

Research Report

Commission on the Status of Women

Topic B

Promoting Political Participation of Women

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1 Introduction

“[...] I have looked at this from a national security issue – when I was Secretary of State, I decided that women's issues had to be central to American foreign policy, not just because I'm a feminist, but because I believe that societies are better off when women are politically and economically empowered, that values are passed down, the health situation is better, education is better, there is greater economic prosperity. So I think that it behooves us – those of us that live in various countries where we do have economic and political voice – that we need to help other women.”

– Madeleine Albright

Madeleine Albright became the first female US Secretary of State in 1997. Since 2005, a woman is the chancellor of Germany – the country in which we are meeting for this session. And though they may be among the most prominent, they are not the only women to have pursued such impressive careers. Nonetheless, they had to go through a lot of struggles because not everyone has realised what gender equality really means yet. So our aim should be to ease this way for the women of today and tomorrow.

This report consists of some findings that hopefully help you in preparing for the conference. However, it can only be a starting point firstly because there is an infinite number of examples and ideas out there which couldn't possibly all be featured here. And secondly because this report is written from a scientific perspective – or maybe from that of the United Nations (UN) or the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). You, however, are representing a country. Your government may have quite distinctive opinions on women in politics and it is these opinions that you need to represent.

I am proposing to focus our discussion on the prospects that new information and communication technologies (ICT) can offer with respect to political participation of women (PPW). After presenting some theoretical and historic background (chapters 2 and 3), I will highlight certain types of approaches (chapter 4) and finally show what I believe to be the challenge of this session (chapter 5).

2 Theoretical background

A lot of thought has been put into the topic(s) at hand already and I am convinced that it will prove helpful to try and reconstruct the most important arguments.

2.1 Women's political rights

One question we should think about when preparing for a topic like this is: Why do we even want women to get involved with politics in the first place? It is tempting to neglect this question as “just obvious” or something similar.¹ But putting some thought into this very basic consideration can add to a more thorough understanding. Getting familiar with some arguments beforehand can also come in handy during debate. In general, there are two main trends of approaches, one is based on rights and one on the effects that political participation of women can have.

Firstly, international documents and treaties show without a doubt that women are equal to men. Obviously, this also extends to politics. Women thus have the *right* to participate in politics and it is a

¹ Of course, the real answer to this question is another question: Why not?

violation of international law to deny them this right. This is also what logic would dictate because if anything is “unnatural”, then it's the *inequality* and the ongoing discrimination against women.

Other approaches try to get beyond referring to rights that are “simply” there. The idea of equality did not (re-)emerge from nowhere; there were reasons for the rights to be installed and benefits that were expected – also for society as a whole. One way is to shine a light on political *representation*.

Political theorist Hanna F. Pitkin came up with the idea to analyse political representation in three different dimensions:

- a) symbolic ('Do the represented *feel* that they have a good representative?'),
- b) descriptive ('How *similar* is the representative to the represented in different features?') and
- c) substantive representation ('Does the representative *in practice* act in the interest of the represented?'). (For more information, see Dovi 2011.)

This analytic framework is often useful because an equal proportion of male and female delegates in a given body accounts for a high level of descriptive representation but says (almost) nothing about the other two types. Female delegates can decide in ways that are not desirable for women² and male delegates can carry out great feminist politics. Therefore, substantive representation cannot depend on the sharing of certain features although this is often assumed. Also, symbolic representation depends on the two aforementioned dimensions as well as on many other factors, so bare descriptive representation should not be overrated. However, with more women delegates, issues that have a tendency of affecting women will be more likely to be dealt with and new perspectives might be added.³ Thus, bearing in mind the potential confusion over political representation, PPW must be desirable from a female point of view.

But fair representation of women is also in the interest of the entire society. For instance, Fitzgerald (2010: 82) claims that an “inclusive, gendered in the best way” model of citizenship enhances democracy. “Gendered in the best way” means that policies aiming at equality of men and women must not ignore differences between men and women. These differences exist, some because of nature, most because of nurture, i.e., education, stereotypes and the like. Setting up policies that simply treat men and women in the same way is not working towards equality but (incorrectly) assuming that this equality already exists. It is only through acknowledging existing differences and acting accordingly that discrimination can be eradicated and that diversity and democracy can be upheld. “To say that feminists can add something new to political theory [...] does not require believing that women and men are 'essentially' different. It requires only that certain experiences be distributed unequally between men and women” (Mansbridge 1998: 154f.).

