

Summary of online discussion “Can young people break the socio-cultural and institutional barriers for women in politics?”

In preparation for the First IPU Global conference of Young Parliamentarians, iKNOW Politics hosted an online discussion on the political participation of youth and their capacity to empower women. The discussion received feedback from several different countries including Belgium, Britain, Bulgaria, Ethiopia, Fiji, France, England, USA, China, Lebanon, Malaysia, Netherlands, Suriname and Uganda. The discussion is still open and we would love to have young parliamentarians join in and share their ideas!

Launch message

Political institutions have traditionally been created in male dominated societies in which men formulate the rules of the political game. Although traditional political institutions have undertaken efforts to become more accessible for young people and women, it seems these efforts were not enough to break the hierarchical structure of these institutions. In both North and South, citizens are disappointed with governments, based on concerns of corruption, lack of responsiveness to the needs of the poor and the absence of a sense of connection with elected representatives and bureaucrats. With the flourishing of civil society and new forms of participatory democracy, citizens have forged new paths to representation and activism. Young people have found a way to have their voices heard, by leading movements such as “Occupy Wall Street”, the “Indignados”, the protests in Tahir Square and many others, where young women have also actively engaged.

- Could these alternatives pave a way to increased participation of young women in politics?
- Can young people change the male dominated political culture in political institutions?
- Are women’s concerns better addressed by young people? Are youth more sensitive to discrimination and gender based violence?

The following is a summary based on user comments on this topic.

Q.1 Could these alternatives pave a way to increased participation of young women in politics?

Formal political institutions are overwhelmingly male dominated and only function by granting tokens and displays of good-will assuring that their powerbase remains uninterrupted. This is why civil society – and particularly youth and women- have sought alternative means to demand rights and action on social, political, economic and cultural problems.

Women participating in leading movements such as "Occupy Wall Street", "Indignados" and the protests in Tahir Square, will definitely increase the number of young women in politics. These movements educate women on how important they are in a political sector. They also inspire women around the world to become more involved and more vocal in politics.

Many women now realize that working from outside the masculine political institutions might provide better means to have their voices heard. Some female politicians abandon political posts to better address their issues from outside formal political structures. Because, when women enter politics, they become part of a political structure and culture where they often have to surrender their activism and lobbying spirit to play the political game according to certain rules and remain loyal to the agendas of their political parties. But operating from outside the formal political framework leaves them with unlimited innovative means to engage politics.

With the flourishing of new forms of participatory democracy, citizens have created new "lobbies" and "networks" to be able to change the status quo imposed by the political elite. These alternatives, however, are not necessarily aimed at entering politics or creating space for other groups (women, youth, elderly, minorities, etc.) to become part of the masculine powerbase and do not always call for long-term political positioning of activists in formal politics. They are more often intended as confrontation and to rally allies to advance specific causes. The positive outcome of alternative engagement is increased awareness levels of political issues with subsequent increases in political engagement/participation, albeit not necessarily from within the formal political structure.

So while these alternatives could pave the way to increase women's participation in politics (with the precondition that women are educated and economically enabled), care must be taken to ensure that these informal methods of engagement translate to more participation in formal decision making and election to offices. In a thesis by one of our members, she holds that while participatory democracy is increasing with the help of new tools and mediums such as social media, online networks and online advocacy, the core problem is that this activism often remains confined in the "virtual sphere". Political institutions need people on the ground to work on changing them from the inside not only through virtual platforms. Activism on the

ground combined with virtual online activism, that creates networks and communities with common interests, will lend young people and women a heard voice that can bring about change. One requirement to integrate youth in formal political processes is a youth-friendly legal framework. In many countries, laws stipulate an eligibility age to run for parliament at 25 years or higher - creating a gap between the voting age, and the age at which an individual can serve in elected office. Good legal practices to foster youth participation include:

- Aligning the minimum voting age and the minimum age of eligibility to run for office;
- Introducing youth and women's quotas in electoral laws; and
- Identifying and addressing context-specific legal barriers to youth participation, such as to facilitate the registration of youth-led organizations.

Civil society organizations (CSOs) and political parties could:

- Review and discuss the legal framework for youth participation;
- Consider proposals for a youth-friendly legal framework; and
- Campaign for changes.

Q.2 Can young people change the male dominated political culture in political institutions?

Admittedly, legislative assemblies and political parties are, alongside other bureaucratic institutions, gendered. The configuration of state hierarchies enables men to predominate the higher echelons thus enabling them to wield positional authority. Male dominance of positions of power and the entrenchment of a culture hostile to women (that is exuded in both the formal and informal channels) only serves to relegate the role of women. Therefore the pressing question is "Can young people break the socio-cultural and institutional barriers for women in politics?"

Young people are doubtlessly a major force that drives progress and changes circumstances which they consider unfair. Their capacity to bring about change has been demonstrated repeatedly throughout history. Young People [men and women] have in the majority of past societies [France during the revolution; the American Colonies when seeking independence from England; China during the long march prior to the communist insurgency] generated and inspired social and political change. More recent examples include the 2011 uprisings in the Middle East and the 2013 civil protests in Bulgaria that were organized in Sofia mainly by young people against corruption and the connection between politics and mafia. Among the leaders of these protests there were many young women and some of them became faces of various civil society organizations. Currently these organizations participate in political discussions and even propose legislative changes.

