

Consolidated Response

The Impact of New ICTs on Information Behaviour of Women in Politics



International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics



Introduction

Despite comprising more than 50 percent of the world's population, women continue to lack access to political leadership opportunities and resources at all levels of government. Women's equal participation in decision-making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy, but a necessary pre-condition for women's interests to be taken into account. Governance structures which do not result in the equal participation of men and women, or their equal enjoyment of benefits from state interventions are by definition neither inclusive nor democratic.

In 2007, recognizing that over the last century women's gains in the political arena have been slow and insufficient, five international organizations came together to enhance women's political participation their collective priority and devise a strategy that would fall in each of the organization's efforts to foster gender equality in politics:

International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA)
Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)
National Democratic Institute (NDI)
United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women)

The International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics (www.iKNOWPolitics.org) is an online network, jointly supported by the five partner organizations, that aims to increase the participation and effectiveness of women in political life by utilizing a technology-enabled forum to provide access to critical resources and expertise, stimulate dialogue, create knowledge, and share experiences among women in politics.

In just three years, iKNOW Politics has become a leading website on women's political participation. Building on a library of over 5300 resources, iKNOW Politics has captured the combined experience and knowledge of its 92 global experts and 10,000 members from over 150 countries. iKNOW Politics has documented and disseminated the lessons and best practices of women as voters, candidates and elected legislators.

The following is a printed version of one of the most frequently-cited iKNOW Politics knowledge products, based on the combined input from experts and members worldwide. Please visit the iKNOW Politics website to pose a question of your own, contribute to the online discussions, browse the resource library or read additional iKNOW Politics consolidated expert responses, E-discussion summaries, interviews with women leaders, or contact iKNOW Politics at connect@iknowpolitics.org to get in touch with a staff member in your region of the world. iKNOW Politics is available in **English, French, Spanish and Arabic**.

Consolidated Response on the Impact of New ICTs on Information Behaviour of Women in Politics

This consolidated response is based on research conducted by iKNOW Politics staff, Alomiza Ennos-Barr, Liberian Representative and Chair of the Women Legislative Caucus, Maryam Ben Salen and Audrey McLaughlin, International Gender Expert.

Question

"Information is a key factor to the actualization of any organizational obligations and goals. How can women's information behaviour enhance their political participation?"

The iKNOW Politics team expanded the scope of the expansion by asking the question to better exemplify how the new ICTs continue to change the information behaviour of women in politics and success strategies employed by women in politics.

Introduction

According to Marcia J Bates, professor at UCLA, "Information behaviour is the currently preferred term used to describe the many ways in which human beings interact with information, in particular, the ways in which people seek and utilize information." How do we find the information we need? How do we identify what it is we are lacking, and how do we go about obtaining it? What sources do we turn to, and how do we process, analyse and distribute knowledge? Though these may be common practices these are not the questions asked often enough by women in politics, but they are essential to the actualisation of (political) obligations and goals. Efficient and targeted information behaviour is invaluable to any political campaign, so how do women candidates and voters make the most of this? This consolidated response will explore the use of new communication technologies along with detailing the difficulties women encounter in their information behaviour. It will also highlight some strategies that have been used to overcome these, focusing mainly on networking, civil society and education at large.

Move to an Information Society

Information behaviour has been radically transformed by the arrival of the internet and, in recent years, of social media. The 21st century has seen an unprecedented increase in the percentage of internet users around the world. Out of China's 1.3 billion people, 29 percent

of are now internet users, 48.5 percent of Iran's population are internet users, in Latin America and the Caribbean 30.5% of the current population use internet, the increase in internet users from 2000 to 2009 has been the highest in the African continent approximately 1392.4%. Over 350 million users of facebook communicate across borders every day, spending close to 10 billion minutes on the social networking site every day. According to a recent report, at least one-half of the world's population has a mobile phone which is increasing every day. These are just some of the statistics that show the ever increasing presence of some form of technology in our daily lives. According to statistics provided by the International Telecommunication Union, the digital divide in 1994 between the developed and developing countries was 73 times more, where as in 2004 it was only 8 times more - "the most stunning feature of the divide is not about how large it is, but how rapidly it is closing".(Fink, C. and Kenny, C 2003). These developments have long been categorized as the advent of the information society, where the storage, production, flow, etc. of networked information plays a central role:

