

WHY WOMEN IN POLITICS?

There is growing recognition of the untapped capacity and talents of women and women's leadership. Over the last decade, the rate of women's representation in national parliaments globally has incrementally increased from 15 percent in 2002 to 19.8 percent in 2012. Some regions have seen particularly dramatic increases, such as Sub-Saharan Africa, where the number of women in parliaments has risen from 13.7 to 19.8 percent, and the Arab States region, which has seen an increase from 6.1 to 14.7 percent. This is still well below the 30 percent benchmark often identified as the necessary level of representation to achieve a "critical mass" – not to mention falling short of women's representation as half of the world's population.

The full and equitable participation of women in public life is essential to building and sustaining strong, vibrant democracies. Accordingly, the meaningful participation of women in national, local and community leadership roles has become an important focus of global development policy. Still, some may ask **WHY** it matters if women become political leaders, elected policymakers or civil society activists. **WHY** does the world need more women involved in all aspects of the political process? 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.

Women's participation in politics helps advance gender equality and affects both the range of policy issues that get considered and the types of solutions that are proposed. Research indicates that whether a legislator is male or female has a distinct impact on their policy priorities, making it critical that women are present in politics to represent the concerns of women and other marginalized voters and help improve the responsiveness of policy making and governance.¹ There is strong evidence that as more women are elected to office, there is also a corollary increase in policy making that emphasizes quality of life and 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, and helps democracy deliver.

WOMEN WORK ACROSS PARTY LINES

Research shows that women's leadership and conflict resolution styles embody democratic ideals and that women tend to work in a less hierarchical, more participatory and more collaborative way than male colleagues.² 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.³

- Twenty-five percent of women lawmakers in the U.S. cite women from the opposition party as key supporters of their top legislation, while only 17 percent of male lawmakers name similar support.⁴
- In the Russian Federation, an examination of the role of female legislators in the *Duma*, or parliament, shows that the women legislators were able to set aside ideological and party differences to promote legislation benefiting children and families on a multi-partisan basis. They proposed measures that increased benefits to citizens with children, extended pregnancy benefits and parental leave, reduced taxes for families with many children, created penalties for domestic violence, and promoted equal rights for men and women.⁵
- Women members of parliament (MPs) in Britain have informally worked together across party lines on issues that are important to society, including issues like employment law, equal pay, and violence against women.⁶
- In a demonstration that women party members are prepared to cross the boundaries of parties, ethnicity, religion, language and districts to meet their objectives, NDI identified non-partisan issues in Sri Lanka on which women politicians from all parties came together, despite extreme political tensions, to draft and endorse a platform for improving women's political participation.
- 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 coalesced to introduce amendments to the labor law that would give working mothers mandatory nursing breaks, and provide onsite childcare for companies with more than 200 employees.

WOMEN LAWMAKERS ARE HIGHLY RESPONSIVE TO CONSTITUENT CONCERNS

Research shows that 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,⁷ and that more women see government as a tool to help serve underrepresented or minority groups.⁸ Women lawmakers therefore have often been perceived as more sensitive to community concerns and more responsive to constituency needs.

- On average, congresswomen in the U.S. sponsor 3 more bills per congressional term than do congressmen and co-sponsor 26 more bills per term than male colleagues.⁹ Congresswomen in the U.S. bring in 9 percent more money for their districts than their male counterparts. This amounts to roughly \$49 million extra for the district or \$88 per capita per year for citizens represented by women.¹⁰
- Tendencies toward “high effort, consensus building, and issue specialization help female lawmakers achieve increased legislative effectiveness,” though institutional circumstances can sometimes curb their impact.¹¹
- Legislators in the U.S. agree that the presence of women has increased access to the legislature for economically disadvantaged groups and for the concerns of

racial and ethnic minority groups. Additionally, women are notably more likely to report that the attitudes of their constituents would be the most important consideration in determining how they would vote (42 percent versus 33 percent).¹²

- Evidence from developing countries around the world shows that an increase in women's participation in the political life of their countries often leads to improved socio-economic conditions, as many of these women-- more readily than their male counterparts-- tackle poverty reduction and service delivery as areas of primary importance to their constituents and supporters, as can be seen in Rwanda.¹³

WOMEN HELP SECURE LASTING PEACE

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 suffer disproportionately during armed conflict and often advocate most strongly for stabilization, reconstruction and the prevention of further conflict. Moreover, research shows that women's engagement in the transitional processes and post-conflict governments can "increase the legitimacy of nascent institutions, decrease government corruption, broaden the political agenda, promote consultative policymaking and encourage collaboration across ideological lines and social sectors."¹⁴

