

“Women as Agents of Change: Advancing the Role of Women in Politics and Civil Society”

Statement by Kenneth Wollack, President, National Democratic Institute
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Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights and Oversight
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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of the National Democratic Institute, I appreciate this opportunity to testify about programs that help empower women to engage in political decision-making and civil society at all levels. NDI has been working with political and civic leaders for more than two decades to assist their efforts to increase the number and effectiveness of women in political life. We currently work in nearly 70 countries, creating programs that are specifically tailored to women and ensuring they are a part of every existing program. I appreciate the chance to highlight both the achievements and challenges in the process of integrating and empowering women in political processes.

There is growing recognition of the untapped capacity and talents of women and women’s leadership. In the last 10 years, the rate of women’s representation in national parliaments globally has grown from 13.1 percent at the end of 1999 to 18.6 percent at the end of 2009. Some regions have seen particularly dramatic increases, such as Sub-Saharan Africa, where the number of women in parliaments has risen from 10.9 to 17.6 percent.¹

As women’s contributions toward a strong and vibrant society are increasingly well documented, there is also growing understanding of why women’s meaningful participation is essential to building and sustaining democracy. Women’s political participation results in tangible gains for democracy, including greater responsiveness to citizen needs, increased cooperation across party and ethnic lines, and more sustainable peace.

Assessment of the economic, security and other benefits of women’s participation Need for women in peace operations, treaty negotiations, constitution development, and reconciliation and reconstruction efforts

Women’s meaningful participation in politics affects both the range of policy issues that are considered and the types of solutions that are proposed. Research indicates that a legislator’s gender has a distinct impact on policy priorities, making it critical that women are present in politics to represent the concerns of women and other marginalized citizens and help improve the responsiveness of policy-making and governance. And as more women reach leadership positions within their political parties, these parties tend to prioritize issues that impact health, education and other quality of life issues. There is strong evidence that as more women are elected to office, there is also a corollary increase in policy-making that reflects the priorities of families, women, and ethnic and racial minorities. Women’s political participation has profound positive and democratic impacts on communities, legislatures, political parties, and citizen’s lives.

In places as diverse as Timor-Leste, Croatia, Morocco, Rwanda and South Africa, an increase in the number of female lawmakers led to legislation related to antidiscrimination, domestic violence, family codes, inheritance, and child support and protection. Only five years after the women's suffrage movement achieved the rights of women to vote and run for office in Kuwait, newly elected female legislators this year introduced new labor laws that would give working mothers mandatory nursing breaks, and provide onsite childcare for companies with more than 200 employees.

Women lawmakers tend to see "women's" issues more broadly as social issues, possibly as a result of the role that women have traditionally played as mothers and caregivers in their communities;² and more women see government as a tool to help serve underrepresented or minority groups.³ Women lawmakers, therefore, have often been perceived as more sensitive to community concerns and more responsive to constituency needs.

Women are deeply committed to peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction and have a unique and powerful perspective to bring to the negotiating table. Women often suffer disproportionately during armed conflict and often advocate most strongly for stabilization, reconstruction and the prevention of further conflict. Peace agreements, post-conflict reconstruction and governance have a better chance of long-term success when women are involved.⁴ Furthermore, establishing sustainable peace requires transforming power relationships, including achieving more equitable gender relations.⁵ Women's peace groups in Uganda, for example, have used conflict resolution training to successfully reduce the level of violence in their communities. In the face of strong resistance from male leaders, women have established cross-community coalitions to open up dialogue and are operating centers to rehabilitate former girl abductees and child soldiers.⁶

Women's leadership and conflict resolution styles often embody democratic ideals in that women have tended to work in a less hierarchical, more participatory and more collaborative way than male colleagues.⁷ Women are also more likely to work across party lines, even in highly partisan environments. Since assuming 56 percent of the seats in the Rwandan parliament in 2008, women have been responsible for forming the first cross-party caucus to work on controversial issues such as land rights and food security. They have also formed the only tripartite partnership among civil society and executive and legislative bodies to coordinate responsive legislation and ensure basic services are delivered.⁸

Around the world, women lawmakers are often perceived as more honest and more responsive than their male counterparts, qualities that encourage confidence in democratic and representative institutions. In a study of 31 democratic countries, the presence of more women in legislatures is positively correlated with enhanced perceptions of government legitimacy among both men and women.⁹

When women are empowered as political leaders, countries often experience higher standards of living with positive developments in education, infrastructure and health, and concrete steps being taken to help make democracy deliver. Using data from 19 member countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), researchers found that an increase in women legislators results in an increase in total educational expenditure.¹⁰ In India,

research showed that West Bengal villages with greater representation of women in local councils saw an investment in drinking water facilities that was double that of villages with low levels of elected women, and that the roads there were almost twice as likely to be in good condition. The study also revealed that the presence of a woman council leader reduces the gender gap in school attendance by 13 percentage points.¹¹

Analysis of the major preconditions for increased participation

Despite these positive indicators and gains, considerable challenges remain to women's meaningful political participation. And while no ideal environment currently exists to jumpstart the advancement of women's political advancement, there are certain conditions that make it easier.

