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# **Women Engaging Politically: Beyond Magic Bullets and Motorways**

**Mariz Tadros**

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Photos: Page 3: Creuza Oliveira, a domestic worker rights activist who has campaigned for election in Salvador, photo: Fernanda Capibaribe. Page 8: Woman Local Councillor from Bangladesh in Pathways South Asia Workshop, photo: Tessa Lewin.



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# Women Engaging Politically: Beyond Magic Bullets and Motorways

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This paper adopts an upside-down approach to women's political empowerment. While the number of women we need to get into legislatures has often assumed centre stage, this paper takes women's pathways as its starting point. In so doing, it challenges the narrow conception of women's political engagement as occupying formal positions and seeks to present a more nuanced perspective on the spaces, relationships and ways of working that influence power hierarchies and dynamics. The paper's aims are two-fold. First, through a multi-country case study, the paper explores the possibilities and limitations of mainstream approaches such as quotas to strengthening women's access to political power. Second, it seeks to broaden the debate by practically engaging with the question of how we can support women's political leadership in ways that speak to women's realities in very concrete ways.

By 2006, around 40 countries had introduced quotas for women in elections to national parliaments, either by means of constitutional amendment or changing electoral laws (legal quotas). In more than 50 countries major political parties have voluntarily set out quota provisions in their own statutes (party quotas) (IDEA et al. 2010).

Quotas are effective in redressing the numerical gender imbalance between men and women in parliament. Out of the top 26 countries with the highest gender equal ratios of representation, 20 have quota systems in place (Ballington 2010). The relative ease with which it is possible to measure progress has increased the popularity of the quota as a transformative mechanism.

Women's increased representation in legislatures has also moved to centre stage in development. Political representation serves both as a proxy for women's empowerment and a goal in itself. The Millennium Development Goal 3 sets the 'proportion of seats held by women in national parliament' as one of the key indicators for its achievement of gender equality (UN 2006). According to the International Parliamentary Union (IPU), women constitute 19.3 per cent of Members of Parliament (MPs) for both houses globally. The lowest percentages are for the Arab states (11.4 per cent) followed closely by the Pacific (12.4 per cent). The rest of the world is within the 18-22 per cent range, excluding the Nordic countries (42.1 per cent). Quotas have been enthusiastically advocated as the fast track

means through which gender inequalities in parliament are redressed.

## **Pathways research into women's pathways to political power**

Research led by the Pathways of Women's Empowerment Consortium sought to examine two questions. Firstly, what is the transformative potential of quotas? Secondly, to what extent should a focus on affirmative action in legislatures continue to be the principle policy focus for supporting women's political empowerment?

We sought to study this because when quotas became the key policy priority endorsed by the international community (among donors, gender advocates and the development community more broadly), it had a very strong impact on the policy environment in which Pathways worked. We noticed this was a universal trend, stretching from Asia to Africa, Latin America to the Middle East. Pathways scholars and activists detected on a country level that while quotas were all the rage, they were still being implemented with a top-down approach to engaging with women's realities. An upside-down view of women's political empowerment requires that our starting point is to ask how do women become politically engaged? What political, social, economic dynamics obstruct or facilitate their pathways to political power? What kinds of relationships enable or undermine women's ability to assume

## Key findings

Evidence from country case studies in Ghana, Egypt, Sierra Leone, Bangladesh, India, Brazil, Costa Rica, Sudan and beyond suggests the following:

- Quotas in and of themselves are not a magic bullet to women's political empowerment.
- The effectiveness of quotas is conditional not just on the type of quota chosen and the kind of electoral system in place but also on the configuration of power of local political actors.
- Most importantly, we need to broaden debates on what political empowerment is, what political leadership looks like, and what are the possible pathways that offer in-roads to power.

leadership? Such an upside-down approach to women's political empowerment necessitated a different methodological approach, one that was based on following closely, the paths trodden through these women's eyes and experiences. For each country, different methods were adopted, however, they all had a strong ethnographic nuance to them, whether it was through capturing women councillors engagement in their respective communities on video (Ghana) or through accompanying women on their campaign trails before the parliamentary elections (Egypt).

