

Summary of e-discussion on women mayors, heads of villages, towns and cities

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Introduction

On September 12th 2014 iKNOW Politics launched an online discussion about women's access to, and experience in, mayoral positions. The discussion received contributions from several countries, including Argentina, Australia, Cameroon, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, Romania, Sierra Leone, Slovenia and the USA. The following summary was prepared based on user responses to the following questions:

- 1. What are the greatest challenges for women in accessing mayoral positions?
- 2. Are there any mechanisms or good practices that have been implemented to encourage the election of women mayors?
- 3. Are there any advantages to having a woman mayor? Are cities with woman mayors more responsive to the needs and rights of women?

1. What are the greatest challenges for women in accessing mayoral positions?

The discussion identified several factors explaining why women remain so under-represented in local politics, including socio-cultural norms that do not value women's role in public life, the absence of legal frameworks that 'fast-track' women's presence, the daunting nature of the electoral process for many women, and the discriminatory treatment faced by women in local politics which discourages other women from running.

Socio-cultural norms that do not value women's role in public life

Significant challenges to women's election to senior decision-making positions such as mayors include patriarchal notions of women's role and place in society and the discriminatory attitudes and discourse of political opponents. The combined effect of socio-political constraints and socio-cultural biases hampers the emergence of a structured political empowerment dynamic which is often also coupled with widespread reluctance to nominate women (political parties) or vote for them (constituencies). Women perceive the electoral environment as biased and discriminatory against female candidates, a perception that is aggravated by harsh media coverage of women politicians.¹

¹ Brunner, J. (February 2, 2013) Why don't we have a woman mayor? Seattle Times. Retrieved on September 24, 2014 from http://seattletimes.com/html/localnews/2020275703_femalemayorsxml.html

The other barrier is that women are often tasked with much more childcare and household chores than men are. The unequal distribution of family responsibilities (children's education, sick family members and housework - which almost exclusively fall on women) result in a double work shift and further constraints to opportunities for professional and personal development – and most definitely the capacity to campaign and run for mayoral office.

The daunting nature of the electoral process

Women in office face much more scrutiny than their male counterparts – scrutiny of both their personal lives and their political decisions. Every aspect of a woman mayor's personal life is inspected - even her appearance (ex: too masculine/ too feminine) is a subject of headlines. This is not the case with male candidates. Additionally, if a woman commits the slightest professional error, she is harshly judged, and swiftly labeled as unfit for leadership. This makes being in office a huge challenge for women who must constantly fight to reach their goals and calculate their every move.

One of the main reasons there are less women than there are men in any political office is that less women actually run! Certainly, the dissemination of information regarding the electoral environment and recruiting of female candidates can play a significant role in narrowing the extant gender gap in ambitions and ultimately shore up the representation of women.

A study carried out for the Women & Politics Institute at American University established that there was a substantial gap in political ambition between men and women: Men have greater political ambition compared to women and are more likely to aspire to political office. The study established that women are less likely to talk themselves into vying for office compared to men. The Brunner study asserts that when women actually run for office, they have an equal chance of succeeding than their male counterparts based on fundraising and electoral results.²

Women tend to be much less likely than men to regard themselves as qualified enough to run for office. Potential female candidates are less confident, less competitive and more risk averse relative to their male counterparts.

On top of women's natural reluctance to run for office, studies have demonstrated that women are also less likely than men to receive the suggestion to run for office – from anyone.

Women's experience of local politics

² Brunner, J. (February 2, 2013) Why don't we have a woman mayor? Seattle Times. Retrieved on September 24, 2014 from http://seattletimes.com/html/localnews/2020275703_femalemayorsxml.html

Women mayors and all those who occupy important positions in the public domain are not as visible in the media as men politicians are. And when they are featured in mainstream media, the way the media covers female and male officials is very different and the trend does not seem like it's about to change. Women need to develop alternative communication strategies so that other women – and men- recognize their leadership and competence.

According to research by the Uniciencia University of Colombia on the political participation of women in the Mercosur countries, the challenge is in the need to promote democracy within political parties. It is essential that political parties reform their policies to ensure gender balanced access to internal positions as well as on nomination lists.

Are there any mechanisms or good practices that have been implemented to encourage the election of women mayors?

