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Resistance to Women's Political Leadership: Problems and Advocated Solutions

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to outline and evaluate the barriers women face in becoming representatives and the position of women in public and political life. The paper will outline legislative proposals and the process of lobbying for the increase in the levels of women's representation in political life at the party-level and in civil society. Finally, proposed ways of reaching parity in democracy will be assessed and alternative solutions will be suggested. The quotas system will be presented, together with other strategies that could act as building blocks of a comprehensive strategy to maximize opportunities for women entering the political decision-making process.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The glass ceiling is an easily applied metaphor used to explain the subtle, invisible obstacles women face on their way to public office, which until recently was practically if not formally closed to them. Although the underrepresentation of women in political decision making remains unsolved even in established democracies around the world, many countries have decided to undertake special measures to change the that status quo, owing to the principle of gender-balanced representation as a necessary step towards eliminating the discrimination of women in the public and economic spheres of life.

Although quotas raise a lot of controversy the exclusion of women from decision-making in transformation, coupled with growing patriarchal and conservative political attitudes displayed in public life, have made the demand for a more gender-balanced representation relevant. However, the demand for more gender-balanced representation needs to be based on proper understanding of the actual barriers women keep facing on their path to political career and total empowerment. It is thus important to focus on **institutions** where barriers occur, the **process** in which they occur and the main **actors** involved. The institutions of interest here include the legislature, political parties and the process of candidate selection, as well as the decision-makers involved in making the selection at its various stages.

The first two sections of this paper explores key arguments for the inclusion of women, and the conceptualisation of barriers preventing this inclusion. The next two sections analyse the developments in the area of women's representation, particularly women's position on candidate lists and actions aimed at improving it. The final section outlines the possible solutions, evaluates the proposed ones and offers recommendations on the strategies that could be used to dismantle the existing barriers and open up more space for the inclusion of women into the legislature.

2. FRAMING THE PROBLEM OF UNDERREPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN POLITICS & DECISION-MAKING

Representation is at the core of democracy. Legislators are responsible for both governing the nation as well as representing the interests of their constituents. The gender of the representative has traditionally been an outcome of a natural hierarchy of sexes where men exercised control over women and, consequently, represented their interests in the public sphere.

Due to their dominant nature, men have engaged in a style of governance that has perpetuated their control over public and private spheres, as well as material and cultural resources. Women were denied an independent articulation of their interests in public matters and subsequently a whole range of rights by virtue of being denied suffrage, then education and resources, and the social approval necessary to hold public office.

The understanding around the impact of gender on representation has changed significantly due to the feminist critique of social relations, making more women aware of the need to be represented by women. Research on women in parliaments identifies several justifications for the inclusion of women into the legislature. The first argument for women inclusion in building successful democracies is the need for peace and sustainability. In a society, all members must benefit from its existence and have an interest in its perpetuation. Without a substantial number of women in representation, there is little chance for women to have any distinct input in the shaping of the common good. As the saying goes, a democracy without women is just but half a democracy.

The second argument pertains to the notion of development or progress. It is a well-supported claim that poverty affects women in often-disproportionate ways and will not be removed without women's full participation as agents in the process. Furthermore, the welfare of children, for example, will not be improved without targeting women as critical agents of development. In societies undergoing economic and political transition, the argument can be made that the benefits of this change will not be adequately utilised if women are 'left behind'. Moreover, women have been recognised as having an untapped pool of resources, whose skills should be made better use of.

The third argument suggests a shift from the principle of equal opportunities to the notion of equal impact that balanced participation of men and women would bring. When talking about the lack of women in political decision-making, we should argue not only for a 'politics of presence' but also for a 'politics of impact' that will be generated by women's inclusion. Making impact requires a women's political lobby to make male politicians pay attention and affect gender-sensitive legislation. Many women-directed policies and programs have been adopted thanks to strong female representation in parliaments that have achieved the critical mass of 30%.

However, to understand the reasons and the existing opportunities for change, we need to consider several issues more thoroughly. Firstly, we need a good overview of the barriers women face in a political system that prevents them from entering political-decision making in adequate numbers. Secondly, there is need to understand the history of women's involvement in politics alongside the structural and cultural factors that has led to their marginalisation. Understanding these issues will shed some light on the available solutions, help evaluate current proposals for action and suggest an alternative strategy.

3. CHALLENGES WOMEN FACE ON BEING ELECTED TO PUBLIC OFFICE

The most powerful barrier is the impact of societal culture, specifically, persisting gender stereotyping of politics as exclusively as a men's activity and the perception of politics as 'dirty business.' Facing these deeply held stereotypes and beliefs is not easy for most women. Moreover, the few successful female politicians are seen as 'un-feminine' or perceived as 'honorary men'. Thus women give up a chance of a political career very early on in the selection process, by losing the motivation to become a candidate.

