Created in 1889, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) is the international organization that brings together the representatives of parliaments of sovereign States. The IPU is the focal point for world-wide parliamentary dialogue and works for peace and cooperation among peoples with a view to strengthening representative institutions.

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IS PARLIAMENT OPEN TO WOMEN?
AN APPRAISAL

Conference for Chairpersons and Members of Parliamentary Bodies Dealing with Gender Equality

28–29 September 2009
Geneva
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Foreword

Ever since the first United Nations World Conference on Women, held in Mexico City thirty five years ago, the international community has been striving for the elimination of discrimination against women and for women’s economic and political empowerment. In 1995, at the Fourth World Conference on Women, the Beijing Plan of Action called on States to increase women’s participation in decision making and leadership and to ensure women’s full participation in political life. In 2000, the United Nations, recognizing the central role of women in development, included the empowerment of women as one of the Millennium Development Goals.

The world conferences on women have provided political visibility to women’s rights worldwide, yet there has not been a commensurate increase in the representation of women in parliaments. In 1995 women accounted for 15.9 percent of parliamentarians worldwide; by 2009 they accounted for 18.5 percent, hardly a mark of great progress.

The year 2010 represents a milestone since it is 15 years since the commitments and pledges were made in Beijing. Given that women’s access to and influence in parliament has been so frustratingly slow, can we really be satisfied with the progress achieved?

The Inter-Parliamentary Union adheres to the principle that democracy requires the inclusion of both men and women in decision making. It therefore works to promote a gender partnership by facilitating women’s involvement in parliament and political life. As part of its efforts to strengthen parliament’s capacity to promote gender equality, the IPU holds annual seminars for members of parliamentary bodies that deal with gender equality matters. The 2009 conference, *Is Parliament Open to Women? An Appraisal*, held in Geneva from 28–29 September, brought together around 80 parliamentarians from 38 countries.

The conference appraised progress made in terms of women’s parliamentary participation across the world since the Beijing Conference. The objective of the meeting was to answer the question: is parliament open to women? As the readers of this report will discover, the answers to this ostensibly simple question are multifaceted and diverse.

The IPU wishes to thank both the experts for their presentations and the participants for their enthusiastic interventions. The Seminar would not have been possible without the generous support of Irish Aid and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).

We hope that this report will serve as an inspiration to members of parliament in their efforts to integrate gender equality into every aspect of parliamentary life.

Anders B. Johnsson
Secretary General
Inter-Parliamentary Union
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Introduction

Campaign finance has been identified as a central component for achieving gender equity in the political realm. Despite the fact that women’s representation in national parliaments has significantly increased, the lack of economic resources is one of the main obstacles to achieving gender parity in parliaments.

This paper outlines the funding challenges that women face in electoral processes and highlights the successful finance strategies that increase women’s participation in parliaments. These strategies may not be universal in their application, but they provide valuable lessons for women candidates participating in parliamentary electoral processes.

Funding Challenges for Women

Women confront traditional gender inequities, which are reflected in their access to economic resources when participating in political activities. Women and men face different financial challenges at key moments of their political careers: deciding to run, winning the nomination and running election campaigns.

When making their decision to run, women feel hesitant in relation to various factors, such as investing family resources which they do not feel they individually own, asking for credit and risking their own or their family’s capital, raising funds on their own behalf, paying for domestic or care work they will not be able to do themselves, leaving their jobs and being able to re-enter the labour market should they not be elected.

The costs of nomination campaigns have proved crucial to women’s participation in electoral processes.

The performance of women in the early stages of campaigning will to a great extent define the number of women who run and are elected. Building reputation and recognition among constituents and party members requires constant work, as well as significant amounts of time money to be spent by potential candidates. Women have underlined the importance of “early money” at the start of their campaigns. To respond to these economic needs, women have implemented mechanisms to provide women candidates with early money, such as Political Action Committees (PACs) in the United States, for example EMILY’s List or the WISH List. Providing early money to women increases their chances of obtaining more money during the election campaign.

