

ACTION BRIEF

The Ugly Truth

Threats to Women in Political Spaces

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Executive summary



In November 2009, One World Action and the Institute for the Study of the Americas, University of London, brought together a panel of women to reflect on the experiences of political women in both Latin America and the United Kingdom (UK), for a conference on *The Ugly Truth: Threats to Women in Political Spaces*. This report summarises the day's events, which examined how women from Latin America and the UK can learn from each others' experiences of accessing and participating in political spaces and use this knowledge to increase women's political involvement in their own countries and communities.

This report has five objectives:

- I. To introduce the issue of women's political participation
- II. To provide an overview of the Latin American experience
- III. To provide an overview of the UK experience
- IV. To analyse key themes
- V. To suggest ways to increase women's political participation and affect change within political environments.

1 Introduction

CEDAW and the MDGs

Article 7 of the CEDAW convention commits signatory States to 'take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country'. The third Millennium Development Goal similarly aims to promote gender equality and empower women, with one of the mechanisms to measure its success being the monitoring of the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments.

With the introduction of international frameworks such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), it appears that gender equity in political representation is an important issue on the international development agenda. Furthermore, at national and local levels, policies meant to increase women's participation in the political arena – such as electoral gender quotas – are being widely introduced.

However, despite policies aimed at increasing women's access to the political sphere, their political representation remains far below men's in governing bodies across the world. The global average of women's representation in parliaments remains at only 18.6 per cent¹ and no country has achieved a fully equitable balance between women and men in government. This gender gap is particularly pronounced in the Upper Houses of Parliament (or Senate), where women's representation is most severely lacking.

¹ Data compiled by the Inter-Parliamentary Union on the basis of information provided by National Parliaments by 31 October 2009.



Dr Corinne Caumartin, Oxford University

This inequality transcends the economic divide between developing and developed countries. The top fifteen countries with the highest percentage of women in parliament range from Belgium and Spain to Costa Rica and Rwanda (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2009). This report reaffirms this by highlighting the common challenges and the marginal differences in women's political participation in the UK, one of the world's richest nations, and Bolivia, the poorest country in South America.

This is not to suggest that the experiences in these countries are the same. Bolivian women tend to face more explicit barriers



Liz St Clair, Conservative Party

to participation in political spaces, while the UK experience is characterised by more subtle forms of discrimination. However, the overarching factors that account for gender disparities in politics surpass cultural and geographical divides. They include overt institutional barriers, as well as more insidious social pressures and rigid gender roles, that make the barriers to women's political participation even more difficult to overcome.

This report begins by examining the experiences of Latin America, setting out the perspective of Dr. Corinne Caumartin of Oxford University and Mariá Eugenia Valverde and Ana Mariá Encina of the Association of Women Councillors of Bolivia (ACOBOL). It then shifts to reflect on the situation of women political actors in the UK, drawing on the perspectives of Marie Birchall, Young Labour's National

ACOBOL

ACOBOL is the foremost organisation working on gender-based political violence and promoting gender equality within political spaces in Bolivia and is one of the first such organisations in the Americas endeavouring to tackle this problem. It represents the interests of women councillors and mayors from across the country.

Women's Officer; Vicky Booth, of the Liberal Democrats Campaign for Gender Balance; Lee Chalmers, Director of the Downing Street Project; and Liz St Clair, the Conservative Party Women's Officer. Using these experiences as case studies, the report will examine the key themes arising from the dialogue between the Bolivian and UK representatives, ending by proposing methods through which women can transform political processes, ensuring that political spaces are more accessible and less threatening to women.

2 The Latin American experience



Ana Mariá Encina of the Association of Women Councillors of Bolivia (ACOBOL)

Any discussion of barriers to women's political participation in Latin America is necessarily multifaceted. It must take into account top-down institutional barriers, such as exclusionary trade policies that leave women in a position of economic disadvantage, as well as social factors such as the sexual division of labour, which confines women to the domestic sphere rather than the 'public' sphere of politics, and the commonly held gender stereotypes that dictate that men – not women – are the decision-makers and power-holders. Any discussion of women's political participation in Latin America must also cover women's experiences within the political environment. In

many cases, even if a woman overcomes daunting institutional and social barriers to achieve a position in her municipal government, she may be subjected to acts of violence and harassment whilst in post, which impact her political life, as well as her emotional and physical well-being. This section will therefore examine the wider-reaching socio-cultural barriers that inhibit women's political participation, before considering the barriers to women's equal political participation that exist within political spaces themselves.

According to ACOBOL's President Ana Mariá Encina, "when you decide to be a political woman, it's a 24-hour job." Indeed, given that the burden of care and domestic work still usually falls to women, the additional responsibility of being a political actor in a community can often make the role difficult to attain for many women. Further, long-standing discrimination against girls in education means that women often lack the skills necessary to be effective political representatives in their communities. In Bolivia, for example, only 60 per cent of women councillors are literate.

