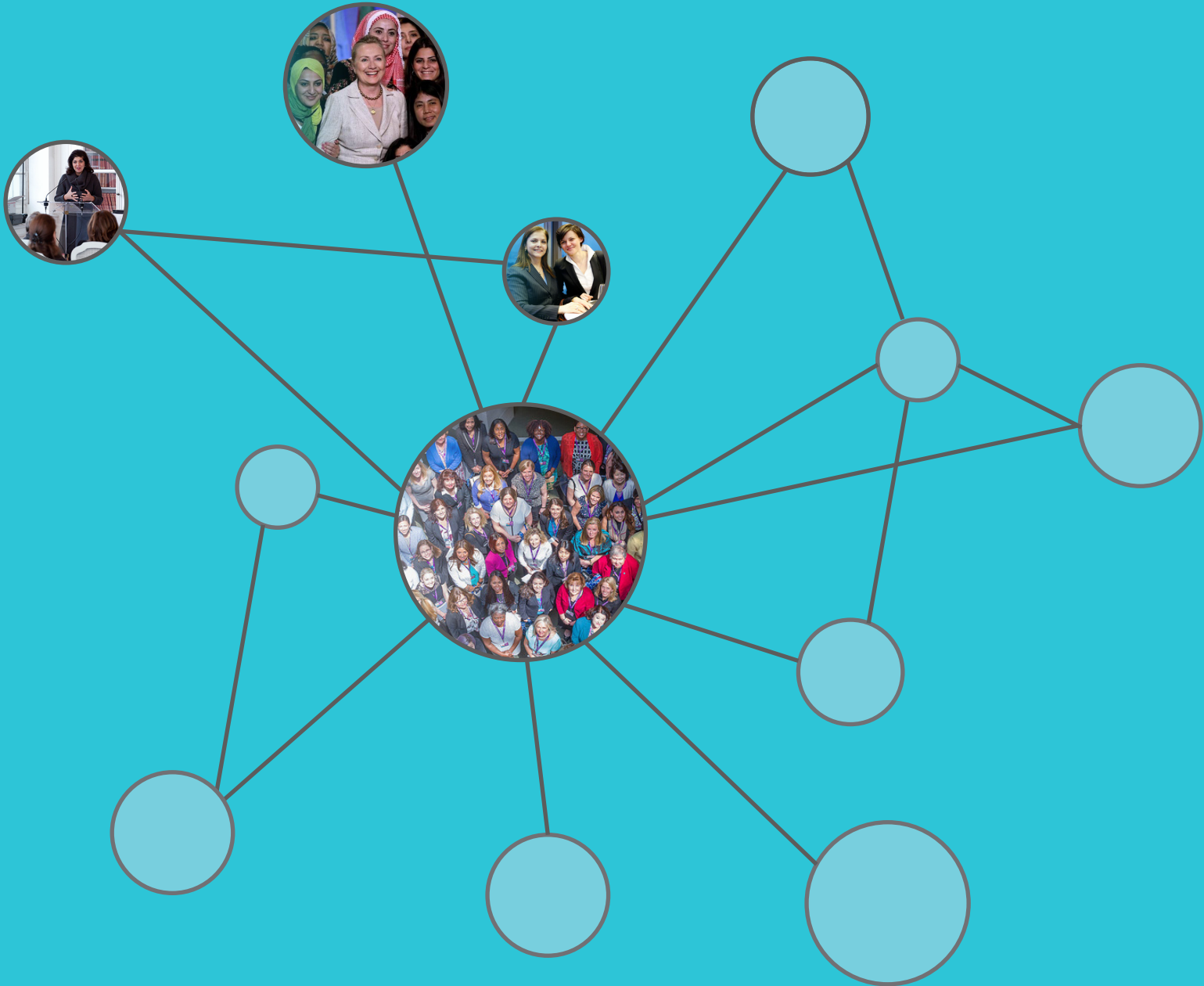


Women's Political Networks

Defining Leadership, Breaking Barriers, and Fostering Change

Lucina Di Meco



WOMEN'S POLITICAL NETWORKS BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH



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About the Women in Public Service Project

The Women in Public Service Project will accelerate global progress towards women's equal participation in policy and political leadership to create more dynamic and inclusive institutions that leverage the full potential of the world's population to change the way global solutions are forged.

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Executive Summary

This paper seeks to understand the impact women's political networks have globally in supporting women overcome the universal cultural and structural barriers they face in engaging in a political career. With best practices from national, regional and international networks, this paper explores the role and modus operandi networks have adopted in supporting women running for national office in congressional or parliamentary elections, enhancing their effectiveness and shaping their leadership once in office. Through desk research of existing literature, interviews with women engaged in national politics and experts in this field, this paper also seeks to raise questions on the role of technology, the media and the correlation between women's participation in networks and their substantive representation.

About the Author

Lucina Di Meo is a Senior Gender Expert with more than 15 years of experience in the design, management and implementation of international development programs addressing gender inequality. Lucina has worked for the United Nations, as well as a wide range of international nonprofits and foundations, defending and promoting women's and girls' rights and empowerment in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Women’s Political Networks: Defining Leadership, Breaking Barriers, and Fostering Change

Background and Research Paper

Annex I: Researching Women’s Political Networks: A Resource Guide

Annex II: Designing Women’s Political Networks: A Ten-Step Toolkit

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Introduction

In 1995, when the Fourth World Conference on Women was convened by the United Nations (UN) in Beijing, China, the world average of women in parliament was 11.3 percent. The conference represented a turning point for the global women's movement, with the affirmation of "women's rights as human rights" and the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action, an agenda for women's empowerment with very specific goals, measures and indicators to increase, among other things, equal participation of men and women in politics.

Since then, progress has been made, as women doubled their representation in parliaments and congresses all over the world (at the end of 2015, women held 22.7 percent of seats). Still, as the Sustainable Development Goals remind us, ensuring women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership in the political public life globally is a goal not yet fully achieved. Progress in this respect is uneven: while the Nordic countries achieved on average 41 percent women's representation and Rwanda and Bolivia have a majority of women in their national legislatures, most countries have failed to achieve Beijing's target of 30 percent women's representation at a decision-making level in legislative and governmental bodies. In 2013, in Asia and the Pacific, where 60% of the world population lives, women hold on average 18.4% of seats in national legislatures.¹ It is also important to note that increased representation does not necessarily mean equal voice and power. Since 1960, only 54 women have become the top political executive in their countries;² women hold only about 17 percent of ministerial positions worldwide and even then, they tend to be reliably entrusted with social welfare portfolios, which do not grant power to decide how revenues should be allocated or to take part in national security or foreign policy decisions.³ Finally, still in 2016, despite the presence of extremely strong female candidates, women have not yet shattered the highest glass

ceilings of UN Secretary-General and United States President.

This paper seeks to understand the impact women's political networks have on supporting women running for office, getting women elected, and shaping their policies and effectiveness once in office.

To explore these issues, Part I reviews contemporary thinking on women's descriptive and substantive representation. In Part II, this study defines and describes the different types of women's political networks and explores answers to some key questions that concern their membership, their relationship to the women's movement and their use of technology. Part III analyzes the universal cultural and structural barriers women face in each stage of a political career and provides best practices of how different types of networks, separately or working in cooperation, have supported women in overcoming these barriers. Part IV highlights some of the main opportunities for further investigation from this research. Accompanying this paper are a key bibliography on women in politics and a mapping of national and international actors active in this field (Annex I), and a toolkit with basic guidelines on how to design a network fostering women's political representation.

I. Women in Politics: Considerations on Descriptive and Substantive Representation

The fact that women represent approximately half of the world's population should in and of itself be a strong argument for equal representation. In addition, women's participation in legislatures is proven to have a positive impact on the policy agenda, profound consequences on the way politics is practiced and a beneficial ripple effect on society as a whole.