*"The emergence of an information society puts us in times of great ferment and provides spaces for a new social organization. Relationships between the State, private sector and civil society, organizations of economic activity and social relationships are being redefined. [...] In these spaces that are still evolving, women can make their claims much more easily provided they engage early enough."*¹

How can these developments benefit women in politics? Examples show how women have been making use of these new technologies to advance their political agency. Piyoo Kochar, Project Manager of iKNOW Politics states, "over the last decade, the exclusivity associated with communication technology has reduced considerably with the governments investing considerable resources in enabling last mile connectivity, and with the increased integration of other mass media with the Internet (e.g: radio through podcasts; videos through video podcast and video conferences; cell phone/sms for crowd-sourcing use in election monitoring etc)."

She further elaborates, in politics "engaging and building constituency through using a combination of communication technologies offers women candidates an opportunity to not

¹ Radhika Lal, UNDP 'Gender in the Information Society: Emerging Issues', 2006, p 25-26
<http://www.iknowpolitics.org/node/6737>

only reach the constituency that would otherwise not have been reached but also ‘eliminate the use of intermediaries in communication and allowing the women themselves to be the news makers’ [...] Recruiting volunteers for different tasks that can be from getting first time voters, promoting the candidates agenda and social media profiles, translating sections of the website, designing banner ads, and helping out with other campaign work are some of the various benefits that these new technologies offer.”

Maryam Ben Salen explains how women political candidates in Morocco use the internet and social media to compensate for their underrepresentation in traditional media outlets:

“One of the ways in which women politicians have been countering this disequilibrium in media coverage is by increasing their visibility through the use of New Information and Communication Technologies or NICTs. In our fieldwork conducted through workshops, meetings, conferences, debates, and focus groups with politically active women at local and national levels in the three countries, we observed women’s willingness to go beyond traditional communication outlets such as television and radio to adopt more direct and interactive communication tools that include facebook, SMS, promotional videos, podcasts, and blogs. The latter proved to be very effective, eliminating the use of intermediaries in communication and allowing the women themselves to be ‘the news makers’.”²

The most recent example of how civil society and individuals have used these new technologies to engage in shaping politics is the ‘Arab spring’, which has demonstrated just how powerful they can be. The protests in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria and Libya have used both social media and cell phones for the constant calls for action, the almost instant dispersion of news and pictures, and the countless expressions of support for the protesters, both from within and outside of the Arab region. Internet and social media have played an unprecedented role in empowering women to engage politically. Doaa Abdelaal, regional coordinator for iKNOW Politics, details her experiences over this past year:

² iKNOW Politics, ‘Summary of E-Discussion on Women’s Political Participation in 21st Century: Using Communication Technologies’ Comment by Maryam Ben Salen, Tunisie
<http://www.iknowpolitics.org/node/29286>

“The Arab region is witnessing tremendous social and political changes since the beginning of 2011. I should give credit to work and effort of different political activists in the region for the last two decades at least. Since late 90's the internet found its way in the region and it was a very effective tool that was used by those activists to bypass the barriers put by regimes on their movement and ability to communicate with different groups in the society. The different online media and communication tools contributed to conveying the messages of the revolutionaries to the different segments in the society, helped to mobilize demands, and to challenge the mainstream media that used to broadcast manipulated messages by the regimes.

Women played an active role in the democratic revolutions, not only in the streets but also as bloggers and propagators of revolutionary ideologies in chat rooms, Facebook, Twitter and other online media. They are organizing different online campaigns for their civil and political demands from Oman, through Saudi Arabia to Morocco and Mauritania. A good example will be the Baladi Campaign and Women 2 Drive in Saudi Arabia. The first campaign is calling for women rights to vote in the next local elections and the second is calling for Saudi Women rights starting by their rights to drive their cars.”

