# Roundtable
# WOMEN IN POLITICS: Women's Political Effectiveness

**Thursday 19 March 2009**
**Jubilee Room, Westminster, London**

## Summary of the Meeting

The roundtable began with Andrea Cornwall and Helen O'Connell providing an introduction to its aims and an overview of both the Pathways of Women's Empowerment programme and One World Action's More Women More Power campaign. The More Women More Power campaign seeks to get 50 per cent or more women in all kinds, and at all levels, of political position. Without this women's rights are not secure and their needs may not be addressed. Article 7 of CEDAW, which was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979, obliges states to remove discrimination in public and political life, but thirty years on and this still has not been successfully achieved.

*Session 1: Challenges Facing Women in Politics*

In this session, Sarah Childs a researcher from Bristol University and Faustace Chirwa from the Malawi National Women's Assembly outlined the challenges facing women in entering politics. From the UK perspective, there is a lot which could be learnt from developing countries. The UK is a poor 60th in the world ranking on numbers of women in politics with Rwanda topping the list. Sarah outlined various factors and structures that impact on how successful women are in getting into politics. These include: the extent to which the state is democratic; the number of political parties; whether quotas are in place; and the women's vote. While quotas on their own are not sufficient in getting women into political office, they can provide a significant initial boost in increasing numbers – as in the case of Latin America – which can then be built upon with more sustaining measures. There has only been significant improvement in the numbers of women in the UK parliament since the Labour Party instigated a quota system for their candidate selection in 1997.

Time and money were factors which continually came up during the roundtable – women need more economic power. However, in the UK, a problem also concerned not being picked for the right seat. One suggestion to improve their chances would be if there were term limits for MPs. There is a consensus that there is enough training for women already in the UK but perhaps the selectors need some training. In Sub-Saharan Africa there has been a lot of

training but the leading parties will not nominate women so civil society organisations need to find a way to work with the parties to increase female candidate selection.

In Malawi, women faced significant negative cultural practices and religious beliefs. Many of these concerned women's perceived place as being in the home and their stereotyped roles as mother and carer. Men are represented as superior and more fitted for public roles. Added to these are the impediments of campaigning for political office. Violence and character assassination are rife. Men already occupy the higher positions and are unwilling to provide space for women. Women are discouraged and do not possess enough resources. Political will is not implemented. The President championed 50/50 but when it came to the primaries there was silence. Women also face educational constraints. The literacy rate for women in Malawi is 49% compared to 74% for men. The big challenge is dealing with the root cause, empowering girl children and providing access to information.

Despite these negatives some gains have been made in Malawi. More women are holding leadership positions on merit – 2%. More women are in businesses. More women have economic power. The number of women in politics has increased from 5% in 1994 to 14% now and they hope to go beyond the 30% mark.

There is a concern that during this global recession we might see a backsliding to traditional gender norms - the presumption being that men do economics better than women. There is also a danger that the issues will be completely about the economy and the overarching focus will shift the debate. It is dangerous territory to say that women are better at this or that than men and are non-corrupt because this constrains them as only being in power for those reasons. We should focus instead on justice and in order to be fairly representative we need more women politicians. We also have to be careful about saying we only want women who agree with us. We should want equality in all parties – we need diversity.

*Session 2: How Can Women be Effective in Politics? Learning from experience: party and other parliamentary support systems, including training and mentoring, and international support mechanism*

In this session, case studies were presented from Egypt (Farkhounda Hassan), Sierra Leone (Hussainatu Abdullah), Bangladesh (Zarina Rahman Khan) and the UK (Jennette Arnold) on various parliamentary support systems which have been initiated. The session was preceded by a short presentation from Emily Thornberry MP who emphasised the importance of strong friendships and support networks in being effective as a MP.

Farkhounda Hassan, the Secretary General of the National Council of Women in Egypt, gave details of a two year programme, supported by UNDP and UNIFEM, which provided training to women MPs. The programme is orientated practically and theoretically with training courses and retreats and lectures led by all kinds of parliamentarians. The women have learnt basic tools, the functions of parliament, oversight and how to achieve better representation. They have learnt how to draft constitutional phrases and made an excellent contribution to the amendment of the constitution.