There are also more subtle cultural factors that can serve as deterrents for Latin American women considering a career in politics. During her research in Guatemala, Dr. Corinne Caumartin, for example, found that any form of political participation outside of traditional household responsibilities can damage women's reputations within communities, as well as those of their families. In communities where men are still viewed as the head of the household and such an upheaval to the family's daily routine and reputation would be viewed in a negative light, active participation in public life is a line few women are confident enough to cross.

In addition to socially-imposed gender roles and expectations, women who wish to pursue a political campaign for election also face an economic disadvantage. Women have less access to and control over household income and property and are often unable to provide for the expenses associated with running a political campaign and achieving political office. Ana Maria Encina explained that when a man in Bolivia wishes to run for elected office, he often chooses to use the equity in his land or property to help fund a campaign. Most women do not have this choice – their resources belong to their fathers or husbands. This economic disadvantage is intensified by the exclusionary trade policies that privilege large corporations and push small scale female producers out of markets, contributing to the ‘feminisation’ of poverty.

Even in cases where individual women are able to surmount these social, economic and cultural hurdles and are elected to public office, in Latin America these women can face direct threats to their involvement in the political sphere in the form of violence and harassment.

According to a 2009 study by ACOBOL which sought to document instances of harassment and violence against women in Bolivian politics, there is a lack of legal protection for elected women politicians facing violence and harassment. ACOBOL reviewed 117 acts of violence against political women, which included pressuring women to resign as councillors and both verbal and psychological violence. In a few cases, there were incidents of physical and sexual violence against women politicians. Just as disturbing as the violence and harassment itself was the response: only 40 per cent of cases documented by ACOBOL

“When I questioned male councillors on the way they conducted meetings and met in places that were convenient only for men, they retaliated with threats and violence. They kidnapped me for a week and I was beaten repeatedly and not given food... I have filed a complaint with the police and Mayor’s office, but nothing has been done.”

Cllr Marta Martinez, Oruro, Bolivia

“I am an elected Councillor. The substitute [deputy] is a man also from the same community. He used social pressure and our shared networks to threaten me and pressured me to draw up a document that mandated equal powers and responsibilities between him and me. The document even allowed equal distribution of my salary.”

Cllr Berta Cubocartahena, Beni, Bolivia

“I am one of the few councillors who has been re-elected. Many of the councillors at this meeting are newly elected... 98 per cent of them will not be standing for re-election. It is common for them to be bullied by colleagues and often they are pressured into resigning.”

Cllr Ada Gutierréz, Potosi, Bolivia

were reported to public authorities and 32.4 per cent of the reported cases were not pursued. It is also important to emphasise that ACOBOL only had access to documented cases and it is likely that there are many more undocumented cases of political violence against women. Mariá Eugenia Valverde of ACOBOL estimated

that around four times the number of studied-cases go undocumented. Through reviewing existing legislation, including international treaties as well as municipal jurisprudence, ACOBOL also found weaknesses in areas dealing with women's political rights. In current national legislation in Bolivia for example, there is no legal definition of harassment and gender-based violence in the political sphere and these cases are not considered to be specific or aggravated crimes. Furthermore, there is no mechanism to denounce cases such of harassment and political violence. There is therefore no way for female victims of violence to obtain moral or material compensation, nor to ensure that perpetrators face justice.

This situation not only deters women's political participation, it also undermines their civil and political rights. The criminalisation of gender-based political violence would be a key step towards making the political environment more conducive to women's effective political participation. The fact that gender-based political violence and harassment are not currently considered to be specific crimes discourages women in politics from reporting this violence and reinforces the notion that women do not belong in political spaces. In addition to implementing policies aimed at increased representation of women in politics, governments must therefore work to guarantee that women who achieve political positions are free from threats and harassment.

Dr. Caumartin carried out similar research with Guatemalan women in political spaces and found they face similar threats. Although these women played down the risk of physical assault, they were very specific about the more indirect ways

that they were made to feel unwelcome in political spaces. During meetings, men often belittled women's proposals, public speaking skills, and appearance, or made sexually-explicit jokes. In some cases women were actively prevented from attaining higher level positions and in other cases men carried on meetings as if women were simply not present. Although not as overt as threats of violence, such actions nonetheless constitute a denial of women's presence and legitimacy in political spaces.

Dr. Caumartin also found that other women, including journalists and constituents, use oppressive humour against women in politics, suggesting that they have internalised the notion that women who participate in politics are infringing on territory that belongs to men. The oppression of women in political fields, therefore, manifests on several levels – through overarching legal structures as well as through cultural and societal norms. In order to effectively challenge discrimination and violence against women in politics, solutions must also be multi-layered.

The internal and external barriers to women's effective participation in political spaces in Latin America are both pervasive and deeply-entrenched. However, ACOBOL are committed to tackling these challenges head-on and they shared some of their strategies and experiences during the conference. ACOBOL are very clear – it is not enough to institutionalise reforms such as gender quotas from the top down, as the central problem does not rest solely upon the *quantity* of women who participate in the political system. As important is the *quality* of the political work that women are free and able to do once they have achieved an elected position. In order to ensure

that women can act as effective political representatives, we must consider the barriers inherent to the culture in which women work – both inside and outside of political spaces.