Globally, women legislators tend to be more sensitive to community needs, as they often prioritize issues like childcare, education and health;⁴ women lawmakers are also much more engaged in gender equality matters, including gender-based violence, equal pay and parental leave.⁵ While there is no ultimate evidence regarding the differential pervasiveness of corrupt behaviors among men and women in public office, multiple surveys in India have found a correlation between women's increased representation and improved popular perceptions about public office.⁶ In the United States, 34 percent of the people interviewed for a recent survey said they perceived women to be more ethical and honest, while only 3 percent said the same about men.⁷

Furthermore, a growing body of research examining leadership styles finds women to be less aggressive, more cooperative and have a more democratic approach in decision making.⁸ In October 2013 in the United States, during the federal government "shut down," as the prospect of a historic default loomed close, it was women from the Senate who worked across party lines to put forward a plan that successfully reopened the government. A study from the Canadian public service points at the positive impact that equal representation has on institutional culture, programs and operations at all levels.⁹

Lindy Wafula, member of the Labour Party of Kenya who ran for office in the last two parliamentary elections, sums it up: "I keep asking myself and women and men in Africa: what would

to run for office. Now we only have one female president. What if it was the other way round?"¹⁰

Another question also remains to be fully addressed. What are the conditions under which nationally-elected female legislators drive these changes? Is the effectiveness dependent upon their sheer numbers, the strength of their internal network, their connections to their constituency, or other factors?

Why Does This Matter? Going Beyond Sheer Numbers

The Beijing Platform for Action asserts that women must achieve at least 30 percent representation in political institutions before their presence can have a transformative effect. This approach, often referred to as the *critical mass theory*, suggests that only when a certain critical mass of women is present in a political institution, will they be strong enough to confront the dominating culture, organize themselves as a group and act on behalf of women's interests.

Since Beijing, 77 countries all over the world have adopted compulsory gender quotas to increase the number of female lawmakers through legislated candidate quotas or reserved seats.¹¹ Political parties in fifty-four countries have also adopted voluntary quotas, with degrees of effectiveness that generally reflect their overall gender-sensitivity, the presence of women in party elites and, to a lesser extent, their ideological make-up.¹² In countries like Rwanda and Bolivia, where women achieved and surpassed that critical mass almost overnight due to ambitious quota rules, they were able to pass gender equality legislation that would have seemed unrealistic only a few years earlier.

While certainly useful in increasing the *sheer number* of women in office (women's *descriptive representation*), quotas can produce resistance or backlash in some countries.¹³ Also, quotas do not necessarily increase the ability (or even willingness) of female legislators to work on gender equality and women's policy concerns (women's

"Now we only have one female president. What if it was the other way round?"

Lindy Wafula, Member of the Labour Party of Kenya and two-time parliamentary candidate



Africa be like if we had 52 female presidents? Would we still see war, hunger, poverty? This is the question I ask to women as I encourage them

substantive representation). Neither do they remove many of the cultural and structural barriers women face in entering the political life and achieving senior leadership positions.¹⁴

The critical mass approach has also come under harsh criticism in recent years for a variety of reasons. First, it assumes women legislators should primarily respond to women as their core constituency.¹⁵ According to a 2008 global IPU survey of men and women in parliament, however, while women parliamentarians reported feeling a responsibility to represent the needs and interests of women, they also noted feeling an equal responsibility to represent the needs of men and children.¹⁶ Second, this approach strengthens a gender-stereotypical notion of which matters are of women's interest, often with a strong focus on health and education.¹⁷ Third, the critical mass approach demands for women representatives a higher and different standard of accountability, neither taking into consideration nor challenging the role played by a multiplicity of stakeholders in the legislative process, which includes civil society organizations, political parties and national legislatures. Finally, this approach does not explain the incredible achievements made by women lawmakers who were able to have important gender-equality legislation passed despite holding very few seats.

These considerations reflect the need to overcome the critical mass approach in favor of a new narrative for gender parity in the political life: one that assumes equal representation as a precondition for political institutions that are inclusive, able to mirror the realities and respond to the needs of all people in their societies. Worldwide, to a greater or lesser extent, men and women are educated and socialized differently because of their gender identity, which fosters differing life experiences with respect to health, education, social norms, economic constraints and much more. By virtue of those experiences, their perspectives are different albeit often complementary and need to be represented equally in the political life. With this in mind, any government aiming at fully meeting

the needs of its population must include an equal number of women legislators to ensure a truly democratic representation.

II. Women's Political Networks: Definition, Role, Membership and Key Relations

A social network can be defined as a set of actors (individuals, groups, organizations, or societies) and the relations between these actors.¹⁸ Building upon this definition, this paper considers women's political networks as the set of critical actors working to increase women's political participation, recruitment and leadership and the relations among them. These actors include the men and women who, through women's civil society organizations, women's political party wings and women's parliamentary bodies (by themselves women's political networks), represent important stakeholders to the legislative process. The paper will analyze the role each one of these stakeholders plays to increase women's representation, both individually and in strategic partnerships sometimes referred to as *women's co-operative constellations*.¹⁹

Women's networks are not necessarily substitutive, but complementary with respect to policies aimed at increasing women's descriptive representation. In some cases they prepare the ground for them, such as when networks advocate for gender quotas. In other cases, they contribute to eliminating some of the barriers that make those policies necessary in the first place. For example, networks can increase the supply or demand of female candidates by increasing the pool of



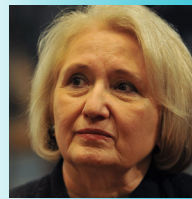
“Having been part of a women's network, when you get into office you will have greater political will to advance the position of women.”

Dr. Joyce Banda, Former President of Malawi

qualified female political aspirants or convincing political parties and the electorate of the importance of having more women in office. Women's networks also play an essential role in promoting women's substantive representation, by fostering dialogue among critical actors to the legislative process, including women in government, civil society and political party activists.²⁰ For Joyce Banda,²¹ former president of Malawi and women's rights activist, "having been a part of a women's network and having gotten that support from your fellow women, when you get into office you will have greater political will to advance the position of women".

Finally, women's networks shape and inform women's leadership. According to Joanna Barsh, Senior Partner at McKinsey & Company, many very successful women use a "centred leadership", heavily reliant on the power of "connecting", or "identifying who can help you grow, building stronger relationships, and increasing your sense of belonging."²² Speaking with over seventy female leaders for their book *Fast Forward*, Verveer and Azzarelli also found "connecting with others" to be absolutely essential in unlocking women's potential.²³ It's through these connections that women discover their power and purpose, as well as find the strength and validation to pursue their political vision.

Melanne Verveer, Executive Director of the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security and first ever U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues at the Department of State from 2009 to 2013, explains it this way: "I believe women's networks are invaluable in providing female political aspirants with the tools they need to get elected, despite the many hurdles in their paths. Women's networks also make an enormous difference in enabling female legislators to meet across party lines,



"In order to make significant progress in women's political empowerment, we need a lot more of such networks."

Melanne Verveer, Executive Director, Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security and former U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues

share experiences and tools on how to successfully advance gender equality policies. In order to make significant progress on women's political empowerment, we need a lot more of such networks."²⁴

Women's Political Networks in Civil Society, Political Parties and National Legislatures: A Multiplicity of Experiences and Goals

Since Beijing, a great number of women's political networks have been created, varying for geographic outreach (national, regional or international) and membership (political party wings, parliamentary committees and caucuses, civil society groups), among other categories. Each of them offers different advantages and services to their members. Asked about the role of different women's networks for her political career, Kah Walla,²⁵ the first woman to run for president in Cameroon, explained: "Each network provides you with something. Being part of national women's networks you can understand and reach out to women involved at the grassroots level and build your constituency. In a regional network you share experiences and understand how to advance your issues. The international network enables you to



"Being part of national women's networks, you can understand and reach out to women involved at the grassroots level."

Kah Walla, first woman to run for President in Cameroon

take your grassroots work to a global level, find similarities and differences with other activists in

the world, learn and build the connections”.

Women's civil society organizations and networks play a very important role in raising political awareness, acting as a loudspeaker for issues and grievances and monitoring the government and political parties' commitment to gender equality at the national, regional and international level. For example, in view of the 2014 European Parliament elections, the European Women's Lobby (EWL), the largest umbrella organization of women's associations in the European Union, performed “gender audits” of the manifestos of the main European parties, assessing their commitment to women's rights. Because of the *sheer numbers* of their members, women's organizations, especially if organized through networks, can influence the agenda of political parties interested in reaching out to women as a constituency.

Often referred to as the *gatekeepers* of democracy, political parties are very important actors in the promotion of women's inclusion in democratic institutions. Women who are members of political parties organize themselves through formal or informal groups or networks commonly referred to as “women's wings.” These bodies are generally aimed at supporting women who run for office and/or seek senior leadership positions within the party,²⁶ as well as influence the party's agenda with respect to policies concerning women. While the majority of political parties globally have women's wings,²⁷ their effectiveness varies widely, from very influential to purely symbolic, often as a reflection of the overall gender-sensitivity of the party and its record of addressing gender issues in governance and electoral processes.²⁸

In parliaments, congresses and parliamentary assemblies, women often organize themselves through what the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the international organization of parliaments, describes as *parliamentary committees* or *caucuses*, depending on their structure and functioning. These bodies monitor the implementation of gender mainstreaming across the country's legislative work, practices and, in some instances,

budgetary allocations.²⁹ In some countries, women's parliamentary bodies allow men to serve as honorary members.

