliamentarians to Uganda and conducted workshops for them in Mogadishu to help the parliamentarians and civic representatives plan legislative and advocacy initiatives. The Uganda study mission focused on the role women played in drafting the Ugandan constitution and on the operation of the Uganda Women's Parliamentary Association (UWOPA), including how it prioritises issues, builds consensus and crafts legislative strategy. UWOPA members explained the importance of women's caucuses and how they complement parliamentary women's/gender committees. The information was particularly useful for the Somali women, who faced a backlash from some members of the Somali Transitional Federal Parliament who contended that a women's caucus

was unnecessary because a parliamentary gender committee already existed (NDI, 2011).

### 3.2 *Strengthen the institution*

In addition to supporting the individual members of governing bodies, programming can also provide institutional assistance to legislatures—such as training legislative staff, supporting legislative libraries, collecting relevant publications, instructing research staff on information management and providing guidance on creating a more effectively functioning Speaker's Office. Several types of support can be provided to strengthen both women's participation and gender integration efforts within legislative institutions.

When women enter a legislature, they often encounter an institutional culture that does not accommodate their needs. These include infrastructure challenges such as the physical architecture or location of the legislative building and the easy availability of women's restrooms and cultural challenges such as dress codes or how parliamentary members refer to each other (NDI, 2011).

The Inter-Parliamentary Union conducted research on the question of gender-sensitive parliaments and institutional culture (Ballington, 2008). In a survey of parliamentarians from more than 100 countries, respondents were asked if the presence of women in the parliament had brought about a change in the parliamentary language and behaviour. Responses were diverse, although overall two-thirds thought that there was a 'noticeable' or 'small change' and this was more strongly felt among men than women. 'Interestingly, those who believed that a 'substantial change' had resulted tended to be women from the Arab States and Africa where an increased women's parliamentary presence is a relatively new occurrence' (Ballington, 2008, p. 39).

Often the changes that women put in place benefit everyone, staff as well as MPs (Geisler, 2000). When women entered South Africa's first post-apartheid parliament, for example, they initially experienced difficulty balancing family and political duties. Women fought to eliminate evening and night-time parliamentary sessions, which conflicted with family responsibilities. They also instituted childcare services in the parliament building. Eventually, men began to use the childcare services for their families, too.

Another way to strengthen legislative institutions involves enabling greater inclusiveness in the policy-making processes. Changes in parliamentary structures and procedures include the introduction of proportionality norms for men's and women's membership in committees, and the establishment of women's whips and formal or informal quotas for women in various legislative positions. Inclusiveness might also broaden the range of issues that are prioritised on the legislative agenda. All legislation affects both women and men. Women legislators

can be influential on all issues—from defence to health care, financial reform to education policy. Certain categories of legislation, however, directly and specifically affect women's rights and women tend to prioritise them. Key areas of concern for women in developing and post-conflict countries include nationality and citizenship, succession and property ownership, marriage and family law and protection from gender-based violence.

In December 2009, the Serbian parliament adopted the country's first gender equality law. The vote took place on 11 December, exactly four months after NDI led a series of consultations with a multiparty group of women MPs who reached the consensus across party lines for the first time. It was the third time that such a law was considered, having failed twice before due to a lack of political will in general, as well as a lack of solidarity among women MPs. The on-going cooperation among female MPs during the parliamentary debate resulted in significant improvements to the law itself. The three most important improvements in the legislation were the following: the obligation of employers to develop plans to ensure women's equal participation in the workforce, in management, in training, and to report annually on the implementation of these plans; language that prevents exclusion and discrimination of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender population and the obligation of local governments to establish bodies responsible for monitoring local policies from an equal opportunity perspective (NDI, 2011, p. 1).

Similarly, all MPs—not just women—should learn how to conduct gender analysis and to review and revise legislation for gender responsiveness. Workshops that cover other topics should include training on gender issues and gender analysis so that all participants are exposed to the subject, not just those who might select it based on their own interest. For example, at least one component of a training session on budget analysis should cover gender-responsive budgeting. Or, training on constituent relations should review the differences between the policy priorities of men and women and their ability to access legislators. In other words, practitioners should ensure that their own training and capacity building programmes are gender mainstreamed.

### 3.3 Promote women's cross-party caucuses

Women's caucuses amplify women's voices. By uniting in a formal caucus, women are more likely to successfully shape the parliamentary agenda. By sharing resources such as staff time, training materials and research budgets, women caucus members can more efficiently and strategically advance their agendas. Such caucuses not only advance women's policy priorities, they provide an important model of democratic governance and collaborative policy-making, particularly in post-conflict or highly polarised environments.

Women have proved themselves to be particularly adept at cross-party collaboration—a critical skill to forming a women’s caucus. Because their leadership style tends to be less hierarchical and more participatory, women are more likely to work across party lines than their male colleagues (Rosenthal, 2001, p. 2). This commitment to collaboration holds true even in highly partisan environments, and particularly resonates in post-conflict countries. In Sri Lanka, NDI worked with female politicians from all parties to identify non-partisan issues on which they could all cooperate, despite extreme political tensions, to draft and endorse a platform for improving women’s political participation. They demonstrated that women are prepared to cross the boundaries of party, ethnicity, religion, language and district to meet larger objectives determined by the women’s caucus.