## Seven key policy messages

We present seven key policy messages from this research into women's political empowerment. The first four are specifically associated with the use of quotas as a tool for women's political empowerment. The last three are concerned with broadening the terms of engagement with 'what' women's political empowerment should look like and 'how' it might best be achieved. These policy messages are not a checklist or a blueprint for how to empower women politically. They serve as points of departure for further debate.

1. No technical formula can be universally applied to ensure the perfect quota. The type of electoral system and a number of other context-specific factors come into play.
2. Quotas should not be used as a proxy for a country's democratisation credentials or its commitment to gender-sensitive social justice.
3. Policymakers need to be more discerning about the kind of critical mass of women they would like to see in legislatures. Strategic support is needed for the actors, alliances and coalitions who strengthen women to advocate a gender and social justice agenda, rather than a mass that favours laws and policies antithetical to women's empowerment.
4. Women's collective action around gender equality is critical. Women's movements' abilities to link with networks and build alliances with other political forces should be strengthened. They need support to influence the design and implementation of the quota, and hold both governments and competing political forces accountable for delivering on their promises of supporting women in politics.
5. Efforts to support women's political empowerment should strive to strengthen their ability to build constituencies.
6. A women's political trajectory should be seen as a process and not a moment that begins and ends with a project or election cycle. Concepts and support for women's political empowerment need to be better tailored to women's ongoing networks of support and influence and less on pre-election moments or international 'blueprints'.
7. A policy shift is required from the current focus almost exclusively on getting women into legislatures to providing women opportunities for political apprenticeship, and ultimately women's leadership.

## Key Message One

**No technical formula can be universally applied to ensure the perfect quota. The type of electoral system and a number of other context-specific factors come into play.**

In terms of quotas and electoral systems, the proportional party list system is lauded as the most effective for creating enabling conditions for women to compete in politics. The strength of this system is that it requires political parties to endorse women candidates, provided they are well-placed on the list. Rwanda, Sweden and Costa Rica provide some of the best cases of gender quotas, all of them having achieved a very high level of representation of women. But they also represent three different types of electoral gender quota.

In Rwanda, 56.3 per cent of parliamentarians are women, making it the number one in the world for women's political representation. Rwanda has reserved seats, increasingly based on elections. Two women must be elected from each district. In Sweden, 47.3 per cent of parliamentarians are women, making it number two in the world. Sweden has voluntary quotas for party candidate lists. Parties on the left practice 'every second a woman' which means a 50 per cent voluntary party quota for candidate lists. Right leaning parties do not have quota rules, but to a large extent also alternate male and female candidates on their lists. Costa Rica has a legislated candidate quota of 40 per cent for all parties. In the most recent elections of 2010, women won 57 seats, thus representing 38.6 per cent of parliament.

The diversity of these contexts, electoral systems and types of quota bears a strong policy message: there are no technical 'fix-it' solutions for arriving at the perfect type of quota to create the most enabling conditions for women to claim political power. Mechanisms for enforcing quotas and ensuring accountability need to be negotiated within local realities in order to address historical and political nuances and any legal loopholes that may arise. For such processes to work on the ground, the policy focus should be on getting the institutional mechanisms right, and crucially on strengthening the capacities of local non-partisan actors to hold those in power accountable.