Observations made during the e-discussion identified four main types of strategies to encourage the election of more women in local politics, including increasing the visibility of strong role models; creating collaborative support networks; implementing training and capacity building programmes for women; developing stronger legal frameworks; and ensuring that responsibility for gender equality is shared between men and women.

Visibility of strong role models

Although research varies on what cultivates strong leaders, there is consensus that the visibility of role models plays a significant part in building leadership and political aspiration among women.

iKNOW Politics member from Australia shared their experience from Victoria, one of the 6 Australian States. In 2013, 30% of mayors were women, but each year the numbers go up and down. Talking with women mayors and those who have been mayors, they all say how they valued the experience and the opportunity to achieve for and learn even more about their communities. Often they will say that young girls and their mothers told them how wonderful it was to have a women mayor as a role model³.

One reason why women mayors are less visible as role models could be that women are more often elected in smaller cities.

³ More stories about women mayors and women councilors on the website Now You're a Councillor www.nyac.org.au

IKP members from the USA mentioned that, while in recent decades, women have made substantial gains in political representation, the top political offices in the United States have remained male dominated-in particular, the big city mayoral positions. Moreover, in the largest 100 cities in the country, only 12 of them had women mayors as at 2012. Some cities such as Los Angeles and New York have never elected a woman mayor. However, in the small cities, 17% of the populations with a population of less than 30,000 are led by women mayors. This happens in Washington, with cities such as Kent, Tacoma and Spokane that have at least had women mayors.

A similar experience was shared by members from Romania, where Romania had the biggest number of women mayors in the East European region. However, women mayors only appear to preside over the small impoverished rural localities where men were not interested to take the responsibility for poorly paid and hopeless positions.

Forging networks

Collaboration of civic-minded women's organizations offering technical, skills, financial and emotional support for women serving in public office across the political trajectory: increasingly, these organizations are leveraging their shared vision of gender equality in civic spaces and working more effectively in a networked way. They partner on events; they speak before their respective memberships; they exchange knowledge on effective structural development; they cross promote. This increases name recognition, expands access to fundraising networks, and unites commitment to elevating women's representation in legislative and executive political positions. Two recent studies conducted by Political Parity and the Institute for Women's Policy Research assert that greater collaboration between women's organizations is needed to recruit more women candidates and have more successful elected female leaders. "Imagine the unified power of our women's political groups: locally, regionally, statewide and prepping for, in the United States, our first woman President come 2016?"⁴

One such example is the Women Mayors' Link (WML) which is an initiative of the Stability Pact Gender Task Force (SP GTF, <http://www.gtf.hr>), a project developed in 12 countries and territories of the Stability Pact (SP) Region with the Equal Opportunities for Women Foundation (SEF) as the lead organization. Direct beneficiaries of WML are 50 selected women mayors from targeted SP countries and territories: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Greece, Hungary, Kosovo, Moldova, Romania, Serbia and Montenegro, Slovenia. Begun in 2002, the purpose of the WML is to foster cooperation between women mayors and local governments and local women's networks in preparing small projects to improve the

⁴ Excerpt from user comment. To see all original comments please go to:

<http://iknowpolitics.org/en/discuss/circles/e-discussion-women-mayors-women-elected-head-villages-towns-and-cities>

quality of life of women and children in local communities. It aims to initiate and facilitate regional and international exchange of best practices in similar projects; lobby for better representation of women in local government; and support efforts of women mayors in increasing people's participation in the problem-solving process of their communities.

Training and capacity building

Women do not have the same access to networks and support groups that men have forged over decades of political dominance. As such it is essential to devise mechanisms to provide women in local office the knowledge needed to fulfill their administrative duties, recognize their leadership, their influence, the importance of partnership and negotiation skills. Initiatives such as the Stability Pact Gender Task Force created in 1999, support women by training them and campaigning for more women to be elected in local governments. As a result of the Task Force's work, the very first women mayors were elected in Macedonia, in Albania, the number of women mayors doubled, while women mayors were elected in the capitals Belgrade, Ljubiana, Zagreb.

Legislation

Most case studies reveal the success of quota systems and alternate party lists in fostering women's access to office.

In Nicaragua for example , it was established, through reform of the electoral law of May 2012, that the lists of candidates of political parties must be gender-balanced (Act 331, Art. 82). During the municipal elections which took place this year, the reform resulted in the election of 55 women mayors out of a total of 153 municipalities (36%).

