BEYOND GENDER QUOTAS: A MULTI-LEVEL APPROACH TO EXPAND FEMALE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

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Beyond Gender Quotas: A Multi-Level Approach to Expand Female Political Participation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Institutional barriers to female political participation have fallen worldwide in recent decades, resulting in a dramatic increase in the number of women elected to public office. Despite these gains, women continue to face deep-seated challenges when attempting to seek, win, hold, and succeed in public office. This has significant implications for democracy, human rights, and governance (DRG) interventions that aim to promote substantive female political participation.

This brief, developed by the International Republican Institute (IRI) as part of its 2021 Learning Agenda and alongside academic partners at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), offers an overview of the institutional, economic, and cultural hurdles women commonly face throughout the electoral process. The brief concludes with recommendations and good practices for DRG efforts designed to promote women's political empowerment at three levels of intervention: institutional, candidate, and community.

Key Takeaways:

- Despite reduced legal and institutional barriers to female political participation, significant challenges persist at every stage of the electoral process, categorized here as (i) identifying aspirants, (ii) campaigns, (iii) once elected, and (iv) upward mobility.

- DRG programs designed to expand female political participation generally focus on the candidate and/or institutional level. Such interventions might seek to increase the supply of female candidates by training and encouraging women to run for office, and they might grow demand for such candidates by engaging political parties or encouraging institutional reforms. While vital to expanding the ability of women to engage politically, these types of interventions are often less well-placed to address community-based constraints on women's political participation.

- Female empowerment programs should expand beyond candidate and institutional engagements to incorporate community-based interventions, which can reduce social and cultural barriers, including gender-based stereotypes.

ABOUT IRI'S LEARNING AGENDA

This document was developed as part of IRI's 2021 Learning Agenda. This initiative seeks to harmonize IRI's global efforts to contribute to the internal and external evidence base on what works and why in the DRG sector. In close collaboration with regional teams, colleagues across the Center for Global Impact, the Women's Democracy Network (WDN), and IRI's Front Office, the Learning Agenda prioritizes actionable, evidence-based resources that will contribute to future organizational learning efforts, business development, and thought leadership. The 2021 Learning Agenda focused on consolidating IRI's knowledge on what works best to build resilient political parties.
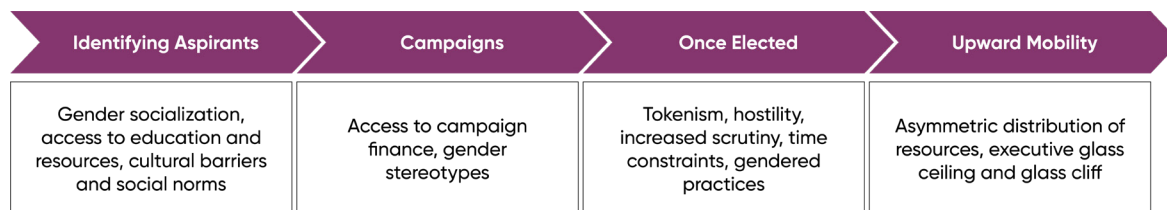
THE CHALLENGE

The first two decades of the twenty-first century witnessed a sharp increase in the global share of elected offices held by women: from 13 percent to 25 percent.[i] This uptick is due in part to institutional and legal reforms, including the widespread implementation of electoral gender quotas, which are implemented, in various forms, in approximately 121 countries today.[ii,iii, iv, v] Yet, in spite of these successes, women continue to face persistent challenges to their equitable participation in politics at each of the four stages of the electoral process, summarized below.

