



EMPOWERING WOMEN IN COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

“Particularly in villages, women are afraid to speak in public and to run in elections” explains Irma Dolores Hernández, Head of the Women’s Office in the Guatemalan city of Concepción Chiquirichapa. Although most women around the world have the right to vote and to run for office, there is a large disparity between the number of women and men who are actively involved in politics. In Concepción Chiquirichapa, like in many places, managing public affairs is seen as a men’s issue and women’s participation is far from equal. Women like Irma Dolores Hernández are working to change that, and tremendous progress has been made in recent years. Today, around 22% of the world’s national parliamentarians and around 20% of local councillors are women, adding up to millions of elected representatives. However, beyond the numbers, significant barriers continue to constrain women from raising their voices and exercising political agency.

UNPACKING POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment is a change process through which people who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices – in other words, people who have been disempowered – gain the ability to make and influence choices themselves (Kabeer 1999). Empowerment includes both a personal, individual dimension, as well as a collective dimension when people come together to take action.

Women's political empowerment means enhancing women's voices, so that women can engage in influencing and making the decisions that affect their lives and the lives of others like them. It is the ability to speak up and speak out, exercising a right to engage in political decision-making processes and to exert authority. Political empowerment processes include strengthening capacities to analyse, organise and mobilise.

What do changes in women's political empowerment look like? They imply transformative changes in attitudes about women's roles in society, and specifically, in political participation and leadership. These include changes in the everyday conditions of women's lives, such as a lack of time to engage in public life due to significant and disproportionate time spent on care work within the household. As these attitudes are different in different places, envisaging such changes requires context-specific and

politically aware analysis. Furthermore, it is important to note that gender-based inequalities are intersected with other forms of inequality including based on class, caste, race, ethnicity, sexuality, location and so on, frequently exacerbating injustice.

WHY DO WE SUPPORT WOMEN'S

POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT?

We support women's political empowerment because it is a significant factor in enabling women's human rights. Women's political empowerment also contributes to strengthening the representativeness of political institutions – a democracy that fails to consider the interests of half of its population can hardly be considered representative. True representation means representation of the diversity of women in the population, and it is thus important to ensure that women from all sorts of backgrounds have a voice.

As women continue to be under-represented in political institutions at all levels (with several notable exceptions, including countries such as Rwanda and Bolivia), we aim to address this imbalance through supporting the empowerment of women leaders in institutions from the household and community level to national parliaments.



© Helvetas/Fajon Kraja

Speaking at a Municipal Council meeting in Shkodra, Albania.

The Women in Politics Network, Albania

While support for women in politics is something encouraged in all our local governance projects, the Women in Politics Network (WiPN) initiative is innovative in deciding to work directly with political parties. Rather than seeing political parties and politicisation as something to be worked around, the initiative works within the political system to facilitate women's political engagement. The WiPN was developed within the frame of the Decentralisation and Local Development Program (dlp), which aims to improve the quality of local governance and local service delivery in Albania.

The WiPN came into being prior to local elections in 2011, and strove to encourage women to stand for election as well as building their skills for electoral campaigning. One important principle stressed in this respect was, and is, neutrality – with equitable opportunities for women of different political parties. From capacity building, activities expanded to profile-raising and networking – creating regional and local forums of politically interested women and supportive men aiming to establish elements of a common cross-party women's platform. One member of the Municipal Council of Durrës, Jolanda Mustafaraj, is quoted as follows, "We came out of that forum with a clear objective in our head: we should support each other in order to include as many women as possible in the lists of the candidates and cooperate with each other..."

Various specific activities were devised to show how women politicians can make a difference. According to Dava Rusta, former member of the Municipal Council of Lezhë "Besides the awareness campaign, we achieved another goal: the increase of our reputation as councillors in the community. We made people say: these women do things, they achieve what they say." For example, WiPN members were able to influence council decisions in favour of easing the tax burden for women-headed households.

The WiPN has also established links with the (non-party political) Alliance of Parliamentary Women in the Albanian Parliament. This offers opportunities for joint initiatives in influencing policy at national level, for example on the new law on local government finances. Some members of the WiPN have "graduated" from being elected as local councillors in the first years of the initiative to subsequently being elected as national parliamentarians.