Experiences of Brazil (Box 1) and Costa Rica (Box 2) suggests that if sanctions, such as making the party pay substantial fines or disqualifying them from running if they do not meet the minimum criteria, are to be highly effective, they will need to be introduced in tandem with other policies. This might include setting a ceiling for election



### Box 1 Brazil's quota system

Araújo's study of affirmative action in Brazil shows how the quota system improved women's representation when it was first applied, but then reached a plateau. The law stated there should be a minimum of 30 per cent per men and 30 per cent per women of the total number of candidates. Yet it also stated that the lists for each party could be up to 150 per cent in relation to the number of seats available for each state. Hence the quota is calculated not on the actual list of candidates, but on the potential list. Araújo points out in her study that since parties do not have that many candidates, 30 per cent of the seats are left vacant for women but they rarely fill them. The impact of this is that the quota has had a maximum ceiling effect rather than a multiplier effect on increasing women's representation in parliament. In 2006, the numbers of women candidates and women elected remained about the same as they were in 2002. (Araújo 2010)

campaign financing and punishing those who violate it. This is likely to impact many women whose financial resources tend to be more limited, but also have positive equity implications for society as a whole, if implemented well. Other sanctions likely to have a positive impact apply to the use of violence where it has become engrained in electoral political cultures.

### **Box 2 Costa Rica's quota system**

Montserrat Sagot's research findings give an account of the struggle of having an 'actionable' quota in Costa Rica. Political parties grudgingly accepted the designation of a 40 per cent quota of their lists to women, but they then sought counter-strategies to avoid its implementation. Activists had to press the Elections Tribunal to add further clarifications to the implementation of the law requiring mandatory alternate placement (to be applied in 2014). They also lobbied for the introduction of sanctions (against non-complying political parties). This lends further support to the idea of the need to redress inconsistencies in the quota system itself, and importantly to pay close attention to its implementation and the outcomes it produces. (Sagot 2010)

### **Key Message Two**

**Quotas should not be used as a proxy for a country's democratisation credentials or its commitment to gender-sensitive social justice.**

The research undertaken here cautions against establishing a positive correlation between introducing quotas and a country's commitment to substantive democracy. In some cases, quotas are introduced by authoritarian regimes under pressure from the West to show a commitment to democratisation, when in essence, the initiative is intended to be a token that bears minimum impact on the political and social status quo. In other words, it is packaged as a step towards respecting women's rights as human rights

### **Box 3 Pakistan: what motivation for quotas?**

Motives for adopting quotas are as diverse as the actors themselves. Khattak's historical analysis of the Pakistani context shows that three military regimes (General Ayub Khan - 1958-69, General Zia ul Haq - 1977-88 and General Pervez Musharraf - 1999-2008) instituted local government reform as a means of deepening and extending their political patronage system, and therefore control over the political process. The latter was responsible for introducing the 33 per cent quota for women in local government in 2000. The regimes' introduction of highly reactionary legislation in other spheres suggests that supporting local participation in local government, including that of women, was not necessarily part and parcel of championing a women's rights' agenda. For example, under Zia ul Haq's Islamisation politics, which saw a reversal in many of the achievements that women had gained previously, women were denied their fundamental right to equality in legal matters and rape and murder were recognised as compoundable private crimes. (Khattak 2010)

when in practice, it is neither part and parcel of a transformative social change agenda nor is it complemented with other gender justice measures.

In Egypt, the national women's machinery led by the First Lady, Suzanne Mubarak lobbied for the institution of a quota, which set 64 seats in the 545 seat parliament. The legislation was lauded by some international actors as a sign of the country's commitment to democracy. This was despite local feminist activists' objection to the conditions of the quota which they argued would be crippling to women's political accession to power if they were not backed by the ruling

party. As predicted, in November 2010 the quota was manipulated to win more seats for the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP). Out of 64 seats, 63 were won by NDP candidates while the remaining seat was contested (Tadros and Jad ed. forthcoming).

In the Occupied Territories in Palestine Jad argues that the institution of a quota was part and parcel of the Palestinian leadership's desire to win cookie points with international policy actors. Jad argues that the quota emerged as a consequence of an