Last but not least: If, to a certain extent, politicians are role models for a given society and are associated with power, then female participation reinforces women's position in society as a whole.

² Keep in mind that “women” are never a homogeneous group; this is simplifying significantly.

³ Cf., e.g., the interview with Katherine Rake, then director of the British Fawcett Society:
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2008/feb/06/equality.gender>

2.2 The network effect

One human alone can do fairly few things. Unfortunately, promoting political participation of women is not one of them. Not only because there still is a long way to go but also because politics itself is inherently social. It is based on groups and on working together. And these groups who are working together (or who need to work together) are becoming bigger and bigger as a consequence of globalisation and the various processes associated with it. The most important administrative units nowadays are nation states, sometimes even supranational entities such as the European Union. And this is where the digital divide comes in: In richer areas, it is self-evident that communication in the whole of a nation state or even across these borders is not only possible but also affordable. Poorer people lack this possibility, leading to their exclusion from politics and thus into a vicious cycle because they needed to be politically active to change their situation.

3 History and status quo

Now that we have established why fighting for women's rights is worthwhile, let's have a quick look at how this has been done in history. Obviously, much more has happened and each of you knows a lot more than what can be dealt with in this section. What we need, however, is but a general overview that enables us to see our conference in context.

3.1 Women's movement

What is usually meant by the “women's movement” is a series of activism waves advocating women's rights in various contexts and spheres. Because there is no fixed definition of what belongs to these waves, it is hard to categorise them. What seems to be agreed upon is that the waves took place predominantly during the 19th and 20th century and were based, again predominantly, in the Western hemisphere. While in the 19th century, female suffrage was the main concern, other forms of discrimination against women were at the centre of attention later on. I do not want to go into more detail here (if you like, you can e.g. have a look at Okin 1991), but it is important to note that none of the other developments could have taken place without the awareness that was created by these movements (which were, by and large, initiated and maintained not by official bodies of any kind but by groups of “ordinary” women).

3.2 International treaties and agreements

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) that was adopted by the United Nations' General Assembly on December 10, 1948, remains the most important document associated with Human Rights. Sadly, it has not lost any of its relevance also with regard to the claims it makes about women's rights. Since its adoption, the concept of gender equality is not debatable any more from a UN point of view.

In 1979, the General Assembly added the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).⁴ Article 7 states that all “States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country”, including

⁴ The text and more information on the convention can be found at <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/>.

participating in the government and holding official positions.⁵ Almost all UN member states have ratified or acceded to the CEDAW.⁶

In 2000, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted a resolution that focuses on girls' and women's rights (especially in the context of conflict and post-conflict situations).⁷

The United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that constitute the global consensus of which stages of development are the minimal acceptable level include women's rights in several contexts. Goal 3 is entitled "Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women".⁸ The most recent UN report on the MDGs states that women "are slowly rising to political power, but mainly when boosted by quotas and other special measures." – "Electoral systems, quota arrangements and other affirmative action measures taken by political parties continue to be key predictors of progress for women" (United Nations 2010: 25).

MDG target 8F calls for the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communications, to be made available in cooperation with the private sector. This simple example shows that all MDGs are closely inter-related. It can be expected, then, that improvements in the fields of women's rights and distribution of technology will have positive impacts on other fields as well.

3.3 Status quo

In the same interview that the quote at the beginning of this report is from⁹, Madeleine Albright talks about what it means to her to be a woman and a politician (or, more precisely, a diplomat). Early on she tells a short anecdote on her youngest granddaughter who once asked the great question: "So what's the big deal about Grandma Maddie being Secretary of State? Only girls are Secretary of State." Of course, the "big deal" is that Mrs. Albright was the *first* woman to be in this position. But it is also true that as far as her granddaughter's life time is concerned, all Secretaries of State have been women. Within only one, maybe two generations, something that used to be new and spectacular has become normality. Now, there are two possible interpretations if we understand the young girl's statement to be representative for her generation. Either it is a cause for concern because when these girls turn to women they will not know in the same way as their mothers or grandmothers what it means to fight for women's rights and to protect them. On the other hand it can be a sign of hope because gender equality is becoming natural. If, then, it should be endangered anew, you could expect the women who already took it for granted to defend their rights with much more confidence.