While the stereotype that women are less interested in technology than men still persists, these experiences indicate that women are in fact not just users of these technologies but are shaping the technology itself. Women are keen to integrate these new opportunities into their political life - not just to campaign but, once elected, to maintain an open dialogue with their constituents. Facebook, Youtube and Twitter are actively used to communicate, rally and engage; in many regions, most active politicians use one or more of these tools as an integral part of their communication strategy.

“Information technology is now the most important political tool. In my international work, I encourage women to learn how to use a computer as the

internet is a major source of research for the elected person and indeed anyone aspiring to political involvement. To donors, I also make the recommendation that in those countries with limited resources computers be provided.” (Audrey McLaughlin, iKNOW Politics Expert)

Levelling the playing field?

Whether the application of these technologies will help level the political playing field for women, however, is impossible to predict. What it does offer, however, is the possibility to not only adopt these technologies in a contextually relevant way but to design them to be accessible in resource-constrained settings. The reality of challenges such as a lack of infrastructure, poor connections, illiteracy and so forth are more often experienced by women than by men. Many have questioned the so-called ‘neutral nature’ of ICT:

“For some development decision-makers and activists struggling for social justice and gender equity in the developing South, engaging in such policy spaces to have a voice in shaping the emerging information society often appeared to be of little value. To them, ICT did not appear to empower or to provide solutions to developments’ pressing problems. Rather, the relatively high cost of access, the steepness of the learning curve and inequities in access to ICT itself were viewed as symptoms of ICT’s biased character as cyber cities emerged and then co-existed with slums and shantytowns. Technology provided instruments for control rather than liberation.”³

Similarly, a 2009 Hansard Society Report indicates that new technologies have done little for the empowerment or assertiveness of citizens vis-à-vis their representatives in parliament:

“MPs are using the internet primarily to inform their constituents rather than to engage with them. The most widely used digital media are those which are mainly passive in nature, such as websites. Interactive forms of media which could be used by MPs to develop a two-way dialogue with their constituents,

³ Radhika Lal, UNDP ‘Gender in the Information Society: Emerging Issues’, 2006, p 27
<http://www.iknowpolitics.org/node/6737>

such as blogs and social networking, are used less commonly. Where these tools are used, it is often in passive 'send' mode with few MPs exploiting their full interactive potential.”⁴

These examples indicate that new technologies are being used, but their application is far from being successful in generating positive changes in information behaviour or breaking through existing barriers. The threshold for women to embrace new communication technologies such as the internet, email, social media and so forth, is often high – in particular in developing countries, where access to these resources is limited. The experience of iKNOW Politics, partners and like minded organizations alike, however, is that it pays to help women politicians to take that all important first step. Women who have adopted these tools often use them more regularly and more efficiently, and they innovate in their use of these tools.

World e-parliament report 2010

Parliaments have always been information intensive institutions. ICT has created even greater demands for information and has raised the standard by which the currency, completeness, and customization of information are judged.

In response to these new demands, some parliamentary libraries have become leaders in integrating technology into their work in new and innovative ways.

However, many continue to face challenges that stem from inadequate resources for training, limited availability of technology and, in some cases, lack of understanding of the contribution they can make to the effectiveness of parliamentary business.

http://www.ictparliament.org/sites/default/files/wepr2010_executivesummary.pdf

As Piyoo cautions in the E-Discussion on Women's Political Participation in 21st Century: Using Communication Technologies, “Using communication technology is not an all pervasive activity; it requires perfect matching of political philosophy, messaging and an array of communication tools that includes technology. Technology cannot and should not be a strategy in and of itself, but has to be part of the overall political strategy.” ICT is not ‘the’ answer. It is important to contextually understand and use the new communication technologies, in remote regions where illiteracy remains dominant, computers remain rare and an internet connection non-existent, information behaviour takes very different forms but is not any less important.

⁴ Williamson, A, Hansard Society, ‘MPs Online Connecting with Constituents’ <http://www.agora-parl.org/node/1696>

What, then, can be done in those parts of the world to improve women's information behaviour? How can women adjust their strategies in such a way that they can benefit politically or become more engaged?