#### **Box 4 Outcomes of quotas in Sudan**

Abbas's research suggests that in Sudan a highly undemocratic regime instituted the quota to undermine the power base of the opposition as well as to make a statement about its modern credentials. For example, in 1968, Nimeri's government reserved 40 per cent of the seats in the National People's Assembly for women, professionals (which could of course include women), the armed forces, the business community, and other groups that the regime saw as critical in combating the stranglehold of the traditional sectarian parties on rural psyches. Yet the same government also repressed independent women's activism, calling into question its commitment to advancing a gender equality programme. The Salvationists too, who came to power and represent the current regime, adopted highly inhibitive measures against women under the guise of instituting the Sharia law. At the same time they increased women's political representation in parliament (though as a co-opted, pro-government force), and introduced the country's most recent quota. (Abbas 2010)

alignment of several actors' agendas: western donors, the Palestinian leadership (Fateh) and a women's coalition whose leader had strong links within the ruling regime rather than a commitment to advance women's rights or a responsiveness to local feminist demands.

Many of the case studies to emerge from Pathways research support Krook's contention that:

"...the adoption of gender quotas does not always stem from principled concerns to empower women in politics. Rather, most quota policies are the result of combined normative and pragmatic motivations, pursued by varied but multiple groups of actors who support reform for various and often conflicting reasons. As these constellations vary substantially across cases, the relationship between gender quotas and feminist projects of empowerment remains an empirical question, not a theoretical given."  
(Krook 2008: 355)

#### **Key Message Three**

**Policymakers need to be more discerning about the kind of critical mass of women they would like to see in legislatures. Strategic support is needed for the actors, alliances and coalitions who strengthen women to advocate a gender and social justice agenda, rather than a mass that favours laws and policies antithetical to women's empowerment.**

The question of who is politically empowered via the quota is very pertinent. Historically, left leaning parties have been the most committed to fielding women and introducing internal party mechanisms to break glass ceilings that inhibit women assuming leadership positions. (Case studies from Pathway's research in Brazil, Occupied Territories, Costa Rica, Egypt and the UK demonstrate this). More recently, right wing parties and forces are increasingly fielding politically affiliated women. No generalisations can be made about the way in which these women exercise their agency within the party nor about the agendas they espouse. There is a pressing need for comparative country studies of the performance of women from right wing parties where they represent the larger proportion of women in parliament, and where they have reached office through quotas.

While we know that gender is important, the social justice agenda more broadly is critical. Many of the country case studies (Rwanda, Costa Rica and Egypt) show a concern for elitist women coming to power. Sagot points out that in Costa Rica:

“the passing of the quota legislation has also meant the arrival into power of many conservative women, closely connected to political and economic elites, who do not have any progressive agendas and who, in fact, act as strong opponents of the feminist movement, particularly on those issues related to sexual and reproductive rights.” (Sagot 2010)

#### **Box 5 Costa Rica's women representatives: whose agenda?**

Sagot's research examined discussions in Costa Rica on the Bill to Criminalise Violence Against Women in 2007. The President of the Congressional Women's Commission in charge (IPU 2011) of analysing all law proposals related to women's issues, disagreed with the bill, arguing that, on many occasions, women provoke family violence. The important thing was not to create more privileges for women, but to preserve the sanctity of the family (IPU 2011).

On another occasion, women legislators expressed their opposition to a bill that proposed an eight hour workday for domestic workers, arguing that they could no longer participate in politics if their domestic workers did not work extended hours. Rosita Acosta, president of the Domestic Workers Association, told these women legislators at a public hearing, 'what you want is a slave and not a domestic worker.' (Sagot 2010)

With more and more women from different political forces coming to power via the quota, this is an opportune time to test the contention

that 'improving women's legislative representation is crucial to addressing women's strategic political needs' (Lindberg 2004: 30). Since the last decade has brought to power or consolidated the power of highly conservative regimes, we need comprehensive, comparative research on how this has translated into women's agency through parliamentary outputs, implementation and having a wider social and political effect.

The quota, like all policies and measures aimed at promoting gender equality, can be used by forces for whom gender empowerment is secondary to other goals. This gives the semblance of being modern or progressive or democratic, conversely for those with highly reactionary gender agendas. It is critical therefore that the policy focus goes beyond the representative dimension of gender parity in parliament to examine how the critical mass is engaging with gender issues, and what kind of legislation is advanced. The implications of stopping when we get the numbers right is that we may end up, inadvertently, in some cases, legitimising the promotion of agendas antithetical to gender justice under the guise that they have been advanced by women. A future policy direction might be to support parties and coalitions not with the most numbers of women but rather those with the most progressive gender agendas in parliament, even if the advocates are a group of gender-sensitive men as well as women.

