

## Consolidated Response on Establishing Women’s Party Sections

Women’s party sections are internal structures within political parties aimed at uniting women members of parties and galvanizing women’s political participation. These party sections may also be referred to as party branches or party wings. Incorporating women’s sections into political parties has been in practice since the early 20th century, specifically after granting women’s suffrage in Europe and the United States.

For example, the Social Democratic Workers’ Party in Norway founded its women’s branch in 1912 and the Social Democratic Party in Sweden in 1920. It is interesting to note that the trend where leftist and reform parties were more likely to promote and select women candidates has been shifting. Nowadays, right-wing and more conservative parties realize the importance of involving women candidates to win seats and promote their platforms. A good example is India’s conservative BJP party that “supports 33 per cent reservations for women in parliament.” [Basu, A. Women, Political Parties and Social Movements in South Asia. p.24.]

### Case: Social Democratic Party of Sweden

“The women's branch of the Social Democratic Party of Sweden was founded in 1920. The branch includes 300 local women's clubs throughout the country. These clubs work with political issues on the local level, influence and form opinions through organizing debates and seminars and take part in the international cooperation within the Social Democratic movement. Another important task for the clubs is to conduct training for women on organizational and political questions. Several women's clubs form a women's district. In total, there are twenty six (26) women's districts of the Social Democratic Party in Sweden. Districts support the women's clubs in training and policy formulation. Each district board consists of active members of the women's clubs and is elected at an annual district meeting.

Meetings at national level take place every two years. Around hundred (100) representatives from the districts meet and make decisions on the upcoming political agenda and assess the branch’s work over the last couple of years. Furthermore, the representatives chose new board members at these meetings. The national women's branch lobbies at the national level for issues that have been agreed upon during the national meetings.”

*This excerpt is provided by Mr. James Gomez , Political Parties Officer, International IDEA, as an Expert Response to iKNOW Politics <http://iknowpolitics.org/en/node/3175>*

This consolidated response illustrates the key steps to establishing a women’s party section as recommended by iKNOW Politics Experts as well as by scholars and practitioners in this field. The key steps include introducing the idea of founding a women’s section to party leadership, creating a legal framework and structure for the section, exploring funding options, and developing membership strategies.

### I. Introducing the Idea of Establishing Women’s Section

Women members of political parties organize themselves into internal party structures to

have greater influence on the party platforms and policies and to increase women’s participation in the party. Initially, the establishment of a women’s party section may face resistance by the party leadership. Thus, women will need to achieve a critical mass and garner support of other party members and leadership to form an official section within their parties. For instance, Audrey McLaughlin advises engaging the party leadership in the planning of a women’s section in order to dispel the view that the section is a threat to the party hierarchy. [McLaughlin, A. Expert Response to iKNOW Politics]. James Gomez recommends introducing the idea of establishing a women’s section “through a formal or an informal meeting with party leaders, at a bigger party meeting or through formal contacts with influential persons within the party.” [Gomez, J, Expert Response to iKNOW Politics]. He also advises including the announcement and discussion on the establishment of a women’s section in the agenda of an official party meeting. This, according to Gomez, will help attract appropriate attention to the establishment of the new section.

## II. Creating a Legal Framework and Structure for the Women’s Section

It is important to establish a framework and structure for the newly established section and include it in the party’s internal regulations and by-laws. James Gomez suggests considering the following questions when creating the framework for a women’s section:

- How will the board of the section be elected?
- How will the new section be structured at the central and local levels?
- How will the section recruit members? Will membership in the new section be compulsory, automatic or optional for women members of the party?
- How can the women’s section ensure that their head participates in the party’s decision making processes?

### The African National Congress Women's League

The African National Congress Women's League traces its roots to the Bantu Women's League. Women had no voting rights within the African National Congress (ANC) until 1943, when a resolution was passed to grant women full membership status in the party and to set up the ANC Women's League.

The election of Ida Mtwana as the President of the League invited a new era in the history of the organization. The structure of the ANC Women's League was overhauled, establishing Provincial Leagues based on the pattern of the parent body. This connected the ANC Women's League with township women throughout the country and opened the way for a new and more dynamic leadership with a broader representation of working class women to coming to the fore.

The continuous struggle by the ANC Women's League against all forms of discrimination and gender imbalance subsequently led to the ANC resolution that one third of its representatives in the Parliament must be women, which had a far reaching effect in transforming the newly-elected democratic Parliament of South Africa.

*This excerpt has been extracted from “ANC Women's League 50 Years of Struggle “ by Malibongwe Igama Lamakhosikazi - [www.anc.org.za/wl/docs/50years.html](http://www.anc.org.za/wl/docs/50years.html)*

The last question is particularly important because simply establishing a women's section may not be sufficient for promoting women's issues in the party's platform and increasing the party's women candidates. For instance, Farida Shaheed points out that in South Asia "women's wings of political parties are rarely integrated into the central power structure of the party. Functioning mostly as mechanisms for mobilizing support for specific parties, these wings may actually further marginalize women by limiting their presence and activism to this auxiliary role, bereft of any real political power." [Shaheed, F. *Politics and Power: A Gendered Perspective from South Asia.*] Therefore, it is important to ensure that a newly established women's section has equal opportunities with other party sections to participate in the political processes and influence the party platform development. Moreover, women's sections can propose policies important to women including women's health, violence against women, child care, education, employment, and access to property rights, etc.