Information Behaviour: Missing, Seeking and Obtaining Information

"Whatever the situation in which a person perceives a need for information, engaging in information-seeking behaviour is not a necessary consequence."⁵

When discussing the struggles women candidates face during campaigns and elections, the focus traditionally lies on the difficulties in acquiring the necessary campaign funding and on the societal and cultural context in which they operate, which is often less accommodating of women leaders than of men. What is increasingly added to this list, however, is the criticism that women often face more difficulties when it comes to seeking out information that might be relevant to their political objectives. The reflex to take needs or concerns up with local actors, to request information on issues that are important to them, or to engage with constituents by taking part in debates, liaising with civil society or consulting experts, is often missing. This relates in part to the lack of technology resources mentioned above, but it really touches upon a far wider issue: the lack of a drive, in essence, to obtain and process pertinent (political) information. In short:

"The missing link ... has been the absence of an effective mechanism for mobilization and stimulating them into action with a view to addressing their problems. That missing link is the lack of information in the right quality and format."⁶

Many development organizations are now focusing on this, as they are increasingly aware that access to information is a crucial resource. The large investments in capacity-building programmes, skills training, civic education and so forth indicate a belief that empowering individuals, groups and states is best done by equipping them with access to information. Many of these programs move beyond a focus on ICTs, concentrating on the more fundamental ability to process information and building on individual skills and strengths.

⁵ Wilson, Tom 'Information behaviour: an interdisciplinary perspective', p1
<http://informationr.net/tdw/publ/infbhav/cont.html>

⁶ Adam Gambo Saleh & Fatima Ibrahim Lasisi 'Information needs and information seeking behaviour of rural women in Borno state, Nigeria' <http://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/~mbolin/saleh-lasisi2.htm>

Most difficult when tackling the issue of information behaviour is that *information needs vary*. Rural women's information needs are very different from those of urban women; the needs of women politicians are altogether different still. How can these different needs be identified in order to point these women to the right sources of information? What steps can be taken to improve women's information behaviour in such a way that they become more politically active and able?

Networking

While there is no easy answer to this question, some basic strategies could be used by development practitioners and women politicians alike. Mirjana Kovacevic believes that the best way to empower women is for them to network and rally around current concerns:

"The question is how women's information behaviour can be influenced and changed in order to increase their political participation and my answer to it is: networking around actual demands and challenges when the goals and duties are clear and when it is easy to grasp the importance of being a part of it. Using every opportunity to get women together around current issues, topics that are recognized and discussed by wider audience and are of concern to decision makers, matters whose relevance to both local and national level cannot be ignored."

How this 'gathering around issues' can be done will depend, as Kovacevic underlines, on the context. A strategy that is increasingly successful in this regard is a proactive effort to work with men and include them in discussions and debate on gender issues. This way male politicians are made aware of pertinent concerns and can start embracing the particular needs of this constituent group; at the same time, these initiatives offer women politicians an entry point to break into the existing political circles and gain access to the 'old boys clubs'. María Eugenia Rojas highlights efforts at the local government level in Bolivia where,

"...the NGO CISTAC proposed involving men in local governments as strategic partners in combating gender violence. A project called, 'Model for questioning power relationships that lead to political violence in municipal government: working on masculinity', was implemented to help change male

value structures, attitudes and behaviors". [Involucramiento de hombres para lograr equidad en municipios]

Similarly, as Margot Nivin Vargas describes,

"...here in my city, Huaraz, in Ancash, Peru, we had a workshop with men to discuss the Equal Opportunity Plan for Ancash. There was little participation, but it is important to discuss this issue in the parties, raise men's awareness and, especially, make them understand that without women's participation, there is no democracy". [Importancia del trabajo con los hombres]

In rural, conservative and traditional areas, it is especially difficult for women to meet their own information needs, and a clear gender distinction persists. In these circumstances, finding the right information at the right time can help ferment political ambitions. Even in extreme cases where women are kept firmly outside of the decision-making structure, (informal) networks and initiatives on working with men can go a long way in shaping political agendas: by identifying key concerns, suggesting and debating opportunities or options, and optimising lobbying tactics (for example through family members, more 'open' members of the political establishment, and so forth), they can still gain access to decision-making structures.

iKNOW Politics Interview

Alomiza Ennos-Barr, Liberian Representative and Chair of the Women Legislative Caucus

"Networking is very important. It is essential to the empowerment of women. I have used it to gather advice from different sources when I need to solve problems. When I see a problem, I can call my colleagues and say, "I have this problem with my district; what do you think I can do?" They'll tell me how they addressed similar problems. Networking means helping each other, especially because gender empowerment is a new issue in the world, particularly in Africa.