So while it is certain that a favorable legal framework represents a great opportunity, there are still obstacles to overcome both within political institutions and within society itself. In this regard, interesting experiences were shared from countries where legislation alone did not impact the number of women mayors.

In Ecuador, for example, the constitution is an important step towards the protection of gender equality, seeing the state's actions focus on inclusion policies. Despite the country's requirements that candidate lists be gender-balanced (50/50) and various initiatives that promote women's political participation, women's effective participation in local governments in the country is still very low. During the local elections, that took place on February 23rd 2014, there were 16,317 male candidates (57.9%) and 11 863 female candidates (42.1%). Yet in spite of this, the election results were not gender-balanced: 4184 men elected (74.3%) and 1444

women elected (25.7%).

A similar experience was shared by a member from Cameroon. Despite recent legislative measures in Cameroon, that promote women's participation in electoral contests at all levels, IKP members noticed that it is clear that the political class (predominantly male) has not yet accepted this. In the last municipal elections which took place on September 30th 2013, almost all political parties limited the number of women candidates to the minimum threshold (30%) set by the law. And few women were nominated by their peers to municipal executive bodies and even less were placed at the top. However, the handful of women mayors in office that are in charge of relatively large constituencies enjoy good reputations within local populations. These are mostly charismatic leaders who have set themselves apart from their male counterparts in their ability to respond to the needs of their communities by implementing concrete initiatives.

Sharing responsibility for gender equality with men

Given the slow rate of progress, there is perhaps a need to (re)consider traditional approaches to women's political empowerment that only involve women in the discourse. One recent initiative calls on men to contribute to an interactive dialogue through the UN Women #HeForShe campaign.⁵ The campaign is premised on the argument that, in order to achieve gender equality, men need to step up and take responsibility for gender equality, which will benefit society as a whole.

Are there any advantages to having a woman mayor? Are cities with woman mayors more responsive to the needs and rights of women?

The traditional rhetoric for including more women in leadership and decision making positions was based on the need for "equality and fairness". Now, there is a growing consensus that putting more women in charge is the smart thing to do. There is a growing argument that women make more effective leaders than their male counterparts. Some anecdotal research suggests that women in public office have a gender related impact in public policy.⁶

⁵ To find out more about the He for She campaign please visit: <http://www.heforshe.org/>

⁶ See "The Impact of Women in Public Office"

Some observations that were made regarding the argument that women are better community leaders are:

- (a) Women are highly committed to promoting national and local policies that address the socio-economic and political challenges facing women, children and disadvantaged groups.

IKP members shared some experiences from women mayors who are particularly committed to advocating for disadvantaged groups in society. An example, from Sierra Leone shows that there is, however, double discrimination towards women who advocate for gay and bisexual rights such as Mary Yabonette Conteh, the National Coordinator Women's Centre for good Governance and Human rights WOCEGAR, who aspired for the position of Mayor in 2012 in Makeni City Northern part of Sierra Leone West Africa but didn't win.

- (b) Additionally it has been theorized that women possess better conflict resolution skills as well as the capacity for developing and building strong local communities because they have ability to tolerate and respect diversity.

- (c) Women are particularly effective in promoting honest government. Countries where women are supported as leaders and at the ballot box have a correspondingly low level of corruption.

- (d) Women are strongly linked to positive developments in education, infrastructure and health standards at the local level. Where rates of gender development and empowerment are higher, human rates of development and standards of living are also higher.

IKP members shared an inspiring story from Peru where the mayor of Lima, Susana Villarán's experience, is a prime example of women's accomplishment in local political office. She is trained, has realized many major construction projects and has implemented many reforms for the city of Lima, more than any other mayor who preceded her, but just because she is a woman, she has been heavily criticized; her opponents have taken advantage of the slightest mistake to discredit her. Mayor Susana Villa De la Puente has been the victim of extensive political harassment.

She has focused on social issues and the needs of "the individual", something which has not been done by others, seeing they have focused on construction projects which were useless in terms of contributing to the well-being and / or citizenship.

Under Susana Villarán, many actions have been completed and many policies have been formulated for women. The "Gerencia de la Mujer," a political training school for women, programs for women entrepreneurs with limited resources, a special participatory budget to achieve equality between women and men were created; gender equality has been systematized and integrated in various metropolitan policies (such as regional joint development plan, the regional plan for citizens security, participatory budgeting, etc.), centers of integral support for women victims of sexual violence were created etc.