ACOBOL takes a multi-layered approach – campaigning for institutional reforms at the top and focussing on work at the grassroots level. In partnership with the National Federation of the 327 Municipal Towns of Bolivia, ACOBOL provides legal and institutional support, counselling and training to increase the effective political participation of women. Its research on harassment and gender based violence led to the 'Law Project', which is campaigning to have the crime of gender-based political violence acknowledged in law. ACOBOL has also contributed to the Indigenous Towns Law and the Law of Violence Politics on Gender Reason. These programmes address the top-down institutional barriers that prevent women in politics from effectively fulfilling their responsibilities in a safe, conducive environment.

At the grassroots level, ACOBOL's training programmes help women to compete on a level playing-field with men in the political sphere, to understand their new political roles and responsibilities, and to provide education on the issues that will help to inform their political positions. ACOBOL also worked with UN-INSTRAW (United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women), to develop the radio programme 'Equity in Local Power' in Bolivia, which supports women elected in municipalities to access information regarding national and international legal frameworks. Importantly, ACOBOL also promote dialogue between men and women to facilitate a better understanding of the benefits of including women in political

spaces and of the challenges they face in accessing these spaces, as well as increasing awareness of the problem of political violence and harassment against women. By facilitating trainings and creating spaces for dialogue, ACOBOL is addressing the more subtle cultural and social barriers that can prevent women from pursuing a career in politics.



Emily Esplen, One World Action

3 The UK experience



Vicky Booth, Liberal Democrats

Socio-cultural barriers also underpinned the experiences of women in the political sphere in the UK. And much like the Latin American context, the barriers to women's political involvement were identified from both inside and outside the political space. Echoing the challenges faced by women in Bolivia, Fawcett Society research into the external socio-cultural and economic barriers to elected office for women in the UK was neatly summed up by Vicky Booth of the Liberal Democrats Campaign for Gender Balance as the four 'C's' – culture, childcare, cash and confidence.

Inside political spaces in the UK, we find a culture that is built around a very specific and homogenous set of needs, skills and lifestyles, which are often not conducive to women's participation. Parliaments were established, organised and dominated

The Scottish Parliament

A UK referendum on devolution in 1997 led to the establishment of the Scottish Parliament. From the outset, the make-up of the Parliament was designed to reflect the varied demography of Scotland, to offer opportunities for diverse representation and, in particular, to maximise the participation of women. The female face of the Scottish parliament has widely been regarded as one of devolution's success stories and substantial proportions of women were elected in 1999 and 2003. A series of parliamentary procedures designed to meet the needs of the 21st century reflect, amongst other things, the differing work-life responsibilities, needs and political styles of men and women. The parliament's commitment to family-friendly working practices, for example, means that the parliamentary day reflects the standard working day and votes usually take place at around 5pm. This is a stark contrast to the UK parliament at Westminster, where debates and votes often last until late into the evening. The parliament also has a crèche facility available to parents working in the building. A third of current members of the Scottish Parliament are women.

by men. Procedures were established for their convenience. Thus, MPs must work late into the night, far away from their homes. Since women continue to shoulder disproportionate responsibility for childrearing and other forms of care and domestic work, the demanding Parliamentary schedule can deter them from coming forward to represent their communities. As Vicky Booth pointed out, whilst Westminster has a shooting gallery,

it still does not have a crèche. In addition to the burden of care, there are prominent financial costs which women must bear in order to represent their community in Parliament. According to research conducted by the Liberal Democrat party on women in local government, the direct costs of paying for additional childcare and travelling to regional events are the primary reasons why women step down from their positions as councillors.

Furthermore, the skills and attributes that are valued in Parliament are often those associated with aggression and confrontation, rather than dialogue and cooperation. MPs disproportionately come from male-dominated careers, such as law and business, which groom them to excel in this environment of institutional masculinity. Indeed, even candidate selection procedures tend to favour individual bravado over a more holistic approach to public representation, in which listening skills and empathy are vitally important. Many selection procedures pit candidates against each other in hostile debates rather than creating spaces for candidates to engage in discussions and work cohesively. Marie Birchall, Young Labour's National Women's Officer and One World Action's Campaign Coordinator was concerned that this political culture creates a very rigid and narrow image of the skills a politician should possess and may contribute to dissuading women who do not fit into this traditional mould or who have a different skill-set, from continuing their political ambitions. Also limiting is the notion of leadership which dominates in the UK, which often emphasises characteristics like unflappability, stoicism, and the ability to make decisions dispassionately. This, too, perpetuates strict and limited ideas of what or who a politician should be and



Lee Chalmers, the Downing Street Project

discourages a diversity of skill sets and attributes within political spaces.