The importance of election campaign costs is context-specific. The relevance of economic resources varies for women at this stage depending on whether measures have been adopted that work in favour of women, such as public funding, quota systems, campaign limits on money and time, closed lists or proportional representation. In contexts where women are not supported by these measures, economic investment at the campaign stage becomes more important and relevant to the running of successful electoral candidacies.

Moreover, other social factors can represent a higher need to invest money in electoral campaigns. It is known that identity markers such as income level, race and ethnic group, level of education, dominant language skills, geographic location, sexual orientation, age, consanguine/family relations and phenotype count a great deal in women’s political participation throughout their careers, including whether a woman is well-positioned to acquire campaign funds during electoral campaigns.
Funding to Increase Women’s Participation in Parliament: Lessons Learned

Providing women with financial resources to participate in the electoral process is key to increasing their access to parliament. Nonetheless, access to campaign finance is only one of many components in getting women elected. A set of measures that would benefit women candidates include but are not limited to: (a) quota systems in the structures of political parties and their candidate lists; (b) quotas for those decision-making positions subject to either popular election or appointment; (c) adoption of legal mechanisms, such as national electoral laws or decrees, that include specific measures on campaign finance for women, and on gender equality; and (d) training for women candidates to engage in fundraising and to strategically manage their campaign resources.

The nature of the electoral system also plays a role in women’s access to financial resources within their parties, since they may or may not be favourable to women candidates. An important distinction should be noted in this regard between the Single Member Plurality systems and the Proportional Representation systems. In the former, women are confronted by a candidate selection process in a winner-takes-all situation in which they will have to compete individually to gather their own resources, mainly private funding. In the latter, a woman candidate might be regarded as one among many team members whose individual expectations to generate resources are lower and whose campaign expenses are usually taken care of by their party. Furthermore, closed lists rather than open lists tend to favour women since they guarantee that women will not have to compete against men or women within their own party.

Women have also gained advantages from measures taken in relation to public funding and setting limits on campaign resources and campaign time periods. In general, women candidates agree that public funding helps their candidacies. Nonetheless, they note that public funding alone may not be sufficient to promote women candidates – since they often have less power within their political parties, which control the allocation of funds. Unless internal mechanisms are set up within the political parties to control equal access to public resources, powerful groups, which are most frequently male-dominated groups, could end up receiving most of the resources.

The Center for Legislative Development in the Philippines and the UNDP-Asia Pacific Gender Equality Network suggest that economic limits should be applied to every national and local election campaign, as well as to donations used for “party building”, voter registration, membership campaigns and payments to party-related “think tanks”. For example, in Mexico the law limits the amount of contributions from non-governmental organizations and bars funding from foreign citizens, religious officials and private businesses. Sanctions include economic penalties and fines, suspension of public funding for political parties or the revocation of a party’s registration. Countries with contribution limits in 1995 included India, Taiwan, Japan, Israel, Russia, Mexico, Brazil, France, Italy, Spain, Turkey and the United States.

Accountability and transparency are required in campaign finances to guarantee democratic electoral processes and reduce gender imbalances. Electoral monitoring bodies require accountability mechanisms to ensure that gender equality measures are being implemented correctly, especially as they relate to allocating direct and indirect financial resources to women candidates.

Denmark, New Zealand and the United States have adopted “reporting of campaign fund” mechanisms, where sources of funding are disclosed and there is public reporting of accounts by candidates, political committees and political parties. In Denmark, parties are required to submit a list of all donors’ contributions. In New Zealand, every registered party is required by law to have the financial returns of the party audited. At the federal level in the United States, campaign committees, including parties and PACs, must present the Federal Election Commission with quarterly reports on funds raised and spent.