#### **Key Message Four**

**Women's collective action around gender equality is critical. Women's movements' abilities to link with networks and build alliances with other political forces should be strengthened. They need support to influence the design and implementation of the quota, and hold both governments and competing political forces accountable for delivering on their promises of supporting women in politics.**

Research findings and experiences from the Pathway's hubs in Asia, Africa and Latin America, show evidence that where women have organised collectively under the banner of promoting gender equality, they have played important roles in a range of interventions. They have lobbied for policy and legal reform; liaised with international women's actors; extended financial



help for women candidates who have limited financial means; supported constituency building; and provided capacity support for candidates and MPs. In Rwanda, Kantengwa's research demonstrates that the presence of various forms of women's coalitions, strong feminist organisations, and the institutionalisation of effective national machineries all worked together to help set the conditions of a form of quota that would work (Kantengwa 2010).

Pathway's research in Indian (Box 6) and Bangladeshi contexts also shows a positive correlation between organised feminist activism (in its many forms) and enhanced capacity support for women's political agency.

In Sierra Leone (Box 7), women's organised collective action contested the government when it sought to sideline the introduction of affirmative action. Women collectively have continued to influence the configuration of power in local and national politics. Conversely, in cases where the women's movement espousing a feminist ideology becomes too weak or fragmented (Sudan at the time of the negotiation of the terms of the quota and Egypt during the process of designing and deliberating the quota under Mubarak's regime), the ultimate outcome was an inability to influence.

Other areas provide further opportunities for the feminist movement to engage with political processes. Abbas argues that in the case of Sudan, women activists from the opposition and women who have just come to office in the 2010 elections (all government affiliated) need to hold a dialogue to find scope for engagement with the gender agenda. Ways of addressing any disconnect between the feminist movement and various power elites need to be more fully explored in every context.

#### Key Message Five

**Efforts to support women's political empowerment should strive to strengthen their ability to build constituencies.**

One of the conventional critiques of quotas is that women acquire seats in legislatures without merit. Many women who come to power via the quota struggle to acquire legitimacy as political actors

#### **Box 6 Women's collective action in India**

Pathways' researchers Sharma and Sudarshan point to the power of collective feminist agenda enacted through the Uttarakhand Mahila Parishad – UMP (Uttarakhand Women's Federation), a women's movement working in the hill villages. The UMP is a network of around 450 women's groups (Whole Village Groups or WVGs), spread over villages in seven districts of Uttarakhand. Many women members of the WVGs have moved on to contest and win the positions of gram pradhan, ward members and block development committee members in the panchayat (village council) elections of 2008. The WVGs nurtured women's leadership, both on a collective as well as individual level, and through a long process of engagement.

Women have over the years acquired the confidence and also the aspiration to effect change through politics and to influence the development agenda. The monthly meetings of the groups have created a space for identifying needs, planning activities, allocating tasks such as cleaning pathways, and common village spaces, plantation activity and resolving conflicts that arise within the village (for instance about trespassing cattle, distribution of water etc.) (Sharma and Sudarshan 2010)

not only in the eyes of the other politicians and the wider public but also in relation to their own self image. Having a constituency that nominates the female candidate is critically important for the woman's confidence, sense of worth and credibility. It also helps counteract any opposition attacks that a woman has not been democratically elected.