Stage 1 – Identifying Aspirants: Due to a range of socioeconomic and cultural factors, women are less likely to run for office than male counterparts.[1] Lack of access to education, meager financial resources, and household and childcare responsibilities all tend to undermine female political participation.[vi,vii,viii] Deeply ingrained cultural barriers and gender norms are also a significant deterrent to would-be female politicians. For example, in Cambodia, female political aspirants are deterred by Chab Srey ("Rules for Women"), cultural guidelines that define gender roles and standards of behavior for women and girls.[ix]

Stage 2 – Campaigns: For those women who do run for office, they face an uphill climb. Limited access to campaign finance remains a significant institutional barrier that women candidates struggle to overcome.[x] This is due in part to a lack of personal resources or property that can be used as collateral for loans, but it is also a consequence of exclusion from elite networks and institutions that finance political campaigns.[xi]

Gendered cultural stereotypes are another stumbling block. When attempting to frame their candidacies in a manner that resonates with a male-dominated electorate, female candidates may struggle to strike a balance between advancing progressive political agendas and perpetuating stereotypes about their own gender.[xii] For example, in Sri Lanka, female candidates have described feeling reduced to their gender roles, gravitating towards campaign slogans that reinforce gender stereotypes, including "from the kitchen to your local council."[xiii]

Figure 1. Stages of the electoral process and typical challenges women face

Identifying Aspirants	Campaigns	Once Elected	Upward Mobility
Gender socialization, access to education and resources, cultural barriers and social norms	Access to campaign finance, gender stereotypes	Tokenism, hostility, increased scrutiny, time constraints, gendered practices	Asymmetric distribution of resources, executive glass ceiling and glass cliff

Stage 3 – Once Elected: After assuming office, female politicians may be side-lined by male colleagues and male-dominated intra-party networks. This challenge may be exacerbated by women's attempts to balance child-care and domestic responsibilities with new professional commitments and expectations.[xiv,xv] Child-care and domestic responsibilities often conflict with professional commitments and the expectation that politicians will work around the clock.[xvi] These factors, combined with the experience of being side-lined by elected male peers, tend to undermine the political engagement and motivation of female elected leaders.[xvii, xviii]

In many contexts, elected women leaders face charges of tokenism. This may be particularly apparent where gender quota systems reserve political positions for women. After a gender quota was implemented in Catalonia, female legislators described facing intense scrutiny – they were seen as "quota women" whose positions were arbitrarily created.[xix] Similarly, in Tanzania, female Members of Parliament described being viewed as "second-class" legislators due to the gender quota.[xx] This atmosphere of hostility also applies to legislation sponsored by women legislators.[xxi]

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[1] While men and women volunteer for political positions at similar rates, women are less likely to stand for election (Kanthak & Woon, 2015).

Stage Four – Upward Mobility: Elected women leaders tend to be confined to the lower rungs of the party. Accumulated political capital and access to elite networks enable male leaders to leverage their positions for future political gain, often resulting in an "asymmetric distribution of resources" between women legislators and their male counterparts.[xxii,xxiii] These asymmetries have significant implications for women's ascension to more prestigious or visible positions. As a result, women politicians face an "executive glass ceiling," which largely prevents them from being appointed to leadership positions.[xxiv] Even when women are appointed to cabinet roles, they tend to hold less prestigious positions, such as education and culture, compared to men appointed to higher-profile positions, such as finance and defense.[xxv]

Where a woman does ascend the hierarchy, political leadership may be a poisoned chalice. This is the perverse phenomenon of the "glass cliff," which refers to the pattern of women being appointed to executive portfolios during times of crisis, often acting as potential scapegoats.[xxvi]

As summarized above, women face an array of institutional, economic, social, and cultural constraints that challenge simplistic notions of empowerment measured by women seeking or holding public office. A seat at the political table does not guarantee women's equitable participation in politics, nor that women's voices will be heard.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Historically, efforts have focused on expanding female political participation at the candidate and institutional levels, helping expand women's numerical representation even as their substantive representation has lagged.[xxvii,xxviii] (A number of factors may explain this lag, but as this review suggests, a key, cross-contextual factor is a cultural opposition to female self-efficacy that manifests at the level of the community.)