While each one of the above mentioned actors (women's civil society organizations, political party wings and parliamentary bodies) independently plays an important role improving women's political representation and leadership, they can achieve their goals most effectively when they strategically work together, even in a challenging political climate. In Germany, Italy and the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, a very small number of female lawmakers managed to advance important laws on gender equality thanks to the strength derived from the connection they had with women's civil society organizations and women's political party wings.³⁰ In the 1990s in Uruguay, women legislators, despite occupying only 15 percent of seats, succeeded in shaping the legislative agenda in favor of gender equality thanks to the strength of their cross-party parliamentary network *Bancada Femenina* and its connectivity with the Uruguayan women's movement.³¹ According to Margarita Percovich, a long-time feminist, politician and one of the founders of the *Bancada Femenina*, this connectivity has been important to “multiply actions and enrich the political agenda.”³²

Speaking about her experience with women's networks, the European parliamentarian from Italy Alessia Mosca³³ says: “I strongly believe in women's networks. I have had the chance to be elected also thanks to the support of many female groups



“I have had the chance to be elected thanks to the support of many female groups and networks that have believed in me.”

Alessia Mosca, European Parliamentarian from Italy

and networks that have believed in me. And I had proof of its strength also a step further the elections, while working on the law that bears my

name and introduces in Italy gender quotas in the boards of listed companies. If it was not for the help of different professional groups representing professional women's interests, female colleagues in the Parliament that supported us, the media attention mostly started by female journalists, and the awareness raised among all the men counterparts, we would not have achieved that result so quickly. And it would not have had such an impact on the Italian society in general."

gender roles and be judged upon them. Several experts and coordinators of international women's political networks interviewed for this study pointed to the relationships of validation, mentoring, support and solidarity that women develop in such spaces. According to Jessica Huber, Senior Gender Specialist at the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES): "There is a strong demand and enthusiasm for the camaraderie, validation and kinship among women who are in the

Are All-Women Networks Always Best?

All over the world, the majority of networks fostering women's political leadership include mostly, if not only, female members. There is a strong case to be made for female-only networks in some circumstances, for example when it comes to capacity building, mentoring and coaching. Research on girls shows how they perform better in same-sex environments³⁴ and when the teacher is female.³⁵ Also, when working in same-sex teams, women and girls boost their self-confidence and draw on each other's strengths.³⁶ The reason behind this seems to be that people tend to relate and learn from "similar others" and that the social ties that participants forge with one another play a key role in going beyond a simple learning experience to an actual capacity-building experience.³⁷ Former United States Secretary of State and presidential candidate Hillary R. Clinton echoed this notion when reflecting on her experience at the women's college Wellesley: "In so many ways this all-women college prepared me to compete in the all-boys club of presidential politics."³⁸

In some countries more than others, women feel more comfortable in female-only environments, where they report feeling safe, able to share their experiences, ambitions and the challenges they face in accessing the political career without the pressure to perform according to stereotypical



"There is a strong demand and enthusiasm for the camaraderie, validation and kinship among women who are in the singular role of being a woman and an election leader."

Jessica Huber, Senior Gender Specialist, International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES)

singular role of being a woman and an election leader."³⁹ Federiga Bindi, scholar and former government official in Italy who directed a training program for women leaders in international relations in 2013 confirmed: "I am still in touch with many participants: each time they never fail to repeat how that week in Brussels changed their life forever. They gained a self-awareness and self-confidence, in addition to a set of specific skills and tools that have since made the difference in both their professional and personal lives."⁴⁰

While female-only political networks are important, female political aspirants, activists and legislators need to complement them with other kinds of political networks that are open to men, as they might have more of the breadth, connectivity and dynamism that are so important in the passage from a simple support network to one that truly helps people advance in their careers.⁴¹ In addition, when it comes to achieving policy change that tackles societal norms on gender identity and roles, the inclusion of men, generally the *power brokers* in political institutions, can prove very important. For example, the involvement of male lawmakers was key for achieving positive changes

in legislation with respect to female genital mutilation in Uganda and abortion in Uruguay.⁴²

Finally, there is a point to be made in favor of political networks that take into consideration the restrictive gender norms in society through the challenges women and men face for their gender identity, engaging both beyond traditional narratives of men's and women's roles and interests. Created in 2016, the Finnish parliamentary group on Feminism, open to (and attended by) both men and women, does just that. The founder explained: "Men are favored in recruitment in Finland. Mothers are favored in custody battles. A feminist group looks at both of these issues."⁴³

Women's Networks and the Women's Movement:⁴⁴ Difficulties and Gains of a Complicated Relationship

For many women and girls who are skeptical towards political parties and politics in general,⁴⁵ activism in civil society organizations linked to the women's movement often represents a first step in the direction of political engagement. The relationship between the women's movement and women in government or political parties is however a complicated one. Khadija Idrissi Janati, an entrepreneur and political activist from Morocco, described her relationship with the women's movement in her country as: "Supportive, as we all have the same objective of encouraging more women to go into politics but conflictive, because we do not do it the same way."⁴⁶

Sometimes, this relationship depends on the movement's role in getting a female candidate elected. Some women access the political life through typically "male" channels (family, political party affiliation, friends); in those cases, they do not necessarily engage with the women's movement and do not always share its ideology. In Tunisia, after the 2011 elections, most women elected in office belonged to the moderate Islamist Ennahda Party; in the discussions on the new constitution, they supported a draft describing

women's roles in the family as "complementary" to that of men.⁴⁷ The Tunisian women's movement took to the streets in protests and ultimately succeeded in having the word "complementary" substituted by the word "equal," in direct opposition to what had been advocated for by many women lawmakers. Other times, women start a political career after having been part of the women's movement, where they found a training ground and a support network. Once elected, these women are more likely to continue engaging with the movement for an open dialogue on their policy agenda.

For many women politicians, however, the reality is in between: while they developed some relationship with the women's movement prior to entering politics, they do not see this relationship to be the only--or even the main--factor that helped them running for office, become a party candidate and be elected. In those instances, women in power will often try to push forward some items on the women's movement agenda but they might be negotiable in exchange for support from senior party leadership.

Often, women legislators find themselves in a dilemma: on the one hand, they fear being identified as "women's issues" politicians and pigeonholed, particularly if newly-elected.⁴⁸ On the other hand, they try to keep a connection to the women's movement and receive support for their gender-sensitive legislative work. Sometimes, in the political compromising and negotiating process, the relationship between female lawmakers and representatives of the women's movement get strained, leaving women legislators and the gender-equality agenda vulnerable.

Despite its difficulties and complications, the relationship between women legislators and the women's movement is a very important and potentially beneficial one for both stakeholders: for female lawmakers, it keeps them connected with their female constituency, informs and grants legitimacy and public support to their policy-making and supports their voices when they are being

sidelined. For women's civil society activists, it provides a channel to influence policies and promote lasting change.

In Central and Eastern Europe, women from progressive political parties, civil society organizations and parliament, organized through the CEE Network for Gender Issues, successfully advocated for the adoption and implementation gender quota policies in Slovenia, Kosovo, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Indonesia, Ukraine, Albania and several other countries. In Rwanda, grassroots activists from the women's movement created a common front with women from the leading political party (Rwandan Patriotic Front, RPF) and women legislators to successfully advocate for quotas, a modification in inheritance laws favorable to women and the introduction of stark legislation to prevent gender-based violence and rape.⁴⁹ In 2003, in Mozambique, more than one thousand women marched to the National Assembly to demand the passing of the New Family Law Act (which contained provisions to allow women to work without their husband's permission). After having previously stalled for four years, the bill was passed one month after the demonstration.⁵⁰ According to Mary Balikungeri, Director and Founder of the Rwanda Women's Network: "Grassroots women's organizations in their efforts to empower women and promote gender equality need to be capacitated to make linkages with women in decision making levels to join efforts in finding durable solutions to fundamental challenges faced by grassroots women."⁵¹

Some current and former women politicians interviewed for this study reported finding a direct correlation between their ability to push forward a gender equality agenda (in other words, their *substantive* representation) and their experience in women's networks. Valeria



"There hasn't been any moment in my political life which hasn't intersected with the policy discussions happening within women's networks"

Valeria Fedeli, Education Minister of Italy

Fedeli, Italy's Education Minister and long-term feminist, said about her political trajectory: "There hasn't been any moment in my political life which hasn't intersected with the policy discussions happening within formal or informal women's networks. Being connected with women who share one's own experiences is fundamental in achieving common goals and gender-sensitive policies."⁵²

Anita Perez Ferguson, former President of the National Women's Political Caucus and White House Liaison to the U.S. Department of Transportation reported that "women who had been in networks were much more able to accomplish, understand policy changes. They had deeper levels of conversation, were more open to different approaches, had a greater comfort level and a strengthened ability to function further in their political careers. They were better equipped."⁵³

According to Sonja Lokar, member parliament in Slovenia from 1986 to 1992 and Executive Director of the CEE Network for Gender Issues since 1998: "All the women from the progressive



"All the women from the progressive parties that stayed long in politics were brought up through the women's networks."