All this has been put in place because the mayor is sensitive to gender issues and recognizes the importance of working on women's empowerment. However, this does not mean that the mere fact of being a woman ensures a gender focused agenda.

However, it remains important to note that the impact of women in public places tends to considerably vary from one political environment to another. And the mere presence of women in office does not guarantee change, as women are not a homogeneous group. Indeed, each woman has a particular perspective that is not necessarily gender focused. Cities with women mayors are only better for other women if the mayor is sensible to gender issues and if she actively puts in place positive measures to improve the status of women. In addition, she must be professionally trained to competently lead her administration. In order to be effective leaders these women need to be highly educated, knowledgeable of local laws and trained in public administration.

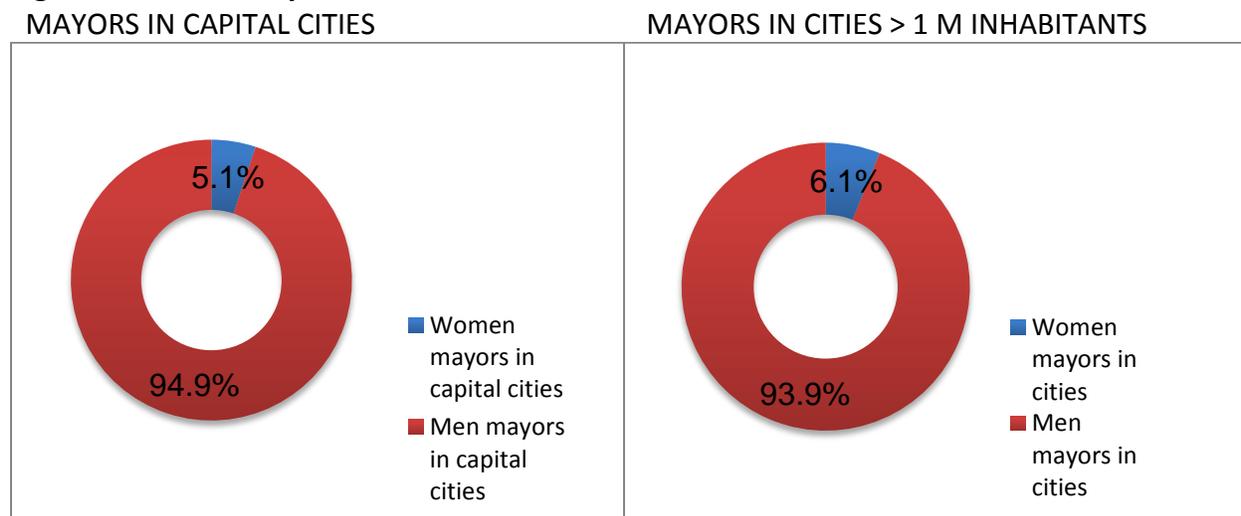
Annex: Launch message and Background info

While women have made great strides in politics, there are still some glass ceilings to be shattered. Among these are women's access to local government, and more particularly, to the most senior decision-making positions at local level, as mayors.

Women as Mayors

According to UCLG, as of 2014, women represent just over 5 percent of the mayors of capital cities worldwide, and 6 percent of cities with more than one million inhabitants.

Figure 1: Women mayors worldwide



Source: UCLG Standing Committee on Gender Equality, *The Equality Agenda of United Cities and Local Governments*, 2014, available at: <http://issuu.com/uclgcglu/docs/uclg-women-en?e=5168798/2752455>

These global averages, however, betray significant variability between countries. As of December 2014, some countries reported relatively high proportions of women mayors, including Mauritius (with 40 percent), New Zealand (26 percent), Serbia (26 percent), and Latvia (25 percent). With 500 women mayors and vice-mayors in its 661 cities, China holds the record for the country with the most women mayors.⁷

The variability is also evident within each country, as demonstrated by the case of the United States of America. Almost one hundred years after the first woman was elected mayor (in Seattle, in 1926), women represent only 18.4 percent (or, 249 of the 1351) of U.S. city mayors with populations over 30,000. Only 13 of the largest 100 cities in the U.S. had women mayors