With similarities to the Latin American experiences, UK media coverage of women politicians can also have a damaging effect on women's participation in politics. Lee Chalmers of the Downing Street Project, which promotes balanced leadership between men and women at all levels of society, observes: "Women go up and give these amazing speeches in the UK and what will get reported by the newspapers will be the shoes they wore." By de-emphasising women's substantive contributions to political discourse, the media can actively contribute to the notion that women do not belong in the political space. However, whilst these cultural barriers affect women across party lines and thus merit a broad scale, cross-

Training for women – A case-study in success

Vicky Booth described the story of a woman's journey to becoming a parliamentary candidate as one of the experiences of which she was most proud. The woman in question attended an induction day but, having taken 5 years out of employment to raise her children, she had lost a lot of her confidence and felt that she lacked the skills required to be a good politician. This was despite the fact that she had previously been successful in business, had been involved in a huge amount of community work, had chaired the PTA at her children's school and campaigned against a local post office closure. After attending training courses and being paired with a mentor, she quickly realised her 'real life' experiences gave her a strong foundation as a local representative. She recently became a selected candidate in her local constituency.

party solution, there are some problems that are specific to individual political parties and must therefore be addressed on a uni-party basis.

According to Vicky Booth of the Liberal Democrats Campaign for Gender Balance, the fundamental problem in her party is that women candidates are simply not coming forward for selection in anything like the same numbers as men. However, when a woman does stand for an elected position in the Party, she has a high chance of being elected. This contrasts with the problems in achieving gender balance in the Labour Party, described by Marie Birchall. To try and

increase the percentage of female political representatives, the Labour Party initially adopted a rule that ensured there was always at least one women candidate in every selection. When this measure did not create any impact, the rule was changed to ensure at least 50 per cent of candidates were women. When even this measure did not significantly increase the numbers of elected women in the Party, all-women shortlists were adopted. This more radical measure did have an impact and of the approximate 130 female MPs currently in Parliament, over 90 of them are Labour members. The root of the issue can in part be attributed to the demography of the Labour Party, which has a significant proportion of politically active men who have deep-rooted bonds and long-standing experience of political networking – such as those active in the trade union movement. It is particularly difficult for a woman to be selected as a candidate when competing against networks of this kind. However, all-women shortlists are not seen by the Labour Party as a long-term solution. The wider goal is to create a critical mass of women within political spaces who can then substantively challenge the pervading political culture and reshape assumptions about politics and politicians.

In order to address individual party problems, the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, and the Conservative Party have implemented a variety of solutions – including the Labour Party's all-women shortlists. The Liberal Democrats Campaign for Gender Balance provides mentoring schemes, shadowing schemes and training sessions for women on a range of skills including leadership, public speaking and political career strategy. The Party is also investigating alternative ways of working, such as job-share systems for

MPs. This would open up this career path to women who face time constraints in their personal and professional lives – the ‘childcare’ challenge. To address the ‘cash’ challenge, the Labour Party has a scheme called Emily’s List which provides financial support for the campaigns of women members who are seeking to be selected as candidates. The Labour Party similarly facilitates support networks for female candidates and politicians, mentoring and knowledge-transfer schemes, as well as specific training in areas like interaction with the media. Such measures are key to ensuring that women have the skills they need to compete on a level playing field with men. Indeed, when encouraging women’s political participation, it is important to balance the long term challenge of changing political ‘culture’ with the reality and expectations of the current political culture in which women must participate.

The Conservative Party has also implemented measures to increase women’s political participation and equip them with the skills necessary to be successful politicians, including supporting training and confidence-building. Liz St Clair explained that the Party changed its Parliamentary selection process and introduced Open Primaries in some constituencies, so that non-party members have a stake in choosing Conservative Party candidates. It has also created an A-List of suitable candidates that comprises 50 per cent women. As the general election approaches and the need to fill vacant seats with candidates becomes more urgent, the Conservative Party will select their candidates using the by-election method, which reduces the number of candidates offered to constituencies to a maximum of six. In some circumstances, this may lead to

all-female short lists. In order to become a Conservative Parliamentary candidate, individuals must be approved by the Parliamentary Assessment Board. This is a skills-based assessment which emphasises writing skills, empathy, ability to work with others, and the ability to think on one’s feet. It represents a shift away from the competitive, often hostile culture that traditionally characterised the assessment procedure.

An important yet controversial aspect of the conference discussion on political space in the UK centred around the impact of opening up political spaces to women. According to research by the London School of Business, it has been demonstrated that, in the business world, when men and women work together in groups, there is a higher frequency of innovative ideas and inventive outcomes. Lee Chalmers, Director of the Downing Street Project, argued that we can apply this same logic to the political world, and that the challenges the UK faces as a nation necessitates a diverse skill set and fresh ideas. The argument for women’s political participation should, therefore, be phrased as an opportunity to strengthen and diversify the policymaking body in the UK. Liz St Clair agreed, stating that women (and men) are a resource for the nation, offering innovative solutions to problems on local and national networks. Women’s political participation enriches and diversifies the political culture in Latin America and the UK and women should thus be welcomed into the political space as a source of strength. Ensuring gender parity in political spaces is not only a matter of basic justice and human rights therefore, but will also lead to better and more diverse decisions, and is an important opportunity for the nation as a whole.