However, at the outset, it is important to note that young people are not a homogenous group anywhere. Differences in locality, region, culture, religion, urban-rural divide, rich-poor divide, etc, all add to their diversity and the different ways they deal with issues within their contexts. Not all young people are aware of the continuing struggle for women's inclusion, and some are still exposed to stereotypical knowledge on women's issues, and issues of social justice, development and inclusion. Still, youth remain a major driving force for change if they are well informed and well fed with knowledge and awareness.

Youth are likely to learn from imitation and apprenticeship. According to a White House Project Education Fund study, young women and men involved in politics were found to have been previously involved in community projects (Ford, 2002) or born in families in which civic behavior was modeled by their parents. The men and women in the study who showed interest in running for office were also found to have had some apprentice leadership opportunity at school. The research therefore emphasizes that providing young girls with mentors, role models and avenues of practicing politics, before transitioning into adulthood has a positive impact on their interest in politics as well as their ambition for office. In Jordan for example UNDP has created a youth program with the Ministry of Political Development (MoPD). They are learning in depth about politics, holding mock elections, having interactive training on public speaking and learning how to use social media as leverage (something older political figures wouldn't have experience with). If we can educate young people more they might be able to have a chance in changing the existing political institutions.

However, one of our members, who has worked with youth, observed that there is also a dose of selfishness and a powerful notion of individualism among them. So while they can most definitely contribute to breaking cultural barriers for women's political participation, it is important to raise their consciousness and interest in this topic starting in schools and universities. Young people must see the importance of women's political participation and the equal distribution of power. It is crucial that they learn from the past where groups tried to change the masculine, patronizing political structure and become part of the decision making process and how enduring these struggles were.

Q.3 Are women's concerns better addressed by young people? Are youth more sensitive to discrimination and gender based violence?

Some of our members argue that women's concerns are not necessarily better addressed by any particular group, including young people. In addition to the fact that many young people (including young women in western societies) are not aware of existing gender discrimination or the history of the women's rights movements. They contend that the best fighters for women's emancipation, freedom and rights are now aging and that only a negligible portion of

youth are involved nowadays in this struggle. It is not that the older generation failed to hand over the torch to the next generation, it is more that because of their grand achievements in their times there exists a misconception at present among young people that women's emancipation is a done issue and that women are equal at all levels. This is regrettable because women fail to realize that their rights and gains should not be taken for granted and that they remain in patriarchal control. It could also be that women in many countries realize that the fight to change patriarchal structures in favour of gender equality is unrewarding and endless. This may turn their attention to issues with more direct outputs and outcomes. Young people often want to see the outcome of their action. That gives them a boost. Struggling for women's rights is not among these.

While it is not sure that women's issues are necessarily better addressed by young people, but it is certainly true that the young people of today will be bringing about the change of the future and it is fairly certain that more progress will be made concerning women's rights in the next fifty years than has been made in the past fifty years, which is saying something. The reason for this is now more than ever we are aware of the approaches that work to ignite real change. Youth led organizations and protests can have an incredible impact on society. Additionally, the millennial generation has a totally different perspective on women's rights. While older generations have been more exposed to a typically male-dominated society, young people are definitely getting more and more used to the idea that women can do everything men can do. This is made all the more possible by the media, internet and television shows. It doesn't hurt that those controlling the media - the Western world - are mainly becoming more and more liberal, meaning they are open to new and progressive ideas concerning women in politics. Sites such as Ted Talks expose people all over the world to real issues and show the ways in which people can contribute.

To conclude, it has been argued that in order to effectively address women's issues all tiers of society should be included. Some of our users suggested that this particularly important since different age groups tend to be concerned with particular issues. For example, younger people might be more concerned by things such as access to abortion/ birth control, maternity leave and access to proper healthcare/ assistance during pregnancy. Older generations might be concerned with things like social security benefits after deceased partners' death. Older women are also important because they can act as role models and can educate younger women about women's issues. But it is doubtless that today youth are empowered in ways that did not exist before and that they represent an incredibly strong and dynamic force in today's societies that must be involved in the struggle for gender equality.

We would like to sincerely thank all participants for contributing to this forum.



About iKNOW Politics

The International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics (www.iKNOWPolitics.org) is an online network 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. The Network was created in 2007 by five international organizations:

- 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)

In six years, iKNOW Politics has become a leading resource on women's political participation. Building on a library of over 3000 resources, iKNOW Politics has developed a unique specialized knowledge base on women in politics. Additionally, iKNOW Politics provides a platform for thematic online discussions for our 10,000 members who hail from over 150 countries and works with 60 international experts that provide advice and information to our users. These exchanges are documented and the combined input from experts and members worldwide is compiled in Consolidated Responses providing lessons and best practices for women as voters, candidates and elected legislators.

Please visit the iKNOW Politics website to post 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. iKNOW Politics is available in **Arabic, English, French and Spanish.**