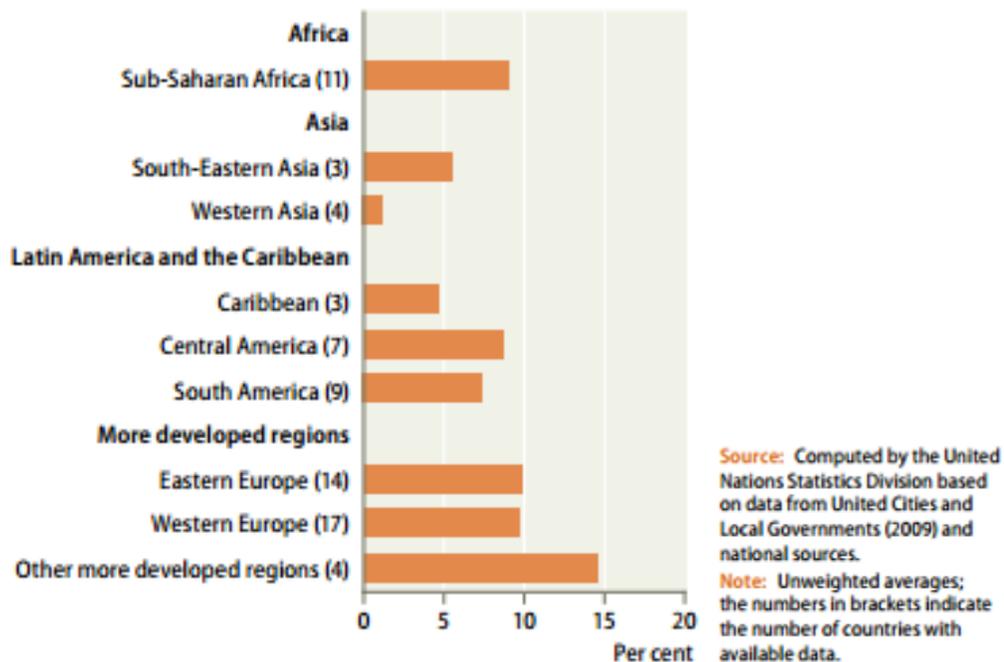
⁷ <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2013/09/18/women-mayor-quinn-greuel-richie/2833261/>

(13 percent)⁸ and only two of the nation's 10 largest cities is run by a woman (Houston and San Antonio).⁹

iKNOW Politics members also mentioned the example of Colombia, where in Bogotá, the Colombian capital has yet to elect its first woman mayor, despite having elections since 1986. So far there have only been 3 female candidates with a real chance of being elected but none have succeeded in being elected to office. Colombians are hopeful that in the upcoming elections next year, it is likely that a woman will be elected. The bigger the administration, the more options there would be for women.

In addition to the variability, there are also considerable data gaps due to the lack of systematically collected data across all countries and all cities, and the absence of a central repository of data on women's political participation at the local level. In 2010, the United Nations Statistics Division was only able to report averages for a small number of countries in each region in its report, *The World's Women* (see Figure 2 below). Of the 193 Member States of the United Nations, data on women's share of mayoral positions was available only for 72 countries (or just over 37 percent).

Share of women among mayors, by region, 2003–2008 (latest available)



⁸ http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/fast_facts/levels_of_office/Local-WomenMayors.php

⁹ <http://www.usmayors.org/meetmayors/mayorsatglance.asp>

Source: UN Statistics Division, 2010. *The World's Women 2010. Trends and Statistics*. Available at: http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/Worldswomen/WW2010Report_by%20chapterBW/Power&ecmaking_BW.pdf

From the data that is available, it is clear that women are significantly under-represented at senior decision making levels both at local and national levels. Women accounted for just less than 6 percent of all heads of state, and less than 8 percent of all heads of government in January 2014.

Questions remain as to why women continue to be so significantly under-represented, and what drives perceptions of women as leaders and women's leadership styles, at all levels of politics.

Exclusive iKNOW Politics interviews with women Mayors from around the world:

[Adelma Salas, President of the Paraguayan Network of Women Municipal Leaders](#)

[Emma Yohanna, Candidate in the Municipal elections of Padang, Indonesia](#)

[Janet Mikhael, the first female mayor in the Occupied Palestinian Territories](#)

[Sylvina Murni, Mayor of Central Jakarta, first woman Mayor in Indonesia](#)