Sonja Lokar, Executive Director, CEE Network for Gender Issues and former Member of Parliament, Slovenia

parties that stayed long in politics, surviving the pressure of the political life and working on issues of violence, sexual rights and care in Southern and Eastern Europe were brought up through the women's network. The others came, stayed for a mandate and disappeared."⁵⁴

Women's Political Networks, Social Media and Digital Technologies: Online Networks, Hashtag Activism and More

Digital technology has revolutionized the way men and women work, live and think. This revolution has not left out the political arena; social media plays an increasingly important role in the way information is shared globally and contributes to defining the relationship between citizens and governments.

Women's networks in civil society are capitalizing on social media's unprecedented political and awareness-raising potential. Hashtag activism has brought women's issues to the forefront of political agendas, helping to increase the visibility of issues that were under-reported in mainstream media, like the #BringBackOurGirls campaign in 2013, which reached over 1 million tweets. Women's political party wings and women's parliamentary bodies globally have also become savvy in using technology and social media for reaching out to their constituency, mobilizing support for their agenda, celebrating activities and achievements and raising awareness on important issues. The Georgian Dream, the political party leading the governmental coalition that won the 2012 elections, has a website with information on the initiatives carried out by their female members at the national and local levels. In 2016, Hillary for America, the political action committee supporting the Democratic Presidential Candidate Hillary R. Clinton, released an application for iPhones which engaged supporters with quizzes on policy issues, information on local advocacy and fundraising events and suggestions on how to support the candidate.

Women who are actively engaged in politics have much higher familiarity and access to such technologies compared to the overall population. They rely on commercial social media platforms, like Facebook, Twitter, Skype and Whatsapp to connect with one another, share information, build a constituency, disseminate their ideas and

mentor one another with limited cost.⁵⁵ In addition, specialized online platforms like iKNOW Politics,⁵⁶ WikiGender, PROLID and Apolitical connect women at various stages of the political career and support them in accessing, sharing and disseminating information and resources, and launching advocacy and awareness campaigns with very limited costs.

Women legislators and coordinators of women's political networks interviewed for this study have pointed out the importance of online tools to connect women with one another nationally and internationally. At the same time, they have stressed how these tools should be seen as complementary, not substitutive with respect to in-person gatherings, where women at all stages of political recruitment truly connect, learn to trust one another and develop bonds that enable them to continue mentoring and supporting one another. As Sonja Lokar⁵⁷ put it: "Virtual things are good if they are in support of the real thing."

III. Women's Networks as Barrier Breakers

Today, women can run for office almost anywhere,⁵⁸ theoretically having the same chances to get elected as their male counterparts. The reality is, however, quite different: in the overwhelming majority of countries, women find it extremely difficult to consider, let alone pursue, a political career, because of obstacles often perceived as insurmountable that directly relate to their gender identity.

Structural and cultural barriers⁵⁹ are the main challenges women face in the three stages of the political career: from eligible to aspirant (as women decide they want to run for office); from aspirant to candidate (as women are selected by political parties as candidates); and finally from candidate to elected official (as women are voted by the population and selected for office).⁶⁰ Structural barriers reflect the overall gender gap

in a society: educational, professional, economic and social differences in the roles and achievements of men and women. Cultural barriers refer to a societal belief of women and men's roles, acquired early in life through family, community, and education, and reinforced through media and continued socialization.⁶¹ Some barriers, like gender-based violence in politics, have both a cultural and a structural dimension, as they build upon existing prejudices of women's roles to restrict their ability to attain professional roles in public office.

While attaining a political career is difficult for men and women, the analysis of their sex-disaggregated responses on what are perceived as the main obstacles faced in this direction are very different. For male legislators, lack of support from the electorate and from political parties, lack of finances and lack of experience in representative functions are the top four barriers. For women, they are domestic responsibilities, prevailing cultural attitudes regarding the role of women, lack of support from family and lack of confidence.⁶² At a closer analysis, two things are clear: first, the main barriers women report facing relate closely to their gender identity; second, these barriers do not substitute, but mostly add to the ones reported by their male colleagues, making their climb to power even steeper.

According to Valerie Dowling, Director at the Women's Democracy Network (WDN) at the International Republican Institute (IRI), which has trained thousands of women engaged in politics all over the world: "The more women we train as our network grows, the more we see how univer-

sal some of the barriers they face are. The degrees are different, but the principles are the same. This has led to WDN's concerted effort to first focus on addressing these barriers in order to set the foundation for successfully increasing women's leadership in this field."⁶³

Women's networks in civil society, political parties and legislatures have an incredibly important role to play, each by its own right or working cooperatively, in supporting women to overcome the barriers they face.

Ambition and the Confidence Gap: Women's Networks as Political Recruiters and Confidence Boosters

In 2013, Lawless and Fox surveyed more than 2,100 American college students between the ages of 18 and 25, assessing their political ambitions. Their findings were, in their own words, "troubling", as the young men interviewed were twice as interested in a political career than their female peers.⁶⁴ What is more, this *ambition gap* was similar to the one found in older age groups, where women are burdened by family obligations and painfully aware of the difficulty achieving work-life balance. What creates such a gap, so early on?

According to Lawless and Fox,⁶⁵ encouragement (or lack thereof) is key in defining young people's political ambition. The young men and women they surveyed were just as likely to respond positively if encouraged to consider a political career, but female students received such encouragement much less than male students did. Girls' ambition gap can also be explained by the scarcity of female political leaders. As Madeleine Albright, the first woman Secretary of State in the United States, famously said: "I never dreamed one day becoming secretary of state. It's not that I was modest; it's just that I had never seen a secretary of state wearing a skirt". Conversely, several studies find a very strong positive correlation between the political aspirations of adolescent models in the political life.⁶⁶

"The more women we train as our network grows, the more we see how universal some of the barriers they face are."

Valerie Dowling, Director, Women's Democracy Network, International Republican Institute (IRI)



Women and girls' *ambition gap* is also closely related to their *confidence gap*. In *The Confidence Code*, by Katty Kay and Claire Shipman, the authors stress how very often women are burdened by levels of self-doubt exponentially superior to the ones men with similar professional and educational achievements face.⁶⁷ In the political field, like in many others, women hold themselves to a much higher standard than their male counterparts and often feel too unqualified to consider running for office. Also, women are more reluctant to promote themselves and are averse to competitive environments, particularly when the competition is against men.⁶⁸ As the Executive Director of the Massachusetts Women's Political Caucus Priti Rao stated: "Women in particular tend to be less likely to be self-promoters. In order to get a woman to agree to run for office she has to be asked seven times by seven different people."⁶⁹

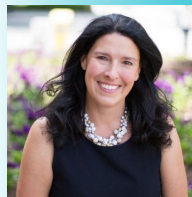
The confidence gap does not only impact the beginning of women's political career (from eligible to aspirant and candidate), but it influences their work once elected into office. In the United States and Sweden, women legislators give fewer speeches than their male colleagues because they are concerned about being perceived as too assertive and facing backlash.⁷⁰ Their concerns are very real, as women-sponsored bills often receive more hostility and scrutiny than male-sponsored bills.⁷¹

Risk-aversion also plays a role. One study found that female state legislators in the United States were willing to consider running for congress only if their perceived odds at winning were 20 percent or more, while men in the same roles were willing to consider running for any odds above zero.⁷² From a behavioral psychology standpoint, this risk-aversion is a direct consequence of the high social price in likeability women pay for being perceived aggressive or competitive.⁷³ Women who are performing stereotypically male jobs seem to be in a lose-lose situation: "When performance is observable, successful women are rated as less likeable than men; when perfor-

mance is ambiguous, successful women are rated as less competent than men."⁷⁴ One consequence is that women who enter politics are on average more educated and experienced than their male colleagues;⁷⁵ another one, though, is that many extremely qualified women simply never run.