Creating and sustaining women’s caucuses is not without its challenges. In some political systems, women who are elected indirectly or are elected through party lists feel beholden to their party leadership and thus may believe that crossing party lines may jeopardise their seats in future elections (Ballington, 2008, p. 70). Often women’s caucuses receive no budgetary or staffing support from the parliament and have to seek donors and partners among the international community. And in some countries, particularly those with few women parliamentarians, a women’s caucus can be easily marginalised. Caucus members can quickly become overwhelmed, particularly if they have greater capacity or commitment to analysing and drafting gender-sensitive legislation than members of the parliament’s gender committee (see below for more information on these).

Women’s caucuses can also act as the primary entry point to provide women legislators with needed information and support, and to build connections between civil society and legislatures. Women’s organisations of all kinds can provide research and experts, draft policies on women’s issues and furnish insight into how legislation involving a range of issues, such as water, education reform or land rights, may affect women differently than men. As an early warning system, women’s caucuses can also supply information on important upcoming committee meetings or votes to civic organisations so they can better prepare, strategise and advocate to influence the outcome.

Governance programmes should provide on-going technical and financial assistance to women’s caucuses, including support for research, legislative drafting, constituent services and skills building in areas such as public speaking, lobbying and strategic planning. Such support not only enhances the capacity of an individual woman or group of women, but also strengthens the legislative institution overall.

### 3.4 *Work with women’s and gender affairs committees*

In addition to meeting in plenary sessions, most legislatures or parliaments conduct a significant portion of their work in committees. All legislatures



organise themselves according to internal rules of procedure, and committee systems vary among countries. Usually, however, they include some combination of standing (permanent) committees and select or special committees. Typically, committees in the parliament serve as legislative counterparts to and correspond with government ministries (NDI, 2011, p. 1).

Many, but not all legislatures, include committees that have jurisdiction over women's affairs or gender affairs or both. Typically, a committee with jurisdiction over women's affairs will review legislation that specifically addresses women's status, rights or needs, including, for example, a national maternity leave policy, legislation mandating non-discrimination in employment or funding for reproductive health care (NDI, 2011, p. 1). Gender committees, on the other hand, may enjoy a wider mandate, such as the authority to review all legislation from a gender perspective. A gender perspective includes a consideration of the needs of both women and men, and recognition that a policy may affect women differently than men. For example, a gender committee might review a pending land rights bill, even if it does not mention women specifically, to ensure that the equal rights of men and women to land ownership are not undermined, and that both women and men have access to redress if their land is seized.

Either a women's affairs or a gender affairs committee can be an effective vehicle for ensuring the gender-sensitivity of legislation. The strength of such committees is dependent on several factors, including the capacity of the staff and committee members, the seniority or influence of individual committee members and the rules and procedures that regulate its jurisdiction. Both men and women should serve on the committee so that the committee's recommendations are not dismissed or marginalised as 'only women's issues'. Likewise, committee members and committee staff must have training on gender analysis and legislation drafting. NDI supported the creation of such a committee in Serbia in 2004, which helped to establish a non-partisan atmosphere and define a work plan for the first year. NDI staff reported that the main challenge involved ensuring that the committee was not marginalised. To demonstrate its worth, the committee had to ensure that legislative initiatives were reviewed from a gender perspective throughout the policy process and that any proposed changes to legislation were strategically introduced so as to be successful.

The gender sensitivity of legislation can also be enhanced by appointing a staff person on every committee to serve as a gender focal point and review all legislation from a gender perspective. Again, the capacity and authority of the focal points will determine the success of the mechanism. In Rwanda, men and women play a leadership role in all parliamentary committees. If the chair is female, her deputy is male and vice versa. This structure is designed,

in part, to ensure that a gender perspective is included in all committees, and not relegated solely to the gender affairs committee. Legislatures can also appoint independent commissions to address specific issues. While committees are a subset of the larger legislative body, commissions are typically semi-independent entities. Many countries have Gender Equality Commissions tasked with reviewing and evaluating both legislation and its implementation or enforcement (NDI, 2011, p. 1). Commissions can be convened on a short-term basis to investigate a particular problem or established as more permanent bodies.

#### 4. Conclusion

Although women remain significantly under-represented in today's parliaments, it is important to look beyond the numbers to focus on what women legislators can actually accomplish while in the parliament—how they can make a positive impact, whatever their numbers may be. In many countries, the presence of women in the parliaments is increasingly common but unless they are able to demonstrate impact, men—and other women—may question their utility and this trend may be reversed. NDI programmes seek to increase this impact by improving the quality of women legislators' interventions and measure it in a way that demonstrates the importance of women as legislators within the framework of good governance.

It should be noted that women are not a homogeneous group. Depending on whether women are young or old, educated or illiterate, live in a rural or urban area, they were exposed to very different life experiences that led to different objectives and needs. Also, women and women's groups often endure contentious relationships because of differing perspectives that result from a competition for resources or judgements about commitment to gender equality. NDI's programmes have sought to build bridges among women and facilitate points of consensus that will accelerate effective policy advocacy and oversight. Moreover, not every woman elected to the parliament or another legislative body will place women's issues or rights at the forefront of her agenda. However, the simple presence of women within these traditional male institutions presents an important opportunity to assess the role of women within the political system and the status of women throughout society.

Male and female legislators must work together to solve the myriad of problems in their countries. And women must be encouraged, empowered and supported to become strong political and community leaders to successfully address those problems, meet worldwide development goals and build strong, sustainable democracies.

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