In Sierra Leone the first multi party elections took place in 1996. There were 5 women out of 80 elected in 1996. In 2002 this rose to 18 or 14.5 per cent. This could be attributed to the 50/50 Group providing training for women. In order to be effective women need to learn the rules of government. In a non-democratic tradition an enabling environment needs to be created. There are a number of ongoing initiatives to focus on getting women into politics. Periodic outreach programmes are conducted with constituencies. USAID and DFID have organised training of women candidates in campaigning, but training is needed on how to engage in public spaces to effect change. Often women receive training and representation increases, but nothing is done after that. Women need to be taught how to use the rules.

In Bangladesh there have been important strides in education, employment and women in political movements. The quota system was used in the civil service but stayed at the bottom levels and did not work well. There are 45 seats reserved for women in parliament but these have to be filled by nomination by the party which wins, not by election. As a result of this, these women lack legitimacy and don't have constituency back up. There is a lack of confidence in the women and as they don't have the right to be directly elected they don't get the higher positions in parliament. There has been some training but it has not been focused but has helped with the challenges. The social and cultural impediments are gradually giving way and people are accepting women in politics.

At the local level in Bangladesh, in 1997, over 40,000 women competed in the elections and 15,000 got elected. Women are staying in for more than one term and are overachieving in places where men were sometimes corrupt. Voters are now voting for women. This is creating a model that could work at the national level. However, can this increase in numbers at the local level equate to an increase at the national level – or are these different kinds of women? Women do have more power at the local level where a difference can be made. On the job training at this level is very important. There are different levels of local government in Bangladesh and they are seeing more women graduating from one level to another. They are leaving the reserve seats and competing in general seats to give them more flexibility.

The people have got an ID card for the first time and it has allowed rural women to have an identity and they are now proud to vote. A simple ID card with their photo has empowered them. This was part of the electoral reform carried out when Bangladesh didn't have an elected government in power.

Jennette Arnold is the Chair for the London Assembly which has a membership of 8 people of which there are 4 women and 4 men. Jennette came into politics because of the injustice due to economic power and that those who have less freedom sometimes experience more violence. More women are needed in public spaces and political office in order to shift the situation. It is easy to get lost in the party system and spend too much time with the party and not with women's groups and other organisations. Parliament can be the end destination, but it is not necessarily the place that all women should aspire to. Women should be at the local and street level as well.

The media is important and plays a key role in the UK in getting elected. You have to know how to use them. Women politicians are treated differently in the media. The media has played an important role in facilitating change in Bangladesh as well. The media has been free for some time and there are a lot of talk shows on television which reach the grassroots. There has been a pressure within political parties to look at women's issues. Generally the media has played a positive role in promoting women's issues.

Creating alliances with men can be important and the starting point is to find men who are supportive. Nyambura Ngugi (UNIFEM) commented that it would be useful to see how and if women parliamentarians can get together on one issue, whatever the political party and working with men can neutralise some of the criticisms. Cristina Buarque (the State Secretary for Women's Policies for Pernambuco, Brazil) said that it is important to understand that these alliances are made within spaces of power. We should not just be 'adding women and stir' but actually transforming. One of the issues with getting women to continue with their training in Egypt was that they didn't want to be identified as '*female* MPs' – just 'MPs'.

*Session 3: How Can Women be Effective in Politics? Learning from experience: CSO support systems which contribute to women's efficacy e.g. networking linkages, campaigns, constituency building, training*

In this session we heard from Rollen Mukanda (Zambia), Mary Musa (Sierra Leone), Cristina Buarque (Brazil) and Nyambura Ngugi (Kenya) on various initiatives undertaken by women's networks to contribute to women's parliamentary efficacy.

In Zambia there are various training programmes available including a programme of women's leadership for women who aspire to be in parliament which takes them through the process of how to look for funds; and a programme for those women who haven't been successful in helping to prepare them for the next election. Women are competing against men who have been in parliament for at least four terms, so the objective is to get women to stay for longer to achieve change. The Zambia National Women's Lobby tries to use the media to profile women who have excelled. There is a programme to provide women MPs with internet research prior to debates and also with interns. They also try to source funding for women as it makes a difference in their campaigning.