Women's networks have an incredibly important role to play in providing the encouragement, validation and role models that women and girls need to consider pursuing a political career that, unlike men and boys, they might not find elsewhere.

All over the world, civil society networks implement leadership programs to ignite women's political ambitions. According to Randi Davis, Director of the Gender Team in UNDP's Bureau for Policy and Programme Support (UNDP), "these networks supports women's leadership with mentoring, research, advocacy and they therefore play a vital role in supporting women to become leaders and be effective in leadership roles. They are also incubators and mentors of leadership. They are vital to supporting women to become leaders and be successful ones." For example, the European Women's Lobby organizes a *Young Feminist Summer School*. In the United States, the non-governmental organizations *Running Start* and *IGNITE*, among others, introduce young girls to the importance of political participation and leadership through trainings in public speaking, networking, platform development and more. According to Susannah Wellford, President and Founder of Running Start: "Women and



"Encouraging girls to be self-confident about their aspirations is an extremely important step in ensuring their political engagement."

Susannah Wellford, President and Founder, Running Start

girls' networks are important because leadership for women can be lonely in a way that it is not for

men. What we heard from the girls we work with is that, before the program, they felt that saying that they wanted to run for office was not OK. Encouraging girls to be self-confident about their aspirations and connecting them with others who share them is an extremely important step in ensuring their political engagement.”⁷⁶

The *She Should Run* initiative offers an online nomination tool, where individuals can submit the information of a woman who they think should consider running for office someday, and the program gives her positive encouragement, connections, and the necessary resources to take the next step. In Ireland, the *Women for Election Initiative* inspires and equips women to succeed in politics through trainings on confidence, communications and campaigning. Many more trainings are developed by international civil society organizations like the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the International Republican Institute (IRI), Women’s Leadership Partnership (WLP) and others. Talking about the role women’s networks played in her political trajectory, Kah Walla reported: “I had made up my mind to go into politics and was politically active, but being part of a network focusing on women’s leadership allowed me to be on panels with world class leaders. This contributed tremendously to my confidence in running for president. Networks that I am part of have then invited me to speak about my experience to other women, which in turn gave courage to many more women to become politically engaged.”⁷⁷ Teina Mackenzie, who ran as the only independent female candidate in the 2014 parliamentary elections in the Cook Islands, also stressed the importance of women’s networks as confidence boosters: “The greatest element has been the self-esteem boost I receive as I recognize that many other women in the community (and beyond) count on me to take their concerns to a variety of forums on their behalf - they trust me to lead, they expect me to

lead and they appreciate the manner in which I lead and that is a very supportive environment to be a part of.”⁷⁸



“Many other women in the community trust me to lead, and that is a very supportive environment to be part of.”

Teina Mackenzie, former parliamentary candidate, Cook Islands

Political parties have also started realizing the importance of recruiting women. In the United Kingdom, the Conservative and the Labour parties have programs to encourage young women to run for office. The Canadian Liberal Party has a Women’s Candidate Search Director to help recruit women to the party. The Swedish Social Democratic Party features a handbook for women party members on how to identify and remove the traps that make it difficult for them to advance within the party, unmasking socio-behavioral patterns that tend to leave them behind.⁷⁹ In Cambodia, the Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) women’s wing provides trainings for female activists.

In some instances, women’s parliamentary bodies have successfully advocated for the introduction of practices aimed at recruiting more women in politics and boosting the confidence of female legislators. In 1997 in Iceland, a multi-partisan parliamentary committee created and funded a 5-year campaign to increase the number of women in politics through ads, mentoring programs and trainings. In the German Bundestag, when a woman raises her hand to speak in discussions, she is automatically shifted to the top of the list of male speakers. This practice aims at overcoming women’s diffidence about speaking in male-dominated groups and maximizes their opportunities to participate.⁸⁰

Women in civil society organizations, political party wings and parliamentary bodies can catalyze change at an even greater extent when they

work co-operatively and strategically together as a network. In Lithuania, the government brings together women from different political parties into non-governmental organizations known as Women's Politicians (Milda) clubs. These clubs, funded through state budget, hold seminars and training events aimed at increasing the confidence and number of women in politics locally and nationally.⁸¹ In the United States, the Women in Public Service Project (WPSP) of the Global Women's Leadership Initiative at the Wilson Center engages an ever-growing number of women at the highest levels of decision-making, including women working in the government, academia, civil society organizations and political parties to build a network of stakeholders that will allow women to assume positions as public leaders across the globe. As Gabriela Jakovleva, WPSP

ical career and be identified as leaders in the first place.

For centuries, women's perceived primary roles as mothers, wives and caretakers limited their engagement in the public sphere. Consequently, leadership has been associated with traits considered to be stereotypically male, like aggression, competitiveness, dominance and decisiveness.⁸³ A 2010 Pew Global Attitudes survey of 46 countries found that, despite women's advances in the last century, women's ability to lead is still questioned in many countries where women have traditionally enjoyed very little political representation: majorities in Mali, Palestine, Kuwait, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Ethiopia and nearly half of Jordanians and Nigerians still said men make better political leaders than women.⁸⁴ The idea of

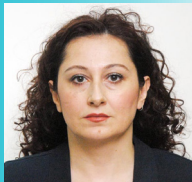
a woman leader, particularly in an eminently public and male-dominated environment like politics, often defies cultural norms and expectations, demanding from women who engage in this field and, often from their families, the willingness and ability to challenge long-held perceptions of femininity and leadership. In

this context, it is not surprising that many women lawmakers consider prevailing cultural attitudes regarding the role of women and lack of support from families as the primary obstacles to pursuing a political career.

Media outlets play an extremely important role in shaping perceptions around women as policy-makers, politicians and leaders, however their influence has often been a negative one, as highlighted by the 2011 documentary *Miss Representation*. In 2015, women made up only 16 percent of the people in news about politics and government worldwide;⁸⁵ female politicians are not only covered less than their male colleagues, but the nature of their coverage is often very gender-stereotypical, as much larger attention is paid to the way they are dressed, their body image and their family life.⁸⁶ A study on the media coverage of

"Behind every successful man stands a successful woman, but behind every successful woman stands the network that we have built."

Gabriela Jakovleva, Women in Public Service Project Institute Alumna from Macedonia



alumna from Macedonia summed up: "Behind every successful man stands a successful woman', but behind every successful woman stands the network that we have built."⁸²

Societal Expectations, Prevailing Models of Macho Leadership and Media Misrepresentation: Women's Networks as Agents of Cultural Change

Ambition and confidence gaps are strictly related to the gendered roles that women and men are socialized to play. While programs like the ones mentioned above are incredibly important in empowering women and girls and changing society one woman at a time, they should always be framed within a wider discussion about the cultural norms and stereotypes that make it counter-intuitive for women to consider a polit-

female candidates in Canada found that women are generally described according to four roles: “sex object, mother, pet, and iron maiden.” Each of these roles “poses dangers for women’s equal representation in politics, as well as societal gender equality more generally. Indeed, to the extent that news coverage perpetuates well-entrenched, but tired stereotypes about men’s and women’s roles, abilities, and aspirations, media contribute to broader dysfunctions in how the genders see themselves and each other.”⁸⁷

These attitudes matter enormously, as they have proven to be better predictors of women’s advancement in public life than, for example, a country’s level of socioeconomic and democratic development, or women’s participation in the labor force.⁸⁸ The way media treats female politicians does not only impact the demand of female candidates (how the electorate and political parties perceive women as candidates), but also their supply (the pool of women willing to run). In a survey conducted after Australia’s first female Prime Minister Julia Gillard left office in 2012, 80 per cent of women over the age of 31 said they were less likely to run after seeing how negatively Gillard was treated by the media.⁸⁹

Societal and cultural expectations are however not permanent. Evidence shows that where women hold public office for a sustained amount of time, the general perception about their ability to lead improves.⁹⁰ As Gwen Young, Director of the Women in Public Service Project at the Wilson Center, pointed out: “Simply having female leaders changes the norms about who can lead and what qualities are necessary in leadership. Having women in leadership roles is breaking

down cultural and structural barriers -- improving leadership around the world and showing everyone what women can achieve.”⁹¹

Societal expectations and attitudes evolve incrementally (under normal circumstances) or abruptly (often as a result of conflict and political unrest). In both cases, women’s networks have an extremely important role to play in supporting the women who are defying societal expectations to gain larger shares of representation and power.