Good Practices

The following are examples of various strategies that have been successful in increasing women’s political participation in parliaments:

The Caribbean

- In Haiti, the electoral law permits a party’s candidates discounted registration fees if their lists include a minimum percentage of women registered. Candidates must pay a filing fee, the amount of which depends on the position being contested.
If the candidate is not from a political party, the filing fee increases tenfold. Conversely, the filing fee is reduced by two-thirds for women candidates representing political parties. At least 30 percent of the candidates from the political party must be women in order to receive this discount.8

- In Suriname and Guyana, where a system of proportional representation is in place, small parties are able to obtain more funding than is available in countries operating without such a system. This is important because in smaller parties women have to be ranked near the top in order to have a good chance of winning a seat.

Africa

- Cowan is an association founded in Nigeria in 1982 as a response to the perceived marginalization of women and widespread conditions of abject poverty, especially in the rural communities. Cowan is active in 32 states in the country and has at least 260,000 registered members. It promotes traditional saving schemes and has developed African Traditional Responsive Banking. This has allowed women in politics to have access to loans from Cowan during the campaign in order to meet with their male counterparts to enable equal participation in decision making. This strategy has had positive and sustained results mainly at the local level where rural women have been elected.

- South Africa introduced a women’s budget which provides financial incentives to women’s political projects. These incentives may be targeted directly at women’s representation by tying the public funding of political parties to the number of elected women legislators.

- In the 2008 elections in Zimbabwe, women activists from The Women in Politics Support Unit together with The Feminist Political Education Project bundled financial support to selected candidates from the four major political parties contesting the election. Despite the chaotic political situation in the country and the lack of funding that women accessed, an international donor supported their initiative.

Europe

- In the Nordic countries, which have high numbers of women in their parliaments, political parties receive a state subsidy or other forms of assistance, such as free and equal broadcasting time on television and radio for campaigns or party-related activities such as research.7

- France has amended its Constitution to require that 50 percent of all candidates must be women. Political parties that do not comply face financial sanctions. This mechanism has been effective with small parties that have limited resources. Larger parties with more abundant resources are inclined to pay the fines and break this constitutional rule.

- In Italy, political parties receive an allotted subsidy for initiatives to promote women’s participation. The amount is equal to at least 5 percent of the electoral funding received.

- Indirect resources for women’s campaigns can be provided by parties or by national, federal or local governments allocating financial resources for promoting gender equity or covering the operating costs of gender equity mechanisms in a political party. In Spain, the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE, Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party) has a Gender Equality Office which coordinates different activities with women candidates and supports them in their governmental activities.

Latin America

- Some political parties in Costa Rica have internal regulations that designate financial resources for women’s activities within parties and electoral processes. The national law that promotes social equity, Ley de Promoción de la Igualdad Social, sanctioned in 1990, triggered innovative measures within a number of parties. The statutes of Liberación Nacional (article 171), Movimiento Libertario (article 72), Partido Acción Ciudadana (article 37) and Partido Unidad Social Cristiana (article 52) designate financial resources for training activities for women candidates.

- Panama’s electoral law was reformed in 2002 to establish subsidies for political parties, 25 percent of which is earmarked for training activities and 10 percent of which is for women’s training workshops and activities.10 El Partido Arnulfista went further, designating in its internal statutes that 30 percent of the state subsidies should be for women’s political training. In order to achieve the goal stated in the electoral law, women may use these resources in forums and seminars, and
at congresses and other training activities that promote gender equity.\textsuperscript{11}  

- In Nicaragua, the women’s commission of the Partido Liberal Constitucionalista has created a leadership school for women, and the Partido Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional has created mechanisms to work with women’s organizations to train women and organize electoral activities.  

- In Brazil, a legislative initiative states that women must account for at least 30 percent of the candidates that a party fields. Under the current law a party must offer women 30 percent of the candidacies, but is not obliged to actually field them in winnable positions. Ten percent of parties’ advertising and five percent of the public campaign funds they receive must be used to promote women and their professional training.  