4 Key themes



Carolina Gottardo, One World Action

Although there are very acute differences between the Latin American and UK political contexts, especially in terms of the level of violence against female candidates, there are multiple opportunities for women to learn from each others' experiences. This report will now consider the five key topics that emerged during the panel discussions at the conference: the role of law in increasing women's political participation; the implications of creating female-only networks; the thorny issue of representative democracy; top-down versus bottom-up approaches; and measuring the impact that women can have in political spaces.

1. The role of law

One of the most obvious differences between the Latin American and UK political experiences is the extent to which legislation is considered a solution to the

difficulties women face in the political arena. Extensive campaigning and the use of international frameworks, such as CEDAW, for example, have played a very important role in changing legislation and establishing quotas in Latin America. Bolivia, for example, recently ratified a new political constitution which mandates a 50 per cent gender quota for women at all political levels, including the Congress, Senate and in local government. In contrast, the UK has more resistance to using international frameworks like these to frame national legislation, as well as a greater resistance to the quota system more specifically. Indeed, using the law to tackle gender inequality in the political system has not been a panacea to this complex and multi-faceted problem. The quota system as a top-down measure of reform has undergone much criticism in developing and developed countries alike, being accused of amounting to little more than tokenism, particularly where the women elected do not have the skills to compete equally with men in political spaces. In some cases, for example, quotas have not been successful in developing countries because the women who are placed in positions of political authority do not have a clear understanding of their responsibilities. This underscores the necessity of making sure that women have the skills and knowledge required to become effective participants in the political sphere.

Furthermore, the first past the post electoral system in UK, which is based on simple majority voting, makes a quota system difficult to implement. Proportional Representation, where voters choose candidates from party lists according to the percentage of the total vote they receive, is presently the most successful electoral system in terms of

Constituency Twinning

A solution to the gender-quota conundrum in the first past the post election system may lie in constituency twinning. This is a system where constituencies are paired, with one promoting female-only candidates and the other promoting either male-only or male and female candidates. To achieve significant impact, the twinning has to be widespread, and arguably, provided for in law. In recent Scottish Parliament elections, the Scottish Labour Party have adopted the twinning approach, and ensured that for each pair of twinned constituencies, there has been a male and a female candidate. The results have been positive and the Scottish Labour Party is one of the only political parties in the UK to have reached gender parity in its parliamentary representation.

improving the gender balance between men and women. Of the 10 highest-ranking countries in terms of women's representation, all use proportional systems.

However, this is not to say that the UK does not have opportunities to initiate a wide-reaching movement for change. One example is the 2009 Speakers Conference, which is considering the issue of how underrepresented groups can attain better access to political life and has issued a set of recommendations to diversify political participation in the UK. The recommendations derived from this conference have been drawn from insights by members of all political parties and provide a strong foundation for change in the future. This conference is an opportunity for Parliament as a whole to assert the obligation of representative leadership in the UK as an issue to all parties.

Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation

Summary of Conclusions and Recommendations from the Second Interim Report, November 25th, 2009

- > Nearly all MPs are elected on a party ticket. This makes political parties effectively the gatekeepers to the House of Commons. Political parties will have to be the agents of change.
- > When the leaders of the three main political parties gave their evidence, each agreed that the diversity and representation was neither what it should, nor what they wanted it to be.
- > Each party monitors progress on candidate selections internally and this information is not placed in the public domain. This means that there is no public accountability and unless their different performances can be compared with each other (and with others around the world) there is likely to be insufficient pressure for the political parties to pursue the cultural change that is needed before we can have a House of Commons fit for the 21st century.
- > The Party leaders gave their agreement in principle to publish future reports on the results of candidate selections.
- > A new draft clause to the Equality Bill will require registered political parties to report every six months, according to specified criteria, on the diversity of their candidate selections and to publish those reports online.

The recommendations from the final report (published January 2010) can be viewed at: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/spconf/239/239i.pdf>

2. Female Support Groups: Old Girls Networks?

A central strategy in both the UK and Latin American experiences of opening up political space for women has been building support networks in order to equip women with the skills and encouragement necessary to succeed in the political sphere. Indeed, part of the justification for these networks is that they act as a counterbalance to the sexism and monoculture inherent in 'Old Boys Networks,' which are often already established in politics and assist men in succeeding in the political sphere to the exclusion of women. A key concern about women's support groups, however, is that they are simply a mechanism to create an 'Old Girls Network', built around similarly exclusive principles that tend to favour group membership over merit and diversity.