In the past century, conflict has been a catalyst for change and women’s enhanced political representation for many countries, including Rwanda, Burundi, Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa and Uganda. After the Arab Spring, women gained unprecedented representation in national legislatures in Algeria, Iraq and Tunisia.⁹² Because conflict disrupts social norms and practices, women often need to step out of the private sphere to occupy new roles as heads of households, combatants or at the fore-front of peace building activities aimed at de-escalating conflict. These activities offer women a training ground in political engagement and the opportunity of gaining the popular support and visibility necessary to become viable candidates for democratic elections. Women can also play an essential role as countries re-write constitutions and basic electoral and civil laws, to ensure that the new legislation is gender-sensitive and provides greater opportunities for representation to female political activists. In these situations, it is key that women organize through political networks, where they gain the connections, information and skills to take advantage of the opportunities presented to make their voices heard and ensure lasting change.

Even in the absence of an external, dramatic shock like conflict, women’s networks are extremely important to promote incremental change in societal expectations around women, politics and leadership.

Women’s civil society organizations all over the world have been particularly savvy in using the

“Having women in leadership roles is breaking down cultural and structural barriers, improving leadership around the world.”

Gwen K. Young, Director, Women in Public Service Project at the Wilson Center



media for challenging the gender status quo in political campaigns. In the Czech Republic, before the 2006 elections, the local non-governmental organization Forum 50 percent sponsored a poster campaign featuring a long row of trousers and ties and the question “Do you really have a choice?” In Turkey, the local civil society association Ka-Der created posters featuring well-known Turkish businesswomen and female artists wearing a tie or moustache and asking: “Is it necessary to be a man to enter parliament?”⁹³ During the 2010 electoral campaign in Haiti, women from civil society produced and disseminated the “Elect Haitian Women” television and radio campaign to encourage voters to elect women candidates. The campaign subverted the traditional stereotype of women as homemakers with slogans such as “If we can run our families, we can run our country.”⁹⁴ Women’s organizations have also been active in documenting and protesting against gender bias in the way women are depicted by media, training media outlets on gender-sensitive media coverage and encouraging opinion surveys on voter attitudes towards women in politics. Recent research from the United States and Europe has reported a positive evolution in media coverage with respect to gender and politics,⁹⁵ possibly in response to the pressures received from women’s civil society organizations and networks.

Women organized in political parties can raise awareness on the importance of women’s political representation and disseminate media messages highlighting the central role women play in the public life. In recent years, several to-be Prime Ministers highlighted their commitment to gender equality, winning large portions of the female vote in view of the general elections: Zapatero in 2004 in Spain; Hollande in 2012 in France and Trudeau in 2015 in Canada. In the United States, EMILY’s List, a political action committee that aims to help elect pro-choice Democratic female candidates to run for office, disseminates television ads specifically addressing women voters and asking for their support to elect women in office. In Cambodia, the Sam Rainsy Party (SRP)

women’s wing supported a civic education radio program to advocate for increased women’s participation in legislatures.⁹⁶

Women in national legislatures can foster change in parliamentary culture, challenging prevailing cultural norms on men’s and women’s roles within democratic institutions, with positive ripple effects on the entire society. Because of women’s advocacy within parliament, in South Africa, the term “chairman” was replaced by “chairperson.”⁹⁷ Since 2012 in Italy, several women parliamentarians started demanding to be referred to with the feminine form of their professional titles, instead of the default masculine forms, still widely in use. This request encouraged a national debate involving academics, journalists and feminist groups on the use of language to reinforce or challenge stereotypes regarding women’s roles in politics.

Changing cultural norms regarding what is macho and what is feminine is however a long-term process and one that requires engagement of a broad range of stakeholders from civil society organizations, national legislatures and political parties, each working individually, as well as in cooperation. According to Jennifer Siebel Newsom, who wrote, directed, and produced the 2011 award-winning documentary *Miss Representation* and currently leads The Representation Project, a nonprofit organization that uses film and media as a catalyst for cultural transformation: “Our culture’s limiting gender stereotypes - that our girls value lies in their youth, beauty, and sexuality and that our boys value lies in physical dominance, sexual prowess, and financial control - perpetuate many of society’s injustices. Our #AskHerMore campaign calls out sexist reporting for focusing on what and who women are wearing, and suggests ways to re-focus the reporting on women’s achievements. #AskHerMore has a broad range of stakeholders who have actually helped transform the media’s sexist reporting, including media outlets and influencers.”⁹⁸

Another success story is the HeForShe campaign launched by the United Nations to engage men

“Our culture’s limiting gender stereotypes perpetuate many of society’s injustices.”

Jennifer Siebel Newsom, Writer, Director, and Producer, *Miss Representation*



and boys in ending gender inequality is a great example of such efforts at the global level. Espoused by high-level politicians, including the United States President Barack Obama, political party activists, lawmakers, as well as media outlets, universities, financial service companies and well-recognized film actors, the campaign has quickly gained media attention and contributed to starting conversations regarding gender roles and expectations all over the world.

Domestic Responsibilities and Family Penalty: Women’s Networks as Support and Practice Changers

Politics is often experienced as an all-consuming activity by the men and women who engage in it. Even before entering office, a candidate (or aspirant) needs to travel extensively and take part in activism and networking events, often carried out at night and on the weekends, as stepping stones of the political career. In most countries, women carry a disproportionate share of domestic work and find it extremely difficult to find the time to invest in anything other than their families and jobs, particularly if they have small children.

As a result, women tend to become politicians later in life than men (once their children are grown up and require less attention); they are more often single (including divorced or separated), have on average fewer children than both their male colleagues and the overall female population.⁹⁹ These statistics point to the fact that, as in other prestigious and male-dominated professions, women find it extremely hard to balance career and family and the ones who enter the political career do so at a higher personal cost, facing higher trade-

offs than their male counterparts. One legislator interviewed for this study reported: “It is difficult to balance politics and family. I separated from my husband because I was forced to chose either being a politician or housewife.”¹⁰⁰

Even once elected in office, women continue paying a “family penalty,” as they spend substantially more time caring for their families than their male colleagues.¹⁰¹ A Rwandan female parliamentarian explained: “He [her husband] wants everything to be ready by the time he wakes up, he should find all lined-up for him, warm water in the bathroom, breakfast ready on the table, clothes ironed, shoes polished, socks on top of shoes, plus you to be ready by the time he is done if you have to go with him somewhere or use the same car.”¹⁰²

As a result of this situation, female politicians often shy away from leadership positions in parliamentary committees or government, hindering their chances of advancement and possibly re-election. As Anne-Marie Slaughter put it talking about her experience as the first female Director of Policy Planning for the U.S. State Department: “Having it all it all was not possible in many types of jobs, including high government office—at least not for very long.”¹⁰³

Women’s networks can be extremely important in advocating for changes in cultural expectations around family and domestic responsibilities and in supporting women in their quest to balance political ambitions and family. Civil society organizations like Vital Voices Global Partnership offer trainings where women leaders share best practices on work-life balance, learn to better prioritize, delegate and be more efficient in the use of their time. Almost more importantly, they provide participants with role models: women who have gone through the same challenges and found ways to overcome them or learned to accept some trade-offs.

Women’s wings in political parties play a critical role in ensuring that the practices of the party are gender-sensitive and take into consideration men

and women's needs to balance political activism and family responsibilities. Allowing party members to bring their children to congresses and meetings and providing child care (or financial support to sustain childcare costs) are important first steps. The annual political meetings organized by former Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi in Florence are open to (and attended by) men and women bringing small children.

Women's parliamentary bodies are uniquely positioned to mainstream gender into political institutions and practices, making sure that it is possible for female legislators to balance domestic and public responsibilities. Women's caucuses have successfully worked to make legislatures more family-friendly working environments by limiting sitting hours (Denmark, Sweden, South Africa and Spain), having the parliamentary calendar match the school calendar (South Africa and Switzerland), providing child care (Australia) and establishing lactation rooms or proxy votes for new mothers (Peru).¹⁰⁴ Given that changes in parliamentary protocols and practices have financial implications and often need to be voted upon, the ability of women lawmakers to involve their male colleagues in advocating for such changes is of fundamental importance and can be a first step towards a society-wide discussion with respect to gender equality, parenting and domestic responsibilities.