### Box 7 Sierra Leone women's influence

In Sierra Leone, the 50/50 campaign, the women's parliamentary caucus and the feminist movement pushed for the institutionalisation of affirmative action and used their considerable bargaining power to put forward the terms of the quota they deem appropriate from their historical and political experience. Women's organisations are challenging existing barriers to women's political participation through nationwide activism. Parliament has yet to respond to the demand for a 30 per cent quota, and women's organisations have collectively contested the 'elitist' justifications put forward against the quota. They have sustained a nationwide awareness raising campaign holding dialogues and forums between women and different stakeholders at all levels of society. Women's coalitions have provided opportunities for political empowerment where conventional pathways, such as political parties, have been inhibitive. (Abdullah 2010)

### Box 8 Bangladesh: the power of women councillors



Local Government reforms in Bangladesh in 1997 introduced direct elections to reserved seats for women. This replaced the earlier system of nomination, and as a consequence, enabled women to be voted into office via a constituency and become political leaders. The Pathways research team surveyed over 600 women councillors in 13 districts at the Union Parishad (UP) level and followed up with focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with female and male UP

councillors and chairpersons. The change allowed women a direct link with their constituency, helping to increase their legitimacy as representatives. Despite several obstacles, research by the Pathways South Asia team at the BRAC Development Institute of BRAC University found that reforms have partially contributed to giving women 'a foot in the door'.

Women councillors reported a high rate of engagement with implementing development projects and involvement with local dispute resolution. About 78 per cent of women surveyed had participated in budget discussions and 52 per cent had suggested changes to proposals. This does not imply that women councillors now have an effective voice, but significantly, they are more secure in voicing their opinions through direct elections.

The fact that women councillors are now directly elected made them more assertive in claiming their rights and demanding greater responsibility in various public fora such as UP association meetings. As one female UP member pointedly said:

"Oh, they in the parishad say, 'Why does a poor woman have such a loud voice? Who is she?' and I remind them, I was elected directly by people in three wards. I am there to represent their views. I have as much right to speak as they do." (Interview, UP member 2, Pathways digital story workshop, 20 November 2009)

(Nazneen and Tasneem 2010)

In Egypt, the rules of the quota applied in 2010 made it impossible for women to be voted in through a real constituency. Women candidates who won had to rely heavily on the ruling party to substitute for this deficiency. This led to a deepening of the patronage system and power inequalities between elected candidates considered as 'quota women' and others. In Bangladesh however, when the quota system was changed at the local government level from nomination to direct election, many women were able to withstand patriarchal assaults on their legitimacy as political actors. They pointed to the people who delegated them as women to represent them as councillors (Box 8).

More research is needed about whether women and men engage in constituency building in gendered ways. How does class, wealth, political affiliation and forms of community engagement and the constellation of all of the above in different contexts influence the types of constituencies that are forged? To what extent do different kinds of quotas inhibit or encourage constituency relationships as the pathway to power?

#### Key Message Six

**A women's political trajectory should be seen as a process and not a moment that begins and ends with a project or election cycle. Concepts and support for women's political empowerment need to be better tailored to women's ongoing networks of support and influence and less on pre-election moments or international 'blueprints'.**

Many programmes aiming to empower women politically share the same approach: the extension of short training modules to individual women on how to be effective leaders and run campaigns. This reductionist approach to capacity support demonstrates weak conceptualisations of how women engage politically and the reasons behind their inequitable participation in politics. Conceptually, it suggests that women rise to power exclusively on account of their individual capacities and practically, that it is their lack of know-how that is preventing them from engaging politically. Research undertaken by Jad about women nominating themselves in local councils in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, shows that families play a pivotal role in providing women candidates with moral and logistical

support. They also provide support for them to mobilise and be organised. In most cases, "family serves as a crucial medium for women's entrance into public offices", concludes Jad. And yet the family never feature in any of the capacity development programmes. This suggests that rather than focusing strictly and exclusively on providing skills to individual women, capacity support efforts should adopt a more relational approach to engaging with women. Policymakers and programmers should consider working to strengthen the network of enabling agents in which women are embedded.