First, women must have reasonable access to positions of power. Political leadership is often centralized and informal. Holding a formal position, even an elected position, does not necessarily lead to greater influence, as the real leaders do not always hold formal titles. Power in democracies is further built on relationships that often have existed many years. In countries where women's public roles are only beginning to develop, women's absence from this history can present significant barriers. However, by giving women the tools they need to lead, creating the opportunity for advancement and helping build networks of like-minded men and women, and ensuring that women's legal rights are firmly entrenched, a pathway to power can be developed.

Next, transparency in the political and legislative processes is critical to the advancement of women in political and civil society. The lack of openness in political decision-making and undemocratic internal processes are challenging for all newcomers, but particularly for women. Similarly, the complex hierarchies in political parties and legislatures represent a barrier to many women who enter politics at the local level and aspire to rise to other levels of leadership.

Moreover, there must be the willingness of citizens to accept new ideas about gender roles in society. There are still many countries that discourage women from competing directly with men or consider childcare and housekeeping to be the exclusive domain of women. As such, it is common throughout the world to see women activists supporting democratic activities at the grassroots level, yet to see few women in leadership positions, thereby creating an absence of women from whom to draw for higher levels of political leadership. Concerted efforts must be made to raise awareness of gender inequality and the ways in which stereotypical gender roles create both formal and informal barriers. The support of male political leaders is also a key ingredient in creating a political climate that encourages women's political participation.

The ability of women to attain financial autonomy or access to economic resources is also necessary for their greater participation in political life. Worldwide, women's lower economic status, relative poverty and discriminatory legal frameworks are substantial hurdles to overcome. Because women control and have access to fewer economic resources, they are often unable to pay the formal and informal costs associated with gaining a party's nomination and standing for election.

Strategies for increasing women's participation

Quotas – whether mandatory, legislated or voluntary – continue to be the most effective means for increasing the number of women both in political parties and elective office. Studies conducted by NDI also indicate that quotas, in and of themselves, have not overcome the many obstacles that many women confront, including developing the political will to meaningfully implement a quota. Usually, quotas are implemented only after concerted advocacy efforts by women's political and civic alliances. Ongoing debate continues over whether quotas are workable in every political or electoral system; and even in the many countries that have embraced the use of quotas, they are seen as temporary, special measures. As a result, some countries with a long history of quotas, such as Australia, have now opted for gender neutral quotas.

There are several types of quota systems:

Quotas for candidates – A system of reserved seats, such as those in Rwanda, Uganda and Morocco, guarantees that women candidates will be elected and achieve a specified level of representation in the targeted political institution, such as a parliament. Comparable attempts have been made by parties in Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom to get women candidates designated within quotas to *winnable* constituencies. Meanwhile, a quota that targets party lists, such as in Mexico, does not guarantee the election of women candidates, depending on the placement of women candidates in relation to the percentage of votes that the party receives.

Quotas for representative institutions and multiple levels of government – This system mandates women's representation in the national legislature, locally elected bodies, the executive branch (cabinet appointments), the judiciary and political parties.

Internal party quotas for candidates and for governing boards – A number of parties have internal quotas for women for all or some of their governing boards. These quotas ensure that women's voices are present as the party makes internal decisions regarding its strategy and platform.

Non-quota efforts to enhance women's political leadership have included reforms and legislation that regulate party activities; gender sensitive reforms to political institutions that increase the likelihood that the women who are elected will be able to succeed and seek reelection; party funding for the training of women; efforts to enhance the profile of women candidates; mechanisms to help women candidates address campaign costs; outreach to international organizations and donor aid agencies that can fund and carry out technical assistance programs to enhance the capacity of women candidates and elected officials, and to support advocacy campaigns on behalf of women's political participation and leadership.

Overview of programs that empower women to engage in political decision-making and civil society at all levels

NDI has worked to support and empower women in political decision-making and civil society at all levels. Recently, the Institute conducted an assessment to better understand effective approaches to encouraging women's political participation across regions and to measure the

impact of such programs. The research concluded that best practices include: 1) conducting ongoing communications trainings; 2) focusing on building leadership skills; 3) uniting women across political party lines; 4) working with parties on internal reform; 5) training women to train other women; 6) developing the capacity and preparedness of elected women; 7) exchanging information internationally; and 8) engaging youth to help change socio-political attitudes and behavior.