North America  

- Canada’s experience is of measures adopted in electoral legislation. These advances have been traced to the Canada Elections Act of 1974,\textsuperscript{12} which provides for childcare expenses to be included in the personal expenses of a candidate for election. The Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing in Canada noted that the cost of childcare imposes an unequal burden on many women seeking elected office and proposed that childcare is a necessary expense in seeking nomination as a candidate which should be considered a legitimate tax deduction.\textsuperscript{13} In addition, the New Democratic Party has implemented a financial assistance programme in which women and candidates from minority ethnic communities are eligible for reimbursement for childcare expenses incurred in seeking a nomination, travel costs in geographically large constituencies and the costs incurred in seeking a nomination in areas where a New Democratic Party incumbent is retiring. The party also funds three times a much election expenses for women and minority ethnic candidates so as to take advantage of generous tax credit afforded to parties.\textsuperscript{14}  

- Women’s organizations in the United States have established PACs to directly finance women. PACs are organizations that solicit contributions from individuals and make contributions to candidates. Many PACs are affiliated with businesses, trade unions or other organizations, but some – known as non-affiliated PACs – are independent of any association with another organization. One distinct subcategory of PAC is women’s PACs, which contribute money only to women candidates. This modality has become one of the most successful methods for financing women with early money, especially within the Democratic Party. Each election year they are able to finance more women candidates and get more women elected to the US Congress.

Recommendations  

What women in parliaments can do  

- National legislation on political campaign finance and party expenditure should coincide with international conventions and agreements that promote gender equity in political participation, such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Beijing Platform of Action, and the Millennium Development Goals. In the Americas, legislation should coincide with the principles of the Summits of the Americas 2001 Declaration of Quebec, 2004 Declaration of Nuevo León and 2007 Quito Consensus.  

- As parliaments are responsible for preventing all forms of gender discrimination, any policy or national plan formulation process concerning political participation should include a gender-sensitive finance component that secures the presence of women candidates and decision-makers, as well as their training and a system of monitoring.  

- Effective measures to support women’s election, such as legislation in favour of public funding, limits to contributions and expenditure in nomination and election campaigns, and quotas in political parties or cabinets, should be considered and secured in constitutional or legislative reform.  

- Wherever public funding of political parties exists, including government subsidies, legislation should establish incentives to support women candidates. For example, the amount of public funding or reimbursement of election campaign expenses should be linked to the percentage of women candidates put forward by each party and/or elected to parliament.\textsuperscript{15}
States should maintain their commitment to women’s political participation at a minimum percentage of 30%, as outlined in the Beijing Platform of Action.

What women in political parties can do

- A gender equity policy should be included in the statutes of political parties, ensuring that women candidates can benefit from an equitable internal distribution of resources. Parties should thus more equitably support the promotion of women running as party candidates, contribute towards women’s nomination processes, during which women often require resources to establish a political reputation both inside and outside their parties, and contribute towards electoral processes.
- Parties committed to gender equality should: ensure equal access to income resources for women and men, designate a specific amount of resources for women candidates as an affirmative action and incorporate gender equality criteria into parties’ internal transparency and accountability mechanisms.
- Establishing an effective and functional women’s caucus would empower women candidates and help to ensure equal access to the party’s resources, guaranteeing that financial management has a gender perspective.
- Strategizing with women from other parties would be beneficial to all women candidates and has proved an effective method for institutionalizing means for securing financial resources across parties.

Endnotes

1 This document is based on research by the author financed by the Women’s Parliament Forum, the Network of NGOs of Trinidad and Tobago for the Advancement of Women, the United Nations Democracy Fund and the Women’s Environment and Development Organization.
4 Ballington (note 3); Author interview, Lesley Abdela, Sheevolution, United kingdom, 29 August 2007.
5 Author interview, Kristín Sample, International IDEA, Perú, 1 August 2007.
7 See note 6.
9 See note 6.
10 The electoral law from 1997 was modified through Ley 60/2002, ordinal c., numeral 4, article69.
12 Ballington (note 3). p. 162.

Additional Reading

National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), Global Programs for Women’s Participation <www.ndi.org/globalp/women/women.asp>.