Furthermore, the issue is more than simply about numbers: it concerns women politicians' influence and impact both within their political parties and the legislative body to which they may be – or aspire to be – elected. Indeed, as Dava Rusta, former member of the Municipal Council of Lezhë, Albania tells us: "it's true that there are more women in the local councils, but usually their husbands decide for them."

OUR APPROACH

Our approach to women's political empowerment is multi-pronged. Our work in this field comprises a broad range of strategies to foster women's individual and collective capabilities to participate in and influence decision-making about issues that concern them. For example, in many contexts governments have sought to improve women's participation through means such as quotas and reserved seats in political institutions. We work with women leaders and potential leaders to take advantage of such opportunities. We also support women's leadership in community-based organisations, such as forest and water user groups, that make decisions about the use of important local resources.

We support a range of activities around training individual women – including the capabilities to effectively participate as candidates for elections and participate in local government committees, public consultations, community meetings and other initiatives. Indeed, in many contexts women political leaders initially build up their leadership experience and social capital in community based organisations. Our "[Speak Up](#)" leadership training program in Bangladesh, for example, trains women in a series of practical skills important for taking on a greater role in public affairs, including how to mobilise people, networking and communication skills, conflict resolution skills, debating skills and how to access and share public information. Our political empowerment support also builds on our initiatives in the field of women's economic empowerment, as economic independence is often a significant enabler of political voice. Finally, at the individual level, we work not only with women leaders, but also with men, particularly [supporting men who champion change in this field](#) and who work to raise awareness and change attitudes.

Towards the collective end of women's political empowerment, we support the strengthening of groups and networks that focus on local governance and citizen participation, as well as institutions such as women's caucuses in legislative bodies. An example of work on both the individual and collective dimensions of empowerment is the [Women in Politics Network in Albania](#): an exceptional case of women politicians of different political affiliations working together for a common cause.

LESSONS LEARNED

Beyond numbers, beyond token representation

While numbers are certainly powerful, and while quotas and related measures are important for ensuring a certain level of women's representation, they can sometimes be interpreted as the upper ceiling rather than the minimum. Furthermore, women elected representatives are sometimes restricted to working on certain issues that are considered "women's issues". While they may give these issues much-needed attention, women elected representatives should have the opportunities and capacities to engage on a full range of issues. When it comes to moving beyond numbers to actual influence, it is important to ensure that men also are part of the change initiative.

From trainings to social and political systems

While building women's capacities through trainings is an important contribution, this should be anchored within a comprehensive analysis of political systems and a vision for how these capacities can contribute to transformative change. This may imply working on issues of policy and legislation to ensure an enabling environment, addressing constraining social factors such as gender-based violence or unpaid care work, working with men and boys, and directly engaging political actors such as political parties.

Building alliances and social capital

Our experience shows that women who are interested in becoming active in politics are highly conscious of the need to build social capital, and do so in a systematic manner. This means searching out and engaging with a broad range of potential allies. Key here are women's organisations – a clear finding of recent global reviews on women, power and leadership, was that organisations supporting women play a key role in generating women leaders. For development organisations like HELVETAS, it is important to work with them – both in terms of effectiveness and sustainability.



© Helvetas / Simon B. Opladen

Participating in a Village Development Committee discussion in Rangamati district, Bangladesh.

REFERENCES

Read more about HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation's work on women's political empowerment, and gender and social equity more generally on our blog at: <http://blog.helvetas.org/category/gender-social-equity/>

- Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, Agency, and Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment. *Development and Change*, 30, 435-464. The Hague: Institute of Social Studies.
- O'Neil, T. and Domingo, P. (2015). *Women and Power: Overcoming Barriers to Leadership and Influence*. London: Overseas Development Institute.
- Rowlands, J. (1997). *Questioning Empowerment: Working with Women in Honduras*. Oxford: Oxfam.
- World Bank (2012). *World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development*. Washington: World Bank.

Authors



Sarah Byrne



Jane Carter