Then, if they do reach the level of aspirants, economic reasons, such as poorly paying jobs and limited access to large funds necessary for running successful campaigns put them at a disadvantaged position. The expectations placed on women to maintain all family order, provide care of both children and the household, make political career excruciating . In some cases, a decision to take up office might end up in a divorce, and only those women who are older and have grown up children or those few who have supportive partners can afford a smoother political career. The stress and guilt indirectly makes it difficult and prevents women from taking up a political career.

Aside from the perspectives of journalists and comedians, the media coverage of female versus male political candidates has recently been cited as another barrier in breaking the glass ceiling for women in politics. News coverage of women candidates running for election are often covered in a negative, stereotypical and often sexist way. For example, Some women are portrayed as a sex objects while others are attacked for their lack of femininity in print, television and social media. By emphasizing feminine traits and issues, and according less coverage, voters are left questioning about the viability of women as candidates.

The next barrier has to do with party gatekeepers (senior party officials/members) and how possible or impossible they make it for women to be candidates and which position they decide to vie. It is within political parties that the marginalisation of women's rights, skills and experiences has been most visible . These are the institutional barriers in the middle of the selection process that affect women who are interested or have already made a decision to run for office. The level at which political parties as an institution promote or constrain women's selection is undoubtedly important as parties are the main channels through which women can be elected as representatives. Both **internal and external constraints** guide party decisions and actors and consequently affect the selection of women. For example, the type of electoral system and the presence or absence of regulation such as national quota for women or gender equality legislature play a role as much as all the stereotypes of women's roles. The internal party selection rules and regulations and informal practices of the party as an institution also play a role. The presence or absence of gender equality perspective in the internal statutes and the presence or absence supportive framework for promoting women dictates the levels of women's participation. This is to say that the opinions of the party leadership on gender equality and the style of decision-making processes they apply have huge impact especially during the selection process.

In countries where majority system is the norm, women face direct competition with men in the party in their fight for the one electoral mandate, and parties do not feel the need to present a 'balanced ballot' to the electorate. In proportional representation systems, there are numerous positions within each constituency that can be filled by both male and female members of parliament and parties are encouraged to present a more balanced ballot. For this to happen, there needs to be a social expectation of a balanced ballot from voters themselves, gender equality and parity in politics must be publicly demanded. The key aspect determining women's success is the position of women on the party lists. A close look at the composition of national lists and one can't help but site the discrimination . Proportional

Representative systems are proving increasingly advantageous to the increase in women's representation because they produce more representational democracy and prevent the formation of strong parties and low turnovers in legislature.

All of these factors and barriers should be taken into account but it is also important to note that some structural factors have also been sited as positively relating to women's political participation. For example, the level of economic development, women's participation in the labour force, the presence of strong women movements and absence of extreme religious practices can raise levels of participation.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS; FROM PROBLEMS TO SOLUTIONS

So far we have come to identify several important issues. Firstly, that there are **structural, cultural and institutional barriers** are all present and interlinked. Secondly, that these barriers exist on several levels of the selection process, starting with the personal decision to get involved, then secondly the party **selection barrier** which affects women's **placement** on the lists, and finally the **election barrier**, where voters' decision affects women's entry into the parliament. We can also deduce that there are three main actors in the process: the pool of women who aspire to become potential candidates, the political party leaders, and the voters. Therefore, a successful strategy aiming at changing the current state of affairs would need to affect all of the existing barriers and should impact the three groups of actors. It can also be argued that party rules and practices are of greatest importance and party leaders are the main gatekeepers to office.

Regulatory solutions usually receive most attention for the obvious reason that they result in concrete legal changes, including changes in the constitution. Yet implementing them has been considerably difficult as they require political will, and ideological alignment of the government and the governing political parties with the principle of gender equality. The gains of this solution are measurable and present a strong base for lobbying on the part of women's groups, provided that the solutions are accepted by the public to the extent, that it is politically feasible and does not provoke a backlash reaction either within the political leadership or the voters. However, despite the lobbying process and work undertaken by women parliamentary groups and women's organisations, negative views on quotas are widespread in the media. We may conclude that this strategy has not had a big impact. Most of the time it is not well designed, is ill- timed and has low political feasibility.

Financial solutions solutions such as incentives can be envisaged. For example, rather then controlling or regulating the numbers of women on the lists, a government could reward parties which have a critical mass of women on the lists or at the top of the lists with extra funding, higher thresholds for external funding, or extra campaign time on public television. The incentive would be another way to persuade political parties to change their gendered selection practices.