### III. Identifying Funding Options to Support the Women's Section

#### Case: Social Democratic Party of Croatia

The Social Democratic Party of Croatia was created in 1994 after a merger of several left-wing parties of Croatia. At the beginning, women faced resistance from party members to establish women's wing or organize themselves within the party. However, by January 1995, women activists founded SDP Women's Forum (SDWF). SDWF has become an internal structure within SDP and complied with the party's Statute. Shortly, SDWF created its own Statute that allowed women who are interested in the values and work of the Forum to become its member without becoming the party members.

Initially, the strategy was to form branch offices in any place where there was a party branch, at the municipality, city or county levels. Within two to four years (after 1995) almost 100 SDWF branches were established across the country

Between 1995 and 1999, there were six vice-presidents of the SDP, of which two were women. The total representation of women on the party's governing executive committee – the Main Board – stood at 52 percent.

The strategy of capacity building and increasing the representation of women within the SDP was essential for the SDWF in order to influence the national agenda and implement gender-related policies once the SDP formed government in 2000. As the leading party in the new coalition government, the SDP was largely responsible for the 34 percent women's representation in Parliament in 2000.

*This excerpt has been extracted from "Political party Quotas in the Croatian Social Democratic Party" by Karolina Leakovic, International IDEA.- <http://iknowpolitics.org/en/node/3302>*

To fundraise successfully, women's sections should have a carefully planned and well-administered fundraising strategy. The first step in creating a fundraising strategy is to determine the critical amount of money to raise and the guidelines for spending the raised money. "By combining the budget with a time-line and assigning cost figures to the activities as they are to take place, you can develop a cash flow chart which will provide fundraising deadlines and spending deadlines." [Women's Campaign Manual. p.5]

The second step is to select the most effective and accessible fundraising techniques and tools. Women's party sections may employ fundraising techniques commonly used by political parties, such as charging membership fees, collecting member contributions, soliciting donations, and receiving allotments from a central party budget. At the same time,

women's party sections may develop separate fundraising strategies tailored to the issues on which they work and networks with which they have relationships. "Start with the groups most aligned with your message—sell to them that their concern is your concern. Then move to the groups partially aligned with your message—remember, no group of people is completely homogenous and politics often makes strange bedfellows." [Katz, B. and Rackers, M. *Political Campaign Fundraising: What You Need to Know to Start a Successful Campaign*]. Audrey McLaughlin also notes that women's sections have employed other untraditional tools for fundraising such as selling crafts and handiwork, developing a cookbook for sale, and etc. [McLaughlin, A. *Expert Response to iKNOW Politics*]. A women's section should carefully consider the interests and political stances of donors that it approaches with a specific issue or message.

#### **IV. Recruiting and Retaining Members**

Women's sections need to develop a well-planned strategy on how to recruit new members and how to retain the current ones. Throughout history different women's sections have employed various techniques to grow and maintain their membership. For instance, the Women's Forum of the Social Democratic Party of Croatia (SDWF) has instituted a flexible membership policy by allowing women to become members of the forum without being members of SDP. On the other end of the spectrum, the women's section of the Labour Party in Ireland makes membership in its section mandatory for all women members of the party and optional for other members of the party.

To recruit new members, women's sections may use such outreach techniques as television and radio broadcasts, mail campaigns, canvassing, phone calls and the Internet. However, it is important to strategically choose tools that are going to be more effective in reaching out to constituents and potential section members. As Pippa Norris suggests "Literacy rates and levels of access to mass media, for example, influence whether parties must rely on face-to-face meetings or can reach electors via newspapers, television, or radio." [Norris, P. *Developments in Party Communications*. p.4]

Another technique for recruiting and retaining members is training opportunities provided by women's party sections. Audrey McLaughlin suggests that women's sections that offer training not only stimulate interest and participation among their members, but also enhance women's self-confidence in being politically active. Moreover, "training gives members additional reasons to volunteer their time with the party, and helps bring in new people, and prepares party members to move up within the party, and successfully contests elections by developing and building on their skills." [Political Party Development Program: Political Party Training Manual. p.17]

Both to retain old members and recruit new ones, women's sections should clearly communicate their vision and goals to their members. It is also crucial for the sections'

leadership to work on critical issues and create common goals in addressing such issues. “In order to successfully build party membership and convince voters, each party organizer must understand the party’s position on major issues and plans for the future, and have a way to ask questions, voice opinions and receive honest, useful responses from the party leadership.” [Political Party Development Program: Political Party Training Manual. p. 15]

## **Conclusion**

Women’s party sections are important for creating opportunities for women to have greater influence on party platforms and policies, and increasing women’s political participation in general. iKNOW Politics experts suggest that the newly established women’s party sections should define and establish their structures within party regulations or bylaws as well as develop fundraising and outreach strategies in order to effectively implement their activities and agenda.

Members of the women’s sections may wish to take further advantage of the iKNOW platform to enhance their ability to communicate with one another, connect to their counterparts, and share their experiences with the international community by participating in iKNOW Politics online discussions and sharing their news and resources.

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