- Research and case studies suggest that peace agreements, post-conflict reconstruction and governance have a better chance of long-term success when women are involved.¹⁵ Furthermore, there is strong evidence that establishing sustainable peace requires transforming power relationships, including achieving more equitable gender relations.¹⁶
- Half of all peace agreements fail within a decade of signature, yet "peace processes and peace building are more likely to work, to enjoy support from civil society, and to address the "make or break" issues if there's full participation of marginalized groups," including women.¹⁷
- Research indicates that including women in the earliest stages of peace processes enhances stability, decreases corruption in political institutions, and promotes higher living standards-particularly health care and education.
- By leaving out at least half of the population from peace negotiations, you are more likely to exclude those who may be willing to compromise and reach an agreement much sooner.
- The idea that "women were not involved in the fighting, and should not be involved in peacemaking", is an excuse for excluding women, when women are a growing number of the combatants and certainly effected directly by the conflict.
- In Rwanda, women lawmakers have led the way in instituting decentralized governing structures that maintain stability through inclusive decision making. Women have initiated and implemented national and local reconciliation efforts at the grassroots level, a critical step in preventing further conflict and facilitating reconstruction.¹⁸

- Women’s peace groups in Uganda 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.¹⁹
- Research in post-conflict Kosovo has found that 63.6 percent of women can envision working with a woman of another ethnic group, an important indication of prospects for peace and reconciliation.²⁰ The Women’s Informal Group (WIG) in Kosovo, for example, is a multi-party women’s caucus that has worked across partisan lines to advance gender equality in Kosovo, including through the publication of a guide for women to their rights under the new constitution.

WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION ENCOURAGES CITIZEN CONFIDENCE IN DEMOCRACY

Around the world, women politicians are often perceived as more honest and more responsive than their male counterparts, qualities which encourage confidence in democratic and representative institutions. Their participation also bolsters the legitimacy of the governing body as it becomes more representative of the society it serves.

- 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.²¹
- There is significant evidence from the private sector to show that a gender balance among decision makers significantly improves the outcomes of decision-making processes. In a study of the top 1,000 *Fortune* companies, researchers found a strong positive correlation between company performance and the level of gender and racial diversity on the board. Companies with at least two women on the board performed significantly better than those without,²² resulting in a formula for success that could be translated into policy-making bodies.
- When women are elected, they often feel pressure to work harder to prove themselves in their role, typically introducing more legislation and participating in policy debates. In 2005 and 2006, female legislators in the U.S. averaged 14.9 one-minute speeches in opening legislative sessions that their male colleagues, who averaged 6.5.²³
- Public opinion polls in the U.S. ranked women higher than men in five of seven core policymaking areas, including: “working out compromises, keeping government honest, standing up for what they believe in, and representing constituents’ interests.”²⁴

WOMEN PRIORITIZE EDUCATION, HEALTH & OTHER KEY DEVELOPMENT INDICATORS

When women are empowered as political leaders, countries experience higher standards of living, positive developments can be seen in education, infrastructure and health, and concrete steps are taken to help make democracy deliver.

- Using data from 19 OECD countries, researchers found that an increase in women legislators results in an increase in total educational expenditure.²⁵

- In a survey of 187 women who hold public office in 65 countries, the Inter-Parliamentary Union found that 90 percent believe they have a responsibility to represent women's interests and advocate for other members of society.²⁶
- 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.²⁷
- Despite representing only 14 percent of deputies, Argentina's women parliamentarians introduced no fewer than 78 percent of the bills related to women's rights.²⁸
- In a study of Swedish women local legislators, women showed a strong preference for childcare and elder care over other social issues. These differences in priorities were reflected in local spending patterns, with more money directed towards childcare and the elderly in districts with more female representation.²⁹
- Fourteen percent of women legislators in the U.S. named healthcare as a top priority issue, versus only six percent of male legislators who viewed health care as a top concern.³⁰ Consistent emphasis on healthcare by women legislators is mirrored around the world.³¹
- Research indicates that non-feminist women are more likely to prioritize issues that affect women than non-feminist male colleagues.³²
- In places as diverse as Timor-Leste, Croatia, Morocco, Rwanda and South Africa, an increase in the number of female lawmakers has led to legislation related to antidiscrimination, domestic violence, family codes, inheritance, and child support and protection.

Women's engagement is crucial—and it is important to recognize that women are not a homogeneous group. Depending on whether women are young or older, educated or uneducated, live in rural or urban areas, they have very different life experiences that lead to different priorities and needs. Moreover, not every woman elected to parliament or another legislative body will place women's issues or rights at the forefront of her agenda. Women's representation is not the only factor, but it is a critical factor for the development of inclusive, responsive and transparent democracies.

So, **WHY** women in politics? The positive impact of women in politics is undeniable. Kofi Annan noted, "Study after study has taught us, there is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women. No other policy is as likely to raise economic productivity or to reduce child and maternal mortality. No other policy is as sure to improve nutrition and promote health, including the prevention of HIV/AIDS. No other policy is as powerful in increasing the chances of education for the next generation."³³ Further, as Madeleine Albright has stated, the world is wasting a precious resource in the dramatic underrepresentation of women in leadership positions, often resulting in the exclusion of women's talents and skills in political life.

Male and female legislators must work together in order to solve the myriad of problems in their countries. In order to meet worldwide development goals and build strong, sustainable democracies, women must be encouraged, empowered and supported in becoming strong political and community leaders.

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