Rwanda offers one example of how an integrated, multi-level approach to addressing gender inequality may increase the number of women serving in public life and also reduce the stigmas, stereotypes, and baggage that continue to weigh them down. In the years following the genocide against the Tutsi, Rwanda prioritized economic, political, and social recovery efforts that included engaging and empowering women.[xxix] These efforts were multi-level. At the **institutional level**, Rwanda established an electoral gender quota that stipulated a 30% minimum threshold for female representatives in national and sub-national legislative bodies. At the **candidate level**, women were actively recruited and encouraged to stand for office. And at the **community level**, Rwanda engaged civil society organizations, community actors, and international development partners, including UN Women, to promote gender equality initiatives, working to shift gendered ideas about the public sphere and normalize women's engagement in politics.[xxx]

While difficult to establish causality, these multi-level efforts appeared to contribute to a significant social and political transformation. Rwanda's Chamber of Deputies became the first governing body in the world with a female majority: 61% of the lower house consist of women legislators.[xxxi] Underlying this achievement was a rapid advancement in Rwandan women's political empowerment, certainly, but also in health, education, and economic opportunity. In 2021, Rwanda ranked 7th on the Global Gender Gap Index.[xxxii]

The Rwanda case offers a template for a female empowerment strategy beyond simply increasing women's numeric representation in politics to effect substantive change at the institutional, candidate, and community levels.

1. Institutional-Level Interventions

Institutional interventions focus on addressing features of a country's legal and political framework that disproportionately undermine women candidates.

DRG actors should:

- **Support governing bodies to develop a gender mainstreaming approach.** Gender mainstreaming is a process

of incorporating gender equality into local and national legal frameworks. This would include ratifying and adhering to international gender equality agreements and treaties, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Declaration. It is vital to include gender equality advocates and grassroots organizers in political discussions to strengthen public consultative efforts.[xxxiii] Intervention activities may include creating committees or working groups on gender equality and establishing women's caucuses within legislative bodies.[xxxiv]

- **Work with political party leaders to adjust or reform gender quotas in a way that prioritizes quota size, placement mandates, and compliance mechanisms.** Quota size refers to the minimum number or percentage of women to be included on a party list.[xxxv] Placement mandates require parties to slot women candidates into relative list positions that give them a fair shot at being elected.[xxxvi] Compliance mechanisms refer to those mechanisms for monitoring a party's compliance to gender quota rules and imposing sanctions in the case of violations.[xxxvii] An effective enforcement mechanism might require electoral commissions to veto candidate lists that do not meet the quota's requirements, for example.[xxxviii]

  While quota size is the primary factor that determines a quota's effectiveness, the nature of the placement mandates and mechanisms to punish non-compliance may either weaken or strengthen a quota's impact on the number of women elected to office.[xxxix] For example, while Iraq's gender quota has a 25 percent minimum threshold, the placement mandate requires that one out of every three parliamentary positions are filled by women.[xl]

2. Candidate-Level Interventions

Candidate-level interventions focus on changing the cost-benefit calculus that women face when running for office, by reducing barriers and increasing benefits. Interventions at this level also focus on improving women's self-confidence as political actors.

DRG actors should:

- **Implement programs that simultaneously build the confidence of women candidates while showcasing their competence.** Even where gender quotas emphasize the importance of women's participation in politics, the aggregate numbers show that women are still underrepresented and lag men on several important metrics when it comes to participation and engagement. Women are less likely than men to stand for election, and this gender gap at the recruitment phase is largely a result of gender socialization, with females perceiving themselves as less qualified for political office.[xli,xlii,xliii] Candidate-level interventions have successfully addressed the "gendered psyche" that can discourage women from running. For example, a two-part survey experiment (i) gave survey respondents positive feedback on their results of a political knowledge test and (ii) provided respondents with a comparison of their results.[xliv] The treatment was effective in closing the gap in "self-reported interest in politics" between men and women respondents by providing positive, encouraging feedback to women, and showing men, through comparison feedback, that female respondents possessed political knowledge.[xlv]

