

Women's Caucus Fact Sheet

Why form a Women's Caucus?

Women who are organized into a caucus can serve the same purpose as a "critical mass" of women, even where women do not make up a significant portion of the legislature.¹

Caucuses are able to extend influence over several realms simultaneously:

- They impact the government and political process by helping to shape the agenda and by providing information and advocacy
- They impact the constituency by raising awareness about an issue, by acting as catalyst for communication on certain issues between government and civil society, and by providing information and advocacy
- They act as a watchdog for certain issues by ensuring that concerned individuals and groups are aware when relevant legislation is up for review
- Members of caucuses often become the spokespeople for their issues, thereby streamlining information and raising awareness.²

Many caucuses not only work to help women parliamentarians come together to enact policy. They have programs, lunches and workshops to help make women parliamentarians better legislators and members of parliament:

- The Ugandan Women's Caucus does workshops for women delegates on speech making, constituency building, coalition building, parliamentary procedures and other related topics³.
- In Finland, The Network of Women Deputies of the Finish Parliament organizes informative luncheons intended to rouse debate in parliament on important current affairs. Often women state ministers are invited to these events⁴.
- In Morocco, the Women's Parliamentary Network organized a conflict resolution workshop that trained the women participants in conflict resolution and negotiation skills⁵.

¹ Sue Thomas, *How Women Legislate*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

² Susan Webb Hammond, Daniel P. Mulhollan and Arthur G. Stevens, Jr., "Informal Congressional Caucuses and Agenda Setting", *The Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 38 No. 4 (1985):583-605.

³ Aili Mari Tripp, "The New Political Activism in Africa", *Journal of Democracy*, 12.3 (2001): 150.

⁴ NDI-Morocco, "Information Seminar on Women Parliamentarian's Groups: Examples from Across the Globe" (support material for the information seminar on women parliamentarian groups, Rabat, Morocco, February 20-21, 2003)

⁵ NDI, "Women's Caucus Report" (summary of the information seminar on women parliamentarian groups, Rabat, Morocco, February 20-21, 2003).

How to structure a Women's Caucus?

There are a number of different models and structures of women's caucuses that can be used to best suit the local political context. A few highlights are included below.

The Rwandan Women Parliamentary Forum has five governing structures. *The General Assembly* is the highest body and its membership includes all members of the forum. The *Executive Committee* has nine members and is in charge of the management of the forum. The third governing structure is the *Standing Committees*. There are five committees: Women capacity-building and empowerment; Partnership and advocacy; Gender and legislation; Monitoring of policies, gender strategies and budgets; and Research, documentation and ICT. The fourth structure is the *Audit Committee*, composed of three members who are in charge of the forum's accounts, ensuring that the General Assembly's resolutions are implemented and the resolution of conflicts that may arise in the forum. The last governing structure is the *Executive Secretary*, which is in charge of the forum's daily management⁶.

In Finland, while there has never been a formal women's caucus in parliament, in 1991 women parliamentarians formed the Network of Women Deputies of the Finnish Parliament. Collaboration between women parliamentarians has always existed in Finland and this network made their collaboration more structured. The network organizes seminars and meetings as well as coordinates cooperation with deputies from other countries. The practical aspects of the network's activities are handled by an executive committee elected each year by the general assembly. Each of the parliamentary caucuses is represented in the membership of the network by an incumbent and a new member. The president and the vice-president of the network are appointed for a year, chosen in turn from each of the different caucuses⁷.

In Malawi, the caucus meets at least once per session on the first Wednesday of each session. Additional sessions can be called by the caucus chair. Out of session meetings can be called by the Chair in consultation with other members. With assistance from NDI in finalizing its structure the caucus polled its members on potential priority areas. The resulting priority areas were: Widow & Inheritance, Custody & Maintenance of Children, Citizenship, Marriage and Divorce. Having priority areas allowed the caucus to focus its efforts on the issues that the membership felt was important. This allowed the group to move forward with consensus⁸.