When we phrase the conversation in terms of 'Boys' and 'Girls' networks, we are implying that there always exists a zero-sum game in political cultures, creating an image of women and men, each segregated according to gender, competing with each other for influence in the political sphere. However, and in contrast to the traditional Old Boys Network-characterisation of political culture, the women's support and training networks in Latin America and the UK have the ultimate goal, not of insulating the political sphere and assuring control by the privileged minority, but instead of expanding representation in politics. Mentoring and support schemes for women do not reap gender-specific benefits and are often conducted with the cooperation and support of men. In mentoring systems for the UK Parliament for example, men are often asked to

serve as mentors for inexperienced MPs and candidates. Similarly, when ACOBOL facilitates education and training sessions, they target and work with men in the community, as well as women. The building of a support network for women can therefore be characterised not as an attempt to build an Old Girls Network to rival the Old Boys Network, but rather an attempt to break a traditional system that keeps certain individuals on the outside of political space and to create a more inclusive network that helps and supports, rather than excludes. This inclusive approach also encourages the view that women's political participation is not as a 'women's issue', but an issue for the whole of society.

It is more helpful, therefore, to phrase the conversation about female support networks as an approach that challenges, not reinforces, gender-exclusivity in political spaces.

3. Achieving a Balance: Equality in Representation Versus Democratic Values

The issue of representation versus democracy underpinned both the UK and Latin American experiences of equal participation in politics for women, especially regarding all-women shortlists and quota systems. If more diverse political representation is prioritised, it can be argued that we must necessarily undermine some principles of democracy by decreasing the number of candidates from which the public is able to choose – only women candidates, for example. However, before we describe any positive action measure as 'undemocratic', it is important to avoid conflating democracy's *mechanisms* (its electoral systems and processes) with its

mission to ensure that governing bodies are represented by the people and for the people. We must ask ourselves, is a government or a parliament that excludes the voices of women – usually more than fifty per cent of its people – truly democratic? The more inclusionary the political and electoral system is, the more responsive it will be to the democratic principles on which it is founded.

Recent literature, for example, documents numerous cases where there is a high correlation between the number of women political representatives in a community and the number of women in the community who are prepared to voice their opinions to the governing body. Anecdotally at least, it seems that individuals are most likely to advocate for their own interests or bring their grievances forward to political representatives whom they feel will understand their needs or empathise with

their position. Thus, the mere existence of women inside of the political sphere contributes to the greater confidence of women outside of the political sphere in engaging with political processes. Having female representatives to lobby can also facilitate the bringing together of women with different backgrounds to rally around what they determine their interests to be, advancing the position of women in society more generally via legislative change.

Across the world, women political representatives have been instrumental in bringing forward progressive changes in legislation that benefit a wider section of the community – including other women – as well as impacting upon the equality of the policymaking process itself. Particularly in Latin America and other developing countries, women parliamentarians have campaigned for substantive changes in legislation to correct gender inequalities, such as the Bolivian quota laws. Research by the Norwegian Ministry of Children and Equalities has shown that the integration of women into political spaces has had a positive impact in other policy areas – particularly in social and welfare policy, environmental policy and policy related to care functions. Marie Birchall of the Labour Party asserted that it was thanks to the work of women politicians like current Minister for Women and Equalities Harriet Harman MP that the population in the UK now has access to more progressive maternity and paternity rights and childcare options.

However, pursuing this so-called ‘soft’ agenda in politics has often been a source of ridicule for women operating in more macho political spaces – mocked as a symbol of women’s weakness and relegated way down in the parliamentary

Nagorik Uddyog

One World Action’s partner in Bangladesh, *Nagorik Uddyog* (Citizen’s Initiative), is an NGO that promotes good governance and human rights, with a particular focus on local governance and gender rights. They are working with Shalishs – the committees that make decisions on local justice in rural communities – to ensure that, for the first time, women are represented on the Shalish’s committees. Field workers like Fazila Akhtehy say that for those women who show great courage in coming forward to demand justice against abusive partners, having female Shalishdars makes reporting domestic abuse more likely and the experience of revealing the personal and intimate details of their lives less uncomfortable.

On the impact of the increasing number of women represented in the Scandinavian political system, International IDEA found that:

“More fundamental changes involve changing the way in which certain issues, namely those closer to women’s concerns and in which women have an expertise (e.g. education, welfare policy, and family policy) are viewed in the parliamentary hierarchy. As we have mentioned, the distinction between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ issues is difficult to sustain and is likely to break down. This process will develop from increased interest in ‘soft’ issues by all politicians, as women deputies become more successful in pushing them up the parliamentary agenda. Agenda changes are closely related to output changes.”

International IDEA, 2002, Women in Parliament, Stockholm

policy hierarchy. ‘Hard’ issues – foreign policy, economics and defence – have long been the preserve and preference of male policy-makers, privileging the importance of these policy areas in traditional political culture.