Gender-Based Violence in Politics: Women's Networks as Advocates and Women's Rights Defenders

Gender-based violence is a vicious barrier for women who defy traditional roles and engage in the political arena, as they become objects of insults and cat-calling at best, death threats and

murder at worst. Women lawmakers sometimes report feeling intimidated by the "gentlemen's club" atmosphere and the sexist language which pervade many legislatures.¹⁰⁵

Modern technology, including emails, blogs and social media platforms have provided new channels for misogyny and gender-based violence, with 95 percent of all aggressive behavior, abusive language and denigrating images in online spaces aimed at women.¹⁰⁶ In 2011, Laura Boldrini, Speaker of Italy's lower house, divulged multiple emails she has received threatening rape, torture and murder. She was not alone: for women in politics, threats, online harassment and graphic sexual taunts are often common occurrences.¹⁰⁷

In some cases, online threats lead to physical violence and even murder. In 2016, Jo Cox, a female member of parliament in the United Kingdom, was killed by a male far-right activist. Ms. Cox had been victim of repeated online harassment and threats. In recent years, female candidates have been targeted by violence during the party nomination stage and the electoral campaign in Kenya, Afghanistan and many other countries. Sometimes, women are singled out for harassment when "populist strongmen turn to patriarchal narrative of putatively traditional social values—for example, as both Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan have done in recent years."¹⁰⁸

These attacks, starting at the political aspirant stage and often continuing (or worsening) as women are in office, increase the perception of politics as an inherently "dirty," corrupt, cynical and violent field, where characteristics such as empathy and honesty, predominantly attributed to women, do not have a place.¹⁰⁹ Women who decide to enter this field often do so at their own personal risk and are blamed if they become victims of attacks, scaring away new generations of female political aspirants.

In recent years, women's civil society networks have been particularly active in denouncing

gender-based violence in politics and advocating for legislative tools to prevent and punish it. They have served as shields and human rights defenders for female political activist, organizing advocacy and media campaigns to protect them from abuse. Women's civil society organizations have also promoted the use of new technologies in this respect, through online spaces like GenderIT and Take Back The Tech!, where activists connect globally, share information, best practices and launch awareness campaigns. They have increasingly trained female political aspirants on how to protect themselves from online harassment and gender-based violence. Finally, women's organizations and networks have successfully applied text messaging technology and mapping tools to document and respond to violence and harassment.¹¹⁰ In Kenya, Mali, Egypt, Syria, Senegal and Sierra Leone, these tools have been incorporated into efforts to monitor gender-based violence around elections.

Perpetrators of gender-based violence are often within political parties and women in party wings have a critical role in uncovering and denouncing them. In 2015, the Tanzania Women Cross-Party Platform, supported by the National Democratic Institute, conducted a systematic observation of gender-based violence before the elections, reporting numerous incidents of "sextortion," where female political aspirants or candidates were demanded sexual favors by male party leaders.¹¹¹ Thanks to this reporting, Tanzania's Independent Ethics Secretariat issued stricter disciplinary measures to be taken against any official found to abuse his or her power.

In many countries, women who are in legislatures and government, locally or nationally, often side by side with civil society organizations and women political activists across parties, have successfully advocated for laws protecting female politicians from violence. In 2012, Bolivia passed a ground-breaking law to combat gender-based

harassment and violence in politics. The law was the result of twelve years of advocacy by the Steering Committee for the Political Rights of Women, led by Association of Women Mayors and Councilwomen (ACOBOL), working together with women civil society organizations, government, international cooperation, as well as experts and activists from all backgrounds and origins, including from both urban and rural areas. According to Maria Eugenia Valverde, Gender Expert and Director of ACOBOL from 2002 to 2012, this coordinated work was extremely important: "On the one hand, we succeeded in having greater outreach and visibility as a very wide set of actors was advocating with us. On the other hand, as the women in the network shared information, our collective understanding of the various forms of political violence against women increased and so did our ability to propose a comprehensive law to fight it. In this process, women from very different backgrounds built a common language to share and disseminate information on the various forms of violence, learned to understand one



"Women from very different backgrounds learned to understand one another and find a common denominator in the battle for gender equality"

Maria Eugenia Valverde, Gender Expert and former Director, Association of Women Mayors and Councilwomen (ACOBOL)

another and find a common denominator in the battle for gender equality."¹¹²

In 2013, Mexico adopted amendments to its electoral law and its law on violence against women to include cases of violence against women in politics and in the electoral process. In Afghanistan, women's civil society groups, the Afghan Independent Election Commission and several international actors successfully lobbied the Ministry of Interior to obtain body guards for female parliamentary candidates, increasing their ability to campaign in safety.¹¹³

Substituting the Old Boys' Club: Women's Networks as Resources for Networking, Mentoring and Coaching

As newcomers to the political life, women lack access to traditionally male-dominated networks linked to political parties, such as trade unions, business and other associations where the knowledge sharing, mentoring and coaching activities necessary to launch, sustain and grow a political career take place. For this reason, women's networks represent valuable alternative channels where women at all stages of the political career to connect with one another, advocate on specific policy issues and share information and strategies. According to Caroline Hubbard, Senior Advisor, Gender, Women and Democracy at the National Democratic Institute (NDI): "Women's networks are important for women to have access to power groups they normally do not have access to."¹¹⁴

Women's civil society networks connect wom-

"Women's networks are important for women to have access to power groups they normally do not have access to."

Caroline Hubbard, Senior Advisor for Gender, Women and Democracy, National Democratic Institute (NDI)



en across society and sometimes, countries and regions to strategize around common struggles and advocacy efforts, sometimes propelled by international women's conferences, where they find a new sense of urgency for their local work.¹¹⁵ Women's civil society networks are also strong propellers of training, mentoring and networking opportunities. Based in the United States, the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, the Women in Public Service Project (WPSP) and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems support women at all stages of political recruitment through trainings, technical assistance and mentorship programs. The experience provided by being part of such networks is, for the women who take part

in it, incredibly enriching. As the WPSP alumna Hanane Ennadir¹¹⁶ put it: "WPSP has created a platform where women from different culture but active for the same gender equality cause can exchange information and ideas. Automatically, this impacts our vision and our ability to get things done once we're back at work".

Through women's political party wings, female political activists mentor one another, share knowledge and build a common front to increase their voice and leadership. In the United Kingdom, the women's organizations of the Conservative and Labour Parties provide mentorship, training and networking opportunities to female activists who want to become members of parliament. Women's political party wings in Croatia, Indonesia and Morocco, among others, organize trainings for women political activists to support them in ascending to party leadership positions.¹¹⁷ In Australia, the Labor Party's women's annual conference provides women with the opportunity

to discuss policy, lobby on specific issues and network with one another. In El Salvador, the *Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front* party organizes annual conferences bringing together women leaders, stakeholders and members of the party's senior leadership to formulate gender equal-

ity strategies and policies. The *Women Can Do It* (WCIDI) program, organized by the Women's Wing of the Norwegian Labour Party, trained and provided over 20,638 women from more than 25 countries with a platform to learn, strategize and build alliances.¹¹⁸ The Tha'era network of women, set up in 2013 by the women's organizations of social democratic parties in Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia, has built the capacity of over 150 women political activist to become trainers for female political activists at the grassroots level.