In Sierra Leone, women have taken a more active part in politics since the end of the war. As mentioned before, the 50/50 group are involved in training women in political processes such as lobbying. They are helping to create an enabling environment at the national and other levels. ActionAid, DFID and OXFAM are also involved in networks which are helping women with campaigning and lobbying the government to get into the cabinet. They have been unsuccessful so far with only three women in the cabinet and then one was dropped. The 50/50 group have also given financial support. Money is crucial to win elections – especially in Africa. They show women how to raise funds and put together campaigns. They are providing training at the community level as well.

In Brazil, a feminist schools project was constructed to teach women politics so they are equipped for office. There are different schools for different levels. The feminist schools are for members of any political party. This whole initiative has created a lot of discussion in feminist movements and political parties. Experience shows that where investment happens numbers of women in politics rise, but the right kind of investment needs to be identified. Initially a lot of women considered politics dirty and didn't want to get involved. But this is changing.

Nyambura Ngugi gave an example of where civil society and women parliamentarians worked together in Kenya on the Sexual Offences Act. The women MPs could not name and shame the men who were not supporting the Bill so they relied on civil society to take a stance against them. Women's groups mobilised a constituency which went a long way to helping women parliamentarians to get the Act passed. This was a meeting of minds – but there are examples of where they don't mesh.

How do you forge cross-party links? In some countries it works, for example Kenya where having 22 women in parliament is a major achievement and it is not difficult to get them to

work together across party lines. But to get women MPs together on a joint agenda can be difficult. You need to identify a common interest, something that men can agree on as well, and bring together legal aid, humanitarians and parliamentarians. There was some discussion on how to create a constituency for women and whether this should be for women or for gender equality. It was felt that women can break the gap between political parties, but they need to identify by the issues they need to look at and not by political parties. Nyambura noted that Women Direct had attempted a kind of constituency in the Horn of Africa but unfortunately this had folded. You need to find an issue that requires an original response and can translate into issues for election.

There are also issues of which women? Shirin Rai, a researcher from the University of Warwick, noted that there are instances of the right wing 'hijacking' gender equality. We say we want to be represented by women – but which women?

Communication between civil society and politicians was also noted as being important. There should be a back and forth dialogue.

Issues of ability can also be very sensitive. You cannot always know who is going to be a strong candidate, but with limited resources do you back a weaker candidate? It is subjective and context specific, but it can be a tricky decision. Shirin Rai noted that power has its own dynamic and some women will run with the ball and make the most of what they have. There is also the danger of excluding those who are most marginalised if we are more selective.

*Session 4: Supporting women's social and political empowerment: Towards a strategy to support and promote women's political participation*

In this last session we summarised issues which had been brought up within the roundtable and started looking at strategies to support women's political participation. Anita Vandenbeld from iknow Politics emphasised networking as one of the most important strategies. Providing role models is also important and we should profile women who have been successful and uncover the paths they have taken.

Youth strategies were also considered important. In Malawi, Faustace said that the girl child needed to be empowered. And in the UK we have a youth council and youth parliament, but we need to consider what the gender representation is at that level and what are we communicating to young people: are we saying political voice is important or just political office?

Training as an issue came up a lot, but the training needs to be continual, not just at election time. It sometimes comes too late, just a few months before elections when politicians are unable to use it. We also need to think about what kind of training.

Partnership within politics was also mentioned. Men should make more of a fuss about inequity in politics. Cristina Buarque noted it is much easier to get money to work on violence and health than power. We need strategies of dealing with men. To address poverty, we need to address power. A more fundamental return to basic principles is needed.

Zarina Rahman Khan (BRAC University) said that people need to be included within the political processes. This brings about cleaner and fairer elections and institutional and legal reforms. Institutions need to build capacities to promote networking amongst representatives. Association building at the national and international level is important.

Nyambura Ngugi said that we need to bring party politics into the broader range of justice. Gender is often seen as a small programme on the side, divorced from democratic rights issues – how do we get this into the broader agenda? We need to draw in a wider range of actors and legislation which regulates political parties. It may seem shaky to support quotas but they are a way of creating equality. Interventions need to consolidate on what is working and not jump from one thing to the next. We need to look at how we can relate these things to different contexts – what do we know that is easily translated to lots of places?