With these criteria in mind, the Institute has sought to help women acquire the tools necessary to participate successfully in all aspects of the political process – in legislatures, political parties and civil society as leaders, activists and informed citizens. These programs have been supported by, among others, the National Endowment for Democracy; the U.S. Agency for International Development; the State Department's Middle East Partnership Initiative and Bureau for Democracy; Human Rights and Labor; the United Nation's Development Programme; the Canadian International Development Agency; the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency; and individual contributors and private foundations, such as the Liz Claiborne Foundation and the Melvin and Bren Simon Foundation.

Working with women in civil society is a major part of NDI's work. Women's civil society organizations play a key role in supporting increased women's political participation and women leaders. Furthermore, they advocate for, and provide technical expertise on key policy issues and help illustrate how policies may affect men and women, and boys and girls differently.

Involvement in civil society also gives women the opportunity to influence government and gain visibility, credibility and respect, and to help mitigate barriers to women's political participation. In many regions, civic organizations are led by women, and are often viewed as vehicles for women's leadership; they have emerged as incubators for women to cultivate their political and personal power. Creating strong partnerships among women in civic organizations and women in political parties and elected office can help advance a common women's agenda in a coordinated way. Furthermore, partnerships between civic organizations - that are critical in reaching and educating citizens - political parties and elected officials help build networks, develop relationships, and sustain trust and communication at the grassroots level.

Civic organizations can also be useful in conducting gender equality assessments, working with political parties or examining public policies or government programs to identify challenges to gender equality and how to best address them. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Mostar Women Citizens' Initiative (MWCI) created issue-based coalitions across ethnic lines to provide a greater role for women in political and civic life in Bosnia. One such coalition of women from major political parties, civic groups and citizen associations formed to advocate for greater protection to women on maternity leave. The group established and managed a working group of experts who produced a draft law, then implemented a media and advocacy campaign to help influence the government to adopt this draft law.

Working with women in political parties is at the heart of NDI's work with women. Political parties are the gateway to political leadership and the key to advancing women's full participation in the political process. It is not enough for parties to establish women's wings or place women at the bottom end of party lists; they must develop real avenues for women's

leadership. Access to, and advancement within political parties remains both essential to women's political success and the most difficult political door for women to enter.

NDI's political party programs focus on building the skills and capacity of women party activists, as well as reinforcing among party leaders the value of women as voters, party leaders and candidates. NDI's Win with Women Global Initiative, convened in 2003 by NDI Chairman Madeleine Albright, has focused exclusively on strengthening women's roles in political parties. The Win with Women Global Initiative's organizing tool is the Global Action Plan (GAP), a set of concrete recommendations to help political parties broaden their appeal by becoming more inclusive and representative of women as voters, party leaders, candidates and elected officials.

NDI has conducted multiparty and/or single party programs to assess parties' strengths and weaknesses in recruiting, retaining and promoting women; to help parties reform their internal policies and practices; and to develop effective strategies that attract, retain and promote women. The Institute also helps parties develop and implement gender equality strategies to increase women's representation and participation and provides technical assistance to parties in developing gender responsive political platforms.

In Botswana, NDI conducted assessments of three major political parties to determine the degree to which women are incorporated in leadership positions, and to identify both the obstacles and opportunities they face in seeking such positions. From these assessments, NDI generated specific recommendations on how each party can increase women's political participation. These findings were presented to party leaders and also informed the content and design of a skills-building program for potential women leaders in each party.

NDI also works to promote and support the participation of women in all stages of the electoral process, as candidates, campaign managers, poll watchers and voters. Recognizing the particular barriers women face in electoral processes, NDI has developed and implemented programs targeted specifically toward the specialized needs of women and gaps in women's electoral participation. In 2005, NDI assisted the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE) in developing and a nationwide campaign to encourage women to participate in the general elections. The "Use Your Voice" campaign featured five prominent Lebanese women who appeared in television, radio, public transportation and billboard advertisements to motivate women voters.

In Afghanistan, where women have been disproportionately affected by the brutal repression of the Taliban regime, NDI has trained most of the women candidates for national and provincial elections since 2004. And in Iraq, the National Platform for Women, supported by NDI, brought together women political and civic activists to advance the issues of healthcare, education, employment and political participation. After the elections, the National Platform will be a tool for newly-elected parliamentarians as they seek to respond to constituents' needs. It will also serve as a point of reference for including women in policy debates; and it will encourage voters to hold candidates and political parties who have endorsed the platform accountable to their public campaign promises.