Parliamentary women's bodies help women legislators share information and strategic advice, as well as refine and implement their individual and common agenda. In several countries, in-

cluding Laos, Burundi, Morocco and Ethiopia, the national women's parliamentary bodies train their newly elected members on the rules and procedures in place, helping them be effective legislators. The Rwanda Women Parliamentary Forum (RWPF) trains both its male and female members in gender-related policies, gender mainstreaming and gender-responsive budgeting. The Ugandan Women's Parliamentary Association raises awareness on gender equality legislation and promotes activities to support and develop women's leadership.¹¹⁹ In El Salvador, the Association of Salvadorian Women Parliamentarians and Ex-Parliamentarians supports female politicians in reaching senior leadership positions. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) is the world organization of parliaments, it has a membership of 170 Member Parliaments. Since 1985, at the initiative of women parliamentarians from different countries, it has established a forum of women parliamentarians to enhance solidarity among women and advance the gender equality agenda. According to Zeina Hilal, IPU Program Officer for the Gender Partnership Program: "The women see the forum as a space to share best practices, report on developments in their respective countries. A place where they can share their challenges not only in the forum's meetings but also in the corridors."¹²⁰

An even greater value is generated by networks that include women from civil society organizations, political parties and legislatures. Together, they multiply knowledge and skills and ensure that the concerns of women at the grassroots level are taken into account and translated into policies at the national level. In Uganda, women's civil society organizations have successfully partnered with the women's caucuses by building their members' capacity to write and present bills.¹²¹ In Uruguay, the *Bancada Femenina* worked hand in hand with civil society organizations in defining the policy items to prioritize and was able to

have several gender-equality bills passed.¹²² In Peru, the women's parliamentary caucus engaged women from grassroots civil society networks and succeeded in getting the issues that were of main concern to them (like gender-based violence) translated into policy reforms. According to Anna Burke, former member of the Australian Labor Party and Speaker of the House of Representatives, national networks where women political aspirants and women in office meet are crucial: "Someone who has never run for office cannot give you the lived experience of what it is like to try to enter parliament, the many obstacles and challenges."¹²³

Lack of Financial Resources: Women's Networks as Assets to Sustain Political Campaign Costs

On average, women have less financial resources than men do, as a result of unequal gender divisions of labor, patriarchal laws on inheritance and land ownership, domestic responsibilities, cultural practices and much more. Women have also less access to business networks and rich individuals that sometimes financially support the electoral campaigns of male candidates. For this reason, systems where aspirants need large amounts of money to become candidates tend to disadvantage female candidates; conversely, limitations on campaign spending and on the amount of individual donations tend to have a positive effect on women's representation. With more limited assets to begin with, fewer financial sponsors and, often, less support from the party's senior leadership (often all-male), women find sustaining the costs of a political campaign extremely hard. Financial



"Someone who has never run for office cannot give you the lived experience of what it is like to try to enter parliament."

Anna Burke, former member of the Australian Labor Party and Speaker of the House of Representatives

risk-aversion also plays a role: women are in fact generally less willing to put their financial resources into a personal objective perceived as risky (the political career) and more likely to invest them in their families. Ironically, the very same traits that are highly desirable in public office, such as concern for balanced budgets and selflessness, make many women less likely to run for office.

Women's civil society organizations and networks are very important sources of monetary and in-kind support for female candidates, who sometimes rely on their members to volunteer time and sometimes financial resources in their campaigns.¹²⁴ In the case of Maria Ysabel Cedano, long-time feminist and member of the Socialist Party in Peru, women from the Peruvian women's movement were the largest donors in her 2016 electoral campaign.¹²⁵ Women's civil society networks can also connect female candidates with business networks and other sources of funding. The Nigerian Women's Trust Fund supports female political aspirants and candidates irrespective of political affiliation, providing them with the financial resources and trainings. In Kazakhstan, the Association of Businesswomen runs a political leadership school for businesswomen, encouraging them to consider starting a political career.

Women political party activists can advocate for changes in the party's campaign financing rules in favor of female representation, as well as organize campaign financing activities specifically for women. In the United States, EMILY's List supports pro-choice Democratic women candidates by raising contributions, organizing campaigns and mobilizing Democratic women voters. A similar initiative has also been developed by the pro-life *Susan B. Anthony List* to support female candidates on the other side of the ideological spectrum. The Women's Campaign Fund provides women from both political parties with the financial resources necessary to run for office. Other countries have started similar initiatives or opened local EMILY's List chapters, including Australia and the UK.

Women's parliamentary bodies, most often in synergy with female party and civil society activists, have succeeded in changing some of the norms that make campaign financing unsustainable for women and encourage political parties to include more women in electoral lists. Several countries, where public funding is a major driver of political campaigns, have adopted policies in this respect. In Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bolivia, Colombia, Georgia, Niger and Haiti, among others, political parties receive additional funding for women candidates. In France, Ethiopia, Burkina Faso and Ireland, parties which do not meet the gender quotas see their public funding reduced or forfeited.¹²⁶ In Mexico, the electoral code demands that two percent of the public funding of political parties be used specifically for building women's capacity as candidates and politicians. In the 2001 elections in East Timor, additional television advertising time was given to women candidates and parties that placed women in "winnable" positions on their candidate lists. In Brazil, a 2009 reform provided 10 per cent additional media time to political parties, to be used by female candidates.¹²⁷

IV. Women's Political Networks: Suggestions for Further Investigation

The experiences and best practices so far described highlight how different women's political networks support women's decision to run for national office, influence their success in being elected and increase their ability to push forward a gender-equality agenda once in office. Several important questions remain however unanswered regarding the link between women's substantive representation and the role of women's networks globally.

While the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Quota project provide important tools to track women's descriptive representation in national

legislatures, very little is being done to track women's substantive representation globally. In most countries in the world, there is no systematic analysis on the legislative record of women in national legislatures: the types of bills they propose, their rate of success or their longevity in office. Also, while several models have been proposed to analyze the reasons behind advances in gender equality in some countries,¹²⁸ they have not been systematically applied to explain variances across time and regions.

In particular, an area that demands much greater investigation is the role various types of women's networks have played in supporting women's descriptive and substantive representation globally. Are women lawmakers who started their career through women's networks in civil society or political parties more effective in their legislative work than the ones who started it through other channels? Do they propose more bills than the others? Do they succeed in getting them passed and are the bills they propose more gender-sensitive than the ones presented by other female legislators? Are they more or less successful at being re-elected than female lawmakers who have not been supported by women's networks? Are these indicators the same or different for women lawmakers who were not part of a woman's networks before entering parliament but joined, once elected, a women's parliamentary or congressional body? How are their chances to achieve senior political roles in parties or government?

In addition to these questions, which have a mostly objective dimension (longevity in office, number and, to some extent, quality of bills proposed or passed can be measured), there are additional ones, equally interesting, which look at the impact of women's networks from the perspective of female legislators who engaged in them. Which role did these networks play in their decision to run for office? What tools did they provide them with, which proved crucial for their

legislative work? Did these networks influence in any way their leadership approach? Did any other network they joined after entering parliament (for example, women's parliamentary bodies)? Surveys of female parliamentarians globally could provide some interesting responses to these questions and shed some light on the impact of women's political networks.

Responses to these questions are important in order to design political empowerment programs and structures that truly improve women's political representation.

According to Kristin Haffert, Founder and Principal of Haffert Group, co-founder of Project Mine the Gap Women's Global Leadership & Gender Equality Expert: "If we're going to move more



"We need a sustainable model to institutionalize academies/centers for women that are cultivated with committed partners in-country."

Kristin Haffert, Founder and Principal, Haffert Group and Co-Founder, Project Mine the Gap

women into elected positions around the world, we need a sustainable model to institutionalize academies/centers for women that long outlive donor programs and are cultivated with committed partners in-country. These centers would not only provide training on critical leadership skills and navigating political processes, but they would establish a network of mentors and peers that women in different stages of the political career can leverage throughout their life in politics. Over time, this could become a locus of support to encourage new women to run and create a stronger pipeline of talents."¹²⁹

According to Jessica N. Grounds, founder of Solid Grounds Strategy, co-founder of Project Mine the Gap and women's political leadership expert: "There is a great need to increase the dialogue among nonpartisan actors working to increase women's political participation in the United

States and internationally. Women in the United States would benefit from knowing best practices from women's networks that have been successful in advancing female political representation in their countries, through legislative change and other tools. On the other hand, international networks would benefit from the lessons learned of the work women's nongovernmental organizations have done in the United States, in order to increase the demand of women in office (for example, by generating and disseminating research on the positive outcomes of having more women legislators), as well as expanding the pool of qualified candidates, for example by boosting women's self-confidence, motivation and skills to run for office."¹³⁰

Conclusion

"There is a great need to increase the dialogue among nonpartisan actors working to increase women's participation"

Jessica N. Grounds, Founder, Solid Grounds Strategy and Co-Founder, Project Mine the Gap



Today, women have the right to vote and run for office almost everywhere in the world.¹³¹ Still, most women find it extremely difficult to consider and pursue a political career because of barriers that are closely related to their gender identity and the highest glass ceilings are still not shattered in many countries and political institutions, including the United Nations and the United States Presidency. Analyzing best practices from women's political networks globally, this paper highlights the incredible results obtained by women's political networks, particularly when composed by various stakeholders in the legislative process (civil society, political parties and legislators) in supporting women overcome these challenges. In doing so, the paper uncovers the need for more qualitative and quantitative research on the long-term impact of women's networks on women's descriptive and substantive representation in national legislatures, as well as in their approach to leadership.

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