*Summary – Next Steps?*

The objectives of the meeting were:

- To explore and highlight examples of support and training which are effective;
- To identify key areas for international development co-operation support;
- To encourage DFID to develop a strategy for promoting and supporting women's political participation;
- To encourage DFID to allocate more resources to programmes which promote and support women's political participation

Kemi Williams, Senior Gender Adviser for DFID, said that there was an opportunity at present as DFID were in the process of putting together a new White Paper to influence work on women in a more exciting way. However, as donors cannot get involved in party politics, their role needs to be carefully thought out.

The meeting showed that the promotion of justice was an important issue and we need to bring gender within the broader range of justice issues rather than as a small programme on the side as it often is. Training is also important and many NGOs are doing essential work in this area. This needs to be continued with support for training women in sustainability within politics and how to be effective once you are voted in. Training in how to operate within these political spaces such as what is happening in Brazil and Egypt is essential. Timing of the training is also critical.

Access to resources is an essential ingredient to get women into political office, so support to civil society groups which help in locating funding is critical. We also need to support groups which work with parties to improve their candidate selection. Getting in at the local level has proved to be important in Bangladesh and has provided very useful 'on the job training', so attention needs to be paid to this area.

Another important point made was the part which media plays. In the UK it has mixed results, but in Bangladesh, increased exposure for women played a positive role. In other research carried out by the Pathways programme on the Bangladesh media, research participants from poor villages talked about the importance to them of the television showing women in non-traditional and more positive roles. So working with the media to profile women who have excelled in political positions is an important step.

Finally, a longer term measure which came out from the meeting is empowering the girl child. Continued support to education is needed and representations of women's roles need to change.

**Participant List**

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|---|---|
| Andrea Cornwall | A.Cornwall@ids.ac.uk |
| Anita Vandenbeld | avandenbeld@iknowpolitics.org |
| Anjana Patel | anjana.patel@harrow.gov.uk |
| Bethan Cobley | bcobley@oneworldaction.org |
| Cristina Buarque | cristibuarque@uol.com.br |
| Elin Lindhagen | E.Lindhagen@ids.ac.uk |
| Elizabeth | esetos@gmail.com |
| Emily Thornberry | emilythornberrymp@parliament.uk |
| Evis Progonati | evisprogonati@gmail.com |
| Farkhounda Hassan | hoda_e@ncwegypt.com |
| Faustace Chirwa | faustacechirwa@yahoo.com |
| Felicity Dennistoun | felicity@dennistoun.info |
| Felicity Manson | fmanson-visram@oneworldaction.org |
| Gary Edwards | G.Edwards@ids.ac.uk |
| Graham Bennett | gbennett@oneworldaction.org |
| Helen O'Connell | hoconnell@oneworldaction.org |
| Hussainatu Abdullah | hussainatu@gmail.com |
| Indra Adnan | indra@thedowningstreetproject.com |
| Jennette Arnold | jennette.arnold@london.gov.uk |
| Jenny Edwards | J.Edwards@ids.ac.uk |
| Kemi Williams | K-Williams@dfid.gov.uk |
| Laura Turquet | Laura.Turquet@actionaid.org |
| Lee Chalmers | lee@thedowningstreetproject.com |
| Marcie Buxton | marciebuxton@mac.com |
| Mariz Tados | M.Tadros@ids.ac.uk |
| Mark Agnew | Mark.Agnew@Hackney.gov.uk |
| Mary Musa | shrmusa@yahoo.com |
| Moniza Inam | moniza.inam@dawn.com |
| Nyambura Ngugi | nyambura.ngugi@unifem.org |
| Rollen Mukanda | nawamukanda@yahoo.com |
| Rosalie Callway | rosalie.callway@lga.gov.uk |
| Rumbidzai Kandawasvika-Nhundu | r.kandawasvika-nhundu@idea.int |
| Sarah Childs | S.Childs@bristol.ac.uk |
| Shirin Rai | shirin.rai@warwick.ac.uk |
| Tara Brace-John | tbrace-john@oneworldaction.org |
| Wendy Harcourt | wendyh@sidint.org |
| Wendy Ngoma | wngoma@oneworldaction.org |
| Zarina Rahman Khan | rkzarina@yahoo.com |
| Zohra Khan | zkhan@oneworldaction.org |