The online resource iKNOW Politics (www.iknowpolitics.org) was created by the Institute and its partners to encourage women's participation and effectiveness in political life. A joint project of NDI, the UNDP, the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), iKNOW Politics is a virtual forum in English, Spanish, French and Arabic that provides opportunities for women to share their experiences, access information and build a supportive online community to promote women's political participation. Since its inception in 2007, iKNOW Politics has averaged 1.5 million hits a month, and serves elected women officials, candidates, decision-makers, political leaders and civic groups, as well as academics, students and practitioners worldwide.

Having attained political office, women need the skills, knowledge and self-confidence to perform their jobs effectively. Elected women have often had little or no opportunity to develop the type of specialized skills necessary to succeed in public office and NDI often works with elected women to help build their capacity to be effective officeholders. These skills may be office-specific, such as rules of procedures, drafting and advocating for legislation and budgets, and constituency outreach. Such capacity building may focus on equipping women with the technical knowledge necessary to participate in influential committees in "non-traditional" areas, such as finance or defense. NDI also works with their male counterparts to raise awareness of gender equality issues, as well as to demonstrate the importance and political value of women's leadership in public office.

NDI also works to help form and develop caucuses that can advocate for women's participation and leadership. Parliamentary caucuses have helped harness the power of women legislators to increase their influence, add a gender perspective into the policy development process and introduce legislation that address priority issues necessary for the achievement of gender equality. These groups frequently represent a unique space within legislatures for multi-partisan debate, and as such, the ability of the women's caucuses to be effective has reverberations on larger legislative, civic and political processes. Many caucuses not only work to help women parliamentarians come together to enact policy, they also conduct programs, training workshops and roundtables to help make women better members of parliament and political leaders. Other types of caucuses include women's branches or wings within political parties that can impact party policies and processes; and broader caucuses that include party activists, elected women and leaders from civil society organizations who work together to advocate for change.

In Bangladesh, NDI supports an alliance of senior women political and civil society leaders through the Bangladesh Alliance for Women Leadership (BDAWL), which was formed to help women rise to senior positions within political parties, government, and civil society. The Alliance helped organize an orientation program for the 9th parliament of Bangladesh. Its recent 197-page publication, "Who's Who: Women Leaders at a Glance", serves as a "resource for government, business, academia, professionals and the media in identifying women experts from a broad array of disciplines."

Conclusion

The international community – including donor aid agencies, intergovernmental bodies, international financial institutes and nongovernmental organizations – has focused its attention on, and dedicated growing resources to women’s development. And with the creation of a new senior level position at the State Department, the Ambassador at Large for Global Women’s Issues, National Security Strategy, along with USAID and State Department-funded programs, the administration has given concrete expression to renewed U.S. efforts in this regard.

There is now growing consensus that women’s equal rights and opportunity are inexorably linked to peace, prosperity, human development and democracy. How a country taps the talents and capacity of its women will, in large measure, determine its economic, social and political progress. As an Institute dedicated to political development, NDI believes that women’s more equitable role in politics will not only ensure that the concerns of women and other marginalized citizens are represented, but will affect many policy options that are debated and the amount of funding that programs receive. A 2008 survey by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, which compiled the views of parliamentarians from 110 countries, found that male and female legislators emphasize different priorities. According to the IPU, women tend to prioritize social issues such as childcare, equal pay, parental leave and pensions; physical concerns such as reproductive rights, physical safety and gender-based violence; and development matters such as poverty alleviation and service delivery.¹²

When women are represented in a legislature in significant numbers, they can bring their priorities forward to influence the legislative agenda. In Rwanda, for example, the growing number of female lawmakers was linked to more assertive and effective efforts on behalf of children.¹³ In fact, there is evidence that women legislators not only prioritize, but take action on and fund these issues. Using data from 19 OECD countries, researchers found that an increase in women legislators resulted in an increase in total educational expenditure.¹⁴ And in a study of Swedish female legislators at the local level, women showed a strong preference for childcare and elder care over other social issues. These priorities were reflected in local spending patterns, with more money directed towards childcare and the elderly in districts with more female representation.¹⁵

It is our hope, therefore, that new initiatives that focus on such issues as maternal and child health and women’s and girl’s literacy and microfinance, particularly in Muslim-majority countries, are joined by comparable efforts to promote women’s political participation and leadership. This will ultimately help sustain a local commitment to health, education and economic development. It is not an accident that the countries in which these issues are not part of the national agenda are places where women are denied a genuine political voice. Conversely, empowering women politically will help countries develop those democratic institutions so they can begin to successfully address issues related to security, jobs, human rights, physical well-being and human development.

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