To give more women opportunities at leadership positions in Nepal, the chairwomen of the Women's Caucus are elected for a one-year term. Additionally, if the chair of the caucus is of one party the vice chair is of the other party. Other elected officers include a secretary, a treasurer and a public relations officer. The Nepali caucus does not have a legislative or meeting agenda as they have decided to focus their work on drafting legislation. NDI has worked with

⁶ Rwandan Women Parliamentarians Forum, "About FFRP", 2007 <http://www.rwandawomen-mp.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=46&Itemid=34> (28 July 2008).

⁷ NDI-Morocco, "Information Seminar on Women Parliamentarian's Groups: Examples from Across the Globe"

⁸ NDI, "Women's Caucus of Parliament Terms of Reference" (materials prepared to assist The Women's Caucus of the Malawi Parliament)

this caucus by assisting them with seminars, skills building and constituency development programs for their members⁹.

Do Women Caucuses Work?

Some noteworthy achievements of women's caucuses around the world include:

Africa

The Uganda Women Parliamentarians Association formed in the 1990s and was instrumental to lobbying for gender equality clauses in the Ugandan Constitution including provisions on non-discrimination on the basis of sex, equal opportunities for women, a quota for women of 1/3 for local government seats, and the establishment of an Equal Opportunities Commission¹⁰.

In South Africa, the women's caucus has worked together not only for gender sensitive policies but to make their experience as female MPs better. The South African Women's Network established a daycare in parliament and made sure that parliament speeches are delivered in language that is gender sensitive. The caucus also worked to pass a bill to reduce the number of guns in society and a bill to make men legally responsible for the financial support of their children. Additionally, the caucus studies and observes department spending and monitor and hold executives accountable.

Asia

In Afghanistan, the Network of Women Parliamentarians and Civil Society through their aggressive lobbying campaign prevented the abolishment of the Ministry of Women's Affairs. The Indonesian Women's Political Caucus (KPPI) working with women's NGOs succeeded in getting a quota passed into the election law starting with the 2004 legislative elections. This caucus is actually a multi-party organization that includes female politicians, civic organizations and trade unions that works with the Indonesian Women's Parliamentary Caucus for increasing women's effective engagement in politics.

Europe

The Women's Parliamentary Club Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia¹¹ has helped get amendments to the Election Code to ensure that at least every third position on the candidates' election lists is allocated to the less represented gender which helped get 37 women MPs elected in 2006. They also helped get amendments to the 2008 Budget of the Republic of Macedonia to increase funding for centers providing shelter for the homeless and victims of family violence.

⁹ Cara Hesse, "Seminar on the Role of the Caucus and Women's Legislative Leadership" (memo about the Seminar on the Role of the Caucus and Women's Legislative Leadership, September 30, 1997).

¹⁰ Anne Marie Goetz, "No shortcuts to power: constraints on women's political effectiveness in Uganda", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 40 Num. 4 (2002):549-75.

¹¹ The Women's Parliamentary Club Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia, "Achievements", <<http://www.sobranie.mk/klub/endefault.asp?vidi=endostignuvanja>> (30 July 2008).

Latin America & the Caribbean

In Brazil, the women's caucus votes as a bloc. This has allowed them to pass a quota law and a law on violence against women. In addition to promoting bills important to the caucus, this caucus mobilizes to assure that the Brazilian budget includes funding for social programs and gender equality initiatives. The caucus was also instrumental in assuring that the Brazilian constitution of 1988 included women's rights, a clause known as the "lipstick clause" due to their hard work¹².

In Uruguay, the women's caucus pushed for the passing of a domestic violence law in 2003 as well as a law that allows all women to take time off for their annual gynecological exam¹³.

Middle East & North Africa

In Morocco, the Women's MP forum was able to help to change the electoral code to raise the threshold for female candidates from 3% to 5%¹⁴.

¹² Ángela Castellanos, "LATIN AMERICA: Women Lawmakers Find Strength in Unity" *IPS News*, 23 July 2006, <<http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=34852>> (28 July 2008).

¹³ Castellanos, "LATIN AMERICA: Women Lawmakers Find Strength in Unity"

¹⁴ NDI-Women's Political Participation Team, "Comparative Examples of Women's Caucuses Supported by NDI", (a PowerPoint presentation prepared to show examples of different women's caucuses NDI has worked with, July 2007).