<http://www.iknowpolitics.org/en/node/9077>

Civil Society

In less extreme cases, women have plenty of other ways to place themselves out in the open and allow their information behaviour to positively impact their political activities.

One of the best strategies for women to mobilise their own ‘information activities’ is by engaging with civil society. This holds true for women in general, but for women politicians and women political candidates it is an especially useful way to stay at the centre of their community. Civil society groups may vary from state to state, region to region or even village to village, depending to a large extent on the political and cultural content: some will be vibrant, diverse and (relatively) free to operate; others will be limited, consisting perhaps of only a few organisations and facing severe restrictions. However small, though, civil society offers a breeding ground for political ideas, as well as a hub for concerns, needs and problems.

Politicians that actively engage with these groups will rarely be short of politically valuable information. Most importantly, these efforts require a fair deal of time, but little extra input: especially at the local level, there is no real need to learn or use new technologies, invest large amounts of resources or really step outside of one’s comfort zone. Especially for first-time candidates or young women, local contacts and face-to-face encounters are invaluable political capital⁷. Not only do they help gain the trust and support of constituents (and the civil society groups they may be part of), they ensure the proper back-and-forth that is, in an ideal world, the backbone of a politician’s campaign and strategy.

Finally, civil society groups are uniquely placed to advance experts and expertise in cases of need, such as when a particular piece of legislation is drawn up in parliament, in case of natural disasters or emergencies, and so forth. In short, civil society offers a wealth of information and – even in traditional societies – an ease of access that, providing women find the courage and initiative to make the most of this, can help reshape their information behaviour in a positive, sustainable way.

Education

As a final point, the importance of education cannot be overlooked. Much has been written on how to better ensure equal educational opportunities for young girls and women to help level the playing field; to this day, achievements remain relatively limited as women continue to lag behind⁸. With respect to information behaviour, a lack of basic skills such as reading and writing is often detrimental to a political career; a weaker skills set (debating, public

⁷ iKNOW Politics, ‘Consolidated Response on the Involvement of Young Women in Politics’, 2009. <http://www.iknowpolitics.org/node/10798>

⁸ iKNOW Politics, ‘Consolidated Response on the Impact of Illiteracy of Young Women’s Political Participation’, 2010. <http://www.iknowpolitics.org/node/29956>

speaking, interpreting complex data, campaigning, budgeting and so forth) due to a comparative disadvantage in education can be just as harmful.

It should also be pointed out that the educational differences are important for women candidates, but are arguably more pervasive for women voters: women who are not at the centre of politics or power, whose interest in politics has failed to be sparked or has been severely diminished through a lack of training and understanding of the issues at stake. In other words, without a fundamental change in the politics and practice of education for women, the strengths and advantages that come with strong information behaviour will continue to be an asset for men and, in the majority of cases, a weakness for women.

Conclusion

Information and information behaviour are recognized as essential aspects of political life, but the importance of these traits for women in politics has not (yet) been underlined quite as strongly. Any political career, and any basic interest in politics or political participation, is anchored in an understanding of the issues, concerns and needs that exist in a particular community. New technologies such as mobile phones, the internet and social media offer plenty of exciting possibilities for women in politics, but experience has showed that these new developments are not as 'gender neutral' as they were initially thought to be. Women are often still kept at arms' length of a society's or group's most crucial information circle, which fundamentally hampers their political participation and ambitions. This paper has sought to detail some ways to overcome this, such as training and skills building, the use of social, political and informal networks, a stronger relationship with civil society groups, and a stronger focus on girls' and women's education in general. While none of these approaches offer a quick fix, empowering women through improved information behaviour, however small, will serve to strengthen the number and activities of women in politics.

Further Reading

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