By the same token, there is an emerging need for unconventional approaches to enhancing capacity. There is a need for context-sensitive approaches and ones that recognise both individual and collective strategies of engagement (for example finding appropriate ways, where relevant, of integrating men as partners in women's leadership programmes). Such approaches might 'target' those who are considering political office. They may also target key influential actors in the community, who if joined in a coalition would play an influential role in creating an enabling environment in which to challenge gender hierarchies.

Many capacity support programmes examined in Pathways research showed a focus on the phase immediately before legislature elections. As important as this moment is in women's political trajectories, other phases are also worth supporting. Once in office, women need support to fully engage with the institutional politics of the legislature to which they have been elected, as well as understanding how to use their agency effectively and fully to build alliances and outmanoeuvre opponents. Yet in many cases, once in office, they are perceived to have reached their destination and are excluded from programmes that prepare women for election. Reimagining capacity support programmes as long-term learning processes rather than a series of short-training opportunities will speak more to the realities of women's political trajectories.

The Pathways research findings are corroborated by a recent evaluation of the work of the influential International Parliamentary Union, a key provider of technical support to women in politics. The report concludes that:

“Although certain IPU gender activities have been carried out as part of a longer-term strategy (as in Burundi and Rwanda) we found much of the gender programming consists of one-off events or short-term interventions. The Gender Review Team fully appreciates one-off training events can be very valuable, especially when responding to a specific need, but in general we believe the IPU’s work could become even more effective if embedded in a longer-term perspective....” (IPU 2010: 12-13)

### Key Message Seven

**A policy shift is required from the current focus almost exclusively on getting women into legislatures to providing women opportunities for political apprenticeship, and ultimately women’s leadership.**

The current policy focus on improving the count of women in parliament and local councils may have inadvertently led to a narrowing of the scope of possibilities to support women to engage politically. There are many sites and spaces for supporting women’s untapped potential to assume leadership positions. While an emerging new interest in supporting women’s leadership in political parties is laudable, there are many other spaces which provide critical junctures for women to assume leadership. These include non-governmental organisations, clubs and community centres, universities and schools as well as in the workforce. In Ghana (Box 9), women’s narratives of becoming a councillor in local government suggests they felt they entered politics by accident. Despite years of assuming leadership positions within their communities, these women local councillors had not perceived they were acting politically.

Support for enhancing political apprenticeship opportunities will broaden the base of women who have opportunities to assume leadership and build repertoires of support. Focusing on the level of political apprenticeship may be one step removed from competing for political office in parliament or local council, however it allows for policymakers and programmers to work with a broader and more diverse spectrum of politically engaged women. It also speaks to a reality in which winning a seat in a legislature is only one

step along one pathway of women’s political empowerment. In all contexts, other possibilities and opportunities of assuming political leadership

### **Box 9 Women in Ghana: unexpected political leaders**

In Ghana, the Pathways of Women’s Empowerment held a three-day dialogue with some selected district women on their experiences of fielding the 2006 election. They included women who stood for but lost elections, women elected and women appointed. These women’s life histories brought out how, in many cases, their entry into politics was neither planned for nor did they consider themselves as political leaders.

Women were building constituencies unintentionally by serving in their communities as nurses, teachers and NGO workers or by building up substantial social capital by being a resource person to those in need. It is in these microcosms of broader political dynamics and processes that women, often by default, learnt how to engage politically in an effective and convincing way. These provided organic opportunities for political apprenticeship on assuming leadership roles. (Takyiwaa Manuh speaking at the Pathways to Political Power workshop, Cairo, December 2010)

exist which may have significant transformative potential for these women, and for the social and political configurations in society more widely.

The above key policy messages do not amount to a blue print for women’s political empowerment. Earlier attempts to institute a ‘cookie cutter’ approach to transfer best practice from one country context to another have either had limited success, backfired or worse been instrumentalised

by authoritarian regimes to enhance their power base. What these key messages point to is first the necessity of complementing any quota law with other interventions to ensure that in substance and in outcome, it has a positive social transformative impact. Second, it is important to adopt an upside-down view of women's political empowerment that examines the dynamics of their pathways and struggle, one which neither starts nor ends upon election into political office.

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