However, it has been argued that the greater number of women participating in politics is slowly leading to a rebalancing of political issues, with success in traditionally ‘soft’ areas increasingly being seen as important to successful administration. This breakdown in distinction between hard and soft issues in politics will help to break down the cultural stereotype of women politicians’ interests being narrowly confined to women’s issues. Distinguishing policy areas into hard and soft categories is increasingly inaccurate and should be continually

contested by women and men politicians. On the one hand, women politicians need to continue to stress the importance of the traditional ‘soft’ areas, whilst on the other hand simultaneously ensuring that they are actively engaged in all areas of policy decision-making, as has recently been the case in countries like Bolivia, which now has a female Defence Minister. Indeed, a more gender-inclusive political culture will result in innovative, fresh outlooks across all areas of policymaking.

In summary, the question of true democratic representation is the root of the larger issue of women’s political participation. Women are not inherently better policymakers than men, nor do men bring a more relevant set of skills to the legislative table than women. Therefore, as women become increasingly involved in political spaces, we cannot expect the emergence of a political utopia. Instead, we should expect political decisions that more accurately and democratically reflect the needs and interests of an increased number of individuals within communities.

4. Changing the Political Culture: Achieving a Balance between Top-Down and Bottom-Up Approaches

It can be argued that a top-down legislative approach is required to achieve a critical mass of women in politics – that is, a significant number of women within the political system who can start to affect the pervading political culture for the better, paving the way for easier and better access to political spaces for future female politicians. The most common legislative approach to improve gender balance in political spaces involves implementing a quota



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system, like the one adopted in Bolivia. However and as detailed, instituting a top-down approach of this nature without simultaneously ensuring that the women elected are equipped with the vital skills, knowledge and confidence they need to operate effectively and to challenge the institutional masculinity of the political system, will lead to limited impact on political outcomes and consequent accusations of political tokenism.

For countries like the UK, where a legislative approach is less savoury, top-down procedural mechanisms like constituency twinning (where two comparable constituencies are paired together and compelled to select one male and one female candidate) and all-women shortlists can and have been used to ensure the presence of equal numbers of women on the candidate lists of political parties and in elected roles. This

approach, however, is also not immune from criticism and sceptics have – as already described – questioned the democratic nature of these mechanisms. In the UK in 1997 and following the extensive use of all-women shortlists, the new intake of female Labour MPs were, for example, patronised as ‘Blair’s Babes.’ The common point around which opponents of these positive action measures rally is the accusation that positively promoting women above men in political selection procedures is not meritocratic (i.e. based on individual merit). In short – metaphorically and otherwise – you simply won’t get ‘the best man for the job’.

Many arguments in favour of ‘meritocratic’ approaches can and should be dismissed. Aside from the fact that it is old-fashioned and inaccurate to suggest that women are less capable of political office than men, the argument does not factor into the equation the fact that current perceptions of political culture and behaviour have an inherently masculine bias. Women candidates are often overlooked by a pervading political culture that does not value their styles of communication or interaction, or does not privilege their policy interests. It does not necessarily equate that these qualities and issues are less valuable, less relevant or less necessary than the pervading political norms.

A top-down approach is therefore not enough to tackle all of the challenges faced by women who have ambitions of attaining political office. Until a critical mass of women have been able to challenge the system of masculine biases and assumptions about political behaviour, and norms that serve to exclude women and belittle their contributions, a bottom-up approach is required to allow women

to compete on an equal level with men in the political system as it currently exists. Women – who around the world have been historically and traditionally cut-off from public life and political processes – can benefit from training in: understanding legislative processes and policy and legal issues; the responsibilities that come with different political roles; developing public speaking, effective communication and voice projection skills; being able to handle relationships and issues around respect with male colleagues; and understanding and being able to handle the media. A similarly valuable bottom-up approach is facilitating the formation of networks that allow women to transfer knowledge and pick up advice – information that would take many years to acquire alone. The training of men is also an important bottom-up approach, particularly to help foster an understanding of the importance of enabling women to play an effective role in the legislature and in raising awareness of gender issues and the extent to which they are linked to most other social, economic and political concerns. A balanced approach to top-down and bottom-up mechanisms therefore not only helps to facilitate women's access to political spaces, but also ensures that they can be effective political actors once they enter political space.

5. Access to political spaces – simply a matter of justice?

A central feature of the discussions was the ability of the women's movement to effectively justify why women should be positively promoted in the political sphere. Indeed, the research and information available on the types of impact that

women can have in politics is recognised by most scholars and institutions to be limited. International institutions and donors alike have stated that there is a need to collate more case-studies on the differences that women are making in the political arena internationally.

This need for justification, however, sits uncomfortably with many women political activists and feminists. After all, men are not continually asked to justify their presence in political spaces, nor are they expected to present to their gender-group how their actions have positively impacted upon the lives of fellow men. Since the time of the suffragette movement, for some women, political participation has simply been a matter of justice – not a means to introduce new 'feminised' values and policies into politics.

This tendency to scrutinise women in the political sphere more closely than their male counterparts is not unique to the impact debate. Particularly in the media, women politicians are expected to have a higher morality and – unlike many male politicians – an untarnished sexual reputation. Anecdotal evidence from both the UK and the Latin American participants also suggested that women are judged much more harshly on both their abilities and looks. It could be argued that by giving credence to the impact debate, the women's movement could open the door to sanctioning women to be judged against different standards in all areas of political space.