- **Engage political parties at national and sub-national levels to develop strategies to support female candidates, ensuring they have access to campaign funding, political networks, and knowledge of the political process.** Political parties are a vital partner in candidate-level interventions. Even when parties do not prohibit women from running, their processes and practices may discourage women's candidacy.[xlvi] Research suggests that parties can play a vital role on both side of supply-and-demand: by inviting women to run for office and by encouraging voters to elect female candidates.[xlvii]

- **Incorporate intersectionality in intervention design.** Engaging women candidates, and tailoring interventions to increase their political participation, may be complicated by intersectional factors. While gender identity may be a salient organizing feature for participants in some cases, in others DRG practitioners may find that alternate sources of identity – ethnic, religious, local vs. national, etc. – may be more relevant. Moreover,

interventions focusing solely on gender can have the effect of widening the gap between women in different groups. Intersectional variations should inform intervention approach. For example, data from a survey on identity in Cambodia showed that women and men place comparable importance on most aspects of identity, but women are significantly more likely to identify with their gender and less likely than men to identify strongly with their ethnicity. Yet, the survey found inter-ethnic variation. Ethnic majority Khmer women, for instance, tended to identify less with their ethnic identity as compared to women from ethnic minority groups.[xlviii]

It is important to consider whether interventions to encourage women to run for office disproportionately benefit women with more economic resources or political capital, including women from political dynasties who leverage family connections to put themselves forward as political candidates.[xlix] In Sri Lanka, the selection of women candidates from political families has reinforced patronage politics.[l] Similarly, in the Philippines, women who enter politics through dynastic channels perpetuate existing political networks and ideologies instead of representing new policies and platforms.[li]

3. Community-Level Interventions

While DRG efforts tend to emphasize institutional- and candidate-level interventions, further efforts are needed to dismantle the social and cultural constraints to female participation at the community level. Gender-based differences in political engagement are context-specific, a product of social norms and cultural practices.[2] Legal and economic barriers to women's inclusion in politics are eroding in many places, and the last frontiers for women's inclusion are social and cultural, which are often most evident at the community level.

DRG actors should:

- **Expand beyond institutional- and candidate-level efforts to incorporate community-based interventions.** Local perceptions of women as political actors have a significant bearing on women's political engagement and success. Thus, local-level engagements – that bridge the divide between potential women candidates and their communities – are vital to sustainable female political empowerment. While interventions of this kind are relatively novel, there are examples. A community-based field experiment in Cambodia collected information about support for women's candidacy for local commune elections by soliciting nominations of women to run for office, then sharing this information with the relevant political party as a strategy for bridging the gaps between women and their communities, and between communities and the political parties that seek to represent them.[lii]

  Community-level interventions need not be explicitly political to improve women's inclusion in politics. In Rwanda, "homegrown" community interventions, such as community level fora for men and women to discuss issues relating to the community have advanced local-level gender equality.[liii] Similarly, interventions that facilitate women's participation in financial credit networks may create positive spillovers to political participation.[liv]

- **When designing interventions, consider the implications for women's physical and emotional safety to inform Do-No-Harm approaches.** Interventions to encourage women's empowerment can cause conflict when insensitive to cultural norms and practices. In the worst cases, this may manifest as local hostility directed toward program participants. Even seemingly innocuous programs that encourage women's financial inclusion, for example, can sometimes increase the rate of intimate partner violence or social exclusion.[lv]

- **Build the evidence base about what works in community-based efforts to expand female empowerment.** The development sector requires additional research that can inform culturally sensitive, community-based interventions that aim to expand women's political engagement. Such efforts should offer templates for stakeholder engagement with politicians and party officials, as well as successful models for partnership with local actors, elites and gatekeepers, and CSOs. For example, when engaging community stakeholders and gatekeepers (many of whom may be men), what strategies have appeared to be successful? Or, when developing a multi-level strategy for engaging and empowering women in politics, how have such efforts been successfully rolled out? What kinds of sequencing are important?

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