Party-level solutions At this level, political parties have freedom in creating and designing their own strategy, do it is less challenging politically. Improving competitiveness of behaviour between parties of similar ideological alignment might work to further promote the demand for women candidates. Internal party quota or gender targets and strategies, particularly when demanded by other actors, such as the government, women's coalition groups across party lines and in civil society can have big impact. Moreover, where regulation is insufficient or totally absent, the activism of women's organisations and women politicians, who form coalitions and ran their own pro-women electoral campaigns has been seen to be working. This seems to stimulate political parties to start paying attention to the role and number of female candidates on their lists.

Boosting and promoting solutions means public image of female politicians and advocating the idea of voting for women should not be underestimated. Government 's national gender offices, Non- Governmental Organization and women groups can improve the position of women in political parties. Pre-Election coalitions of Women groups and elect/vote for women campaigns with the main aim of getting more women elected have proved to be effective. A strong coalition between women from very different parties sends a strong message as that women can cooperate very well outside the party without interfering with their party's program. Combined with successful media campaigns on highlighting women's better understanding of their own and society needs, their good qualifications and ability to 'soften' politics as well as being less motivated by personal ambition then men, parties may feel pressured and compelled to create better conditions for women to become candidates but the choice still belongs to the voters. Positive media attention is changing public perception of women in politics where it is becoming increasingly fashionable and prestigious for leaders of political parties to promote women among their candidates. Women activists are perhaps becoming the most active non-party elements in Elect/Vote for women campaigns, which is significant step in changing apathy, disillusionment and lack of trust for politicians. Increased cooperation between female politicians and women's NGOs focusing on local elections and lobbying the government in cases where women's interests are perceived to be at risk is becoming a visible part of the electoral campaigns, by virtue of noticeable changes in the parties' position on women. The resulting increase in the percentage of female representatives demands serious attention as it may have implications for future trends for women politicians.

Training and mentorship solutions for female candidates from political parties to boost their self confidence and their media profile as well as their political skills and mentorship by more experienced female politicians could be an excellent way to achieve better balance. Training schemes sponsored by the government aimed at training and sensitising party leaders to gender could improve the equality perspective. However, this has not yet been envisaged as an option, and most of the time the politicians and party leaders lack necessary information and knowledge on gender equality mechanisms. Thus, women's organisations have taken up the role of activating leadership potential among women.

All in all, we need a dramatic change in political perception of the quota and parity solutions. More grassroots pressure by women's groups to change regulation will be difficult but at the

same time, party-level solutions could be applied as they are already politically acceptable. Other strategies would need to be explored and utilised in order to make political career more appealing to a larger number of potential women candidates and to further improve the public opinion on women in office as well as further increase the percentage of votes cast for female candidates. In simple terms, women need to be persuaded that they are capable of holding public office, the party leaders have to be persuaded that women have the potential to be successful politicians and the voters need to be persuaded that women can be successful representatives. Changes among any of these groups are likely to reinforce each other but the primary decision-makers are still party-leaders.

5. CONCLUSION

This aim of this paper was to analyse the problem of underrepresentation of women and to offer some evaluations and suggestions on the process of lobbying for mechanisms to solve the problem. To this end, we have outlined the key arguments for the inclusion of a critical mass of women in the legislature, and the several stages and barriers that prevent this inclusion. This background information, together with the more general understanding of the problem has led us to evaluating the current policy changes and to offering suggestions on what elements would make a more successful strategy. In short, the focus should go to designing a strategy which would unleash change among all of the actors involved in the selection process of women, and by doing so to help dismantle all of the existing barriers in a most impactful way possible. The success of this strategy would need to help more women overcome their personal lack of self-belief, provide more pressure on the level of political leadership in order to include adequate numbers of women on electoral lists in the places where it counts, and, persuading the voters to further change their perceptions of women politicians so that more women would actually get elected.

What has been called to attention here, is the picture of political parties as the main institutions controlling women's access to political representation need to be changed and that it can successfully be done. Women's lobbying is also important, both as an alternative political space for the articulation of women's interests than the parties themselves and more importantly as catalysts for change in public opinion and political parties. Unfortunately, the current proposal of total and complete equality status between men and women is likely to be either unsuccessful or ineffective because there is no adequate support for such regulation across the board. At the moment there is little to no discussion on alternative or best solutions that could be applied. And, without a comprehensive strategy taking all the barriers women face into account, while being rooted in the political realities of each individual country, it will not be possible to achieve gender-balanced political representation in the world for a long time.