5 Moving Forward

The Importance of Cross-Institutional and Cross-Party Cooperation



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In order to accomplish the ambitious goal of greater women's representation in the political arena, cooperation is necessary on two main levels. The first of which, the cross-institutional level, emphasises the key role that NGOs like ACOBOL and The Downing Street Project can play in affecting the legal and cultural structures in Latin America and the UK. As an independent NGO, ACOBOL is able to interact with the legal system through law projects derived from independent research, as well as engage with cultural institutions through the establishment of grassroots training support networks. Its independence from any single political agenda ensures that its central goal remains to increase equality for women inside the political space.

The Downing Street Project's non-affiliation with any political party serves a similar role in the UK. Its apolitical status serves as a unifying factor among the political parties in the UK to accomplish the common goal of enabling increased women's political participation in Parliament.

Cross-party cooperation will also be vital in increasing women's access to political spaces. In the UK, the recommendations of the Speakers Conference in the House of Commons is providing a unifying set of demands which women can rally around on a cross-party basis. The party representatives present made a joint-commitment to work together to ensure the recommendations are implemented in full. Further measures, such as sharing consultation documents regarding methods of reforming selection procedures and meetings to emphasise a more diverse, inclusive set of skills, also represent invaluable opportunities for cross-party discourse and solidarity.

The experiences of women in politics are nuanced according to region. Despite commonalities between the experiences examined in this report, the problems and solutions necessary in Latin America are not identical to those in the UK. Indeed, as was evident by the differences among political parties in the UK, the nuance of the overarching issue of greater women's political participation is present even on a micro level within nations. But despite these important differences, there was a general consensus among the panellists from each party in the UK, as well as Latin America, that the political culture in each region must change. There is variance here, too, in terms of the degree to which political violence is used against women in politics. However, the necessity for solidarity on the common issue of a masculinised political culture that is not conducive to the true representation of women remains at the heart of conversation and debate.

6 Summary of main conclusions and recommendations

- ▶ Despite international frameworks and national policies aimed at increasing women's access to the political sphere, women's low political representation transcends economic disparities and remains far below men's in governing bodies across the world;
- ▶ The barriers to women's access to political spaces are multifaceted and are both top-down and bottom-up. The solutions, therefore need to be necessarily multifaceted and accommodate both top-down and bottom-up approaches;
- ▶ Top-down approaches can help to achieve a critical mass of women in political spaces and can include legislative approaches (such as political gender quotas), or procedural mechanisms (such as all-women shortlists, constituency twinning or institutional reform);
- ▶ Bottom-up approaches must address the socio-cultural barriers to women's participation – culture, cash, childcare and confidence;
- ▶ Pervading political cultures privilege institutional masculinity and masculinised characteristics and styles of leadership. A critical mass of women in political spaces is needed to challenge these deep-rooted norms;
- ▶ Innovative policy solutions, such as job-shares for MPs, or parliamentary crèches, should be explored, to ensure that women with care responsibilities can equally access political spaces and to encourage male political actors to see care responsibilities as a norm in political spaces;
- ▶ Funding mechanisms that specifically support women candidates – such as Emily's List – should be implemented to help women overcome their relative economic disadvantage and lack of access to resources;
- ▶ An extensive programme of training is necessary for some women, to ensure that they have the confidence and the skills they need to be effective political actors;
- ▶ The training and inclusion of men is also an important bottom-up approach, particularly to help foster an understanding of the importance of enabling women to play an effective role in the legislature and in raising awareness of gender issues and the extent to which they are linked to most other social, economic and political concerns;
- ▶ The criminalisation of gender-based political violence and harassment is a key step towards making the political environment more conducive to women's political participation, particularly in Latin America;
- ▶ Ensuring gender parity in political spaces not only represents the fulfilment of basic justice but will also lead to better and more diverse decisions and is an important opportunity for economic and social progress as a whole;
- ▶ Proportional Representation – as the most successful electoral system in terms of improving the gender balance between men and women – should be considered;

- ▶ Cross-party and cross-institutional work on gender equity in political spaces is vital for building solidarity and maximising impact;
- ▶ Support networks for politically active women should be guided by an approach that challenges, not reinforces, gender-exclusivity in political spaces and expands the political environment into a more cooperative and cohesive network;
- ▶ When judging the democratic merits of top-down approaches, it is important to avoid conflating democracy's mechanisms (its electoral systems and processes) with its mission to ensure that governing bodies are represented by the people and for the people;
- ▶ The existence of women inside of the political sphere contributes to the greater confidence of women outside of the political sphere in engaging with political processes.
- ▶ Distinguishing policy areas into hard and soft categories is too simplistic and should be continually contested by women and men politicians. On the one hand, women politicians need to continue to stress the importance of the traditional 'soft' areas, whilst on the other hand, simultaneously ensuring that they are actively engaged in all areas of policy decision-making.

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