⁵ <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm#article7>

⁶ The status can be viewed online at http://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-8&chapter=4&lang=en.

⁷ UNSC Resolution 1325 (2000), 31 October 2000 [S/RES/1325] – http://www.un.org/events/res_1325e.pdf

⁸ More information on the goal and on the progress of implementation can be found at <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/gender.shtml>.

⁹ View it online, it's worth the while:

http://www.ted.com/talks/madeleine_albright_on_being_a_woman_and_a_diplomat.html

Average percentage of female delegates in national parliaments worldwide	
Region	Percentage
Nordic countries	42,30%
Americas	21,50%
Europe - OSCE member countries (excluding Nordic countries)	20,50%
Sub-Saharan Africa	19,70%
Asia	18,00%
Pacific	14,80%
Arab States	10,50%
Situation as of 31 October, 2011.	
Data from Inter-Parliamentary Union; http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm	

Table 1: There are significant discrepancies between the representations of women in the world's parliaments.

There are extremely optimistic opinions on the current status of women.¹⁰ However, there are also still alarming violations of women's rights going on. Some women have to suffer torments that seem to make it impossible to even think of political participation. Of course, immediate relief actions need to be taken as well. But maybe this session can view political participation as capacity building to help prepare long term improvements.

3.4 An example of getting ICT to the people

Often the simplest concepts are the best. In the project "Village Phone", someone (but usually a woman) from a rural area in Bangladesh applies for a low-rate microcredit from the well-known Grameen Bank. She uses the money to buy a mobile phone and gets trained on how to use it and – here it comes – how to rent it out. By allowing others from her village or region to use it for money, she makes it her source of income. And suddenly, this network around the "phone lady" has access to the much broader networks of mobile phones. Richardson et al. (2000) provide an extensive evaluation of the pilot project.

4 Approaches

One frequently used way of classifying approaches is also relevant to promoting PPW: the basic differentiation between top-down and bottom-up approaches. Fostering PPW in a top-down manner could include various measures of "positive discrimination", i.e., compensating for discrimination against women by installing mechanisms that women benefit from. These mechanisms aim at reaching a balance between men and women. As soon as this is achieved, they should be redundant and consequently abolished. What can be problematic with this approach is that the mechanisms might not be supported by the respective society, group or whatever it is aimed at. They can, for instance, be "too early" in the sense of individuals not yet having reached the necessary moral convictions (e.g., many members of the group simply don't believe that women should participate in politics in the first place or male members feel discriminated against on a very personal level). Furthermore, it is usually rather difficult to decide when exactly these measures should be abolished as their effects will continue to unfold for some time. However, they can be extremely efficient for the simple reason that the actor carrying them out (be it some form of elite, a government or anything of the like) has the *power* to see them through.

¹⁰ E.g., Hanna Rosin's talk at http://www.ted.com/talks/hanna_rosin_new_data_on_the_rise_of_women.html

Conversely, bottom-up initiatives (also known as “grassroot movements”) only very rarely have (formalised) power at their command. They come into existence when a certain number of people believe it is time to change something and are ready to take part in this change themselves. By definition, they cannot be initiated by any official entity. Nevertheless, they can be supported once they are getting active. Then, they can become extremely powerful actors with a lot of credibility as opposed to organisations associated with traditional power and potentially ambiguous interests. Political participation cannot only happen in parliaments. A strong civil society including NGOs can be extremely powerful. But still, the best results will be achieved if all of these actors try to work together.

Another dimension that may be related is who should drive the change of getting more women to engage with politics. Should it be the work of women exclusively? Should men be allowed or even encouraged to take part? Or is the only realistic approach to lobby the men who are currently in power in order to make them “make way”? Certainly, this last option cannot solve the problem on its own. On the other hand, those who currently are in power cannot be entirely ignored either. They have to “make way” at some point, because revolutions should not be the first choice for this kind of change. Including men in the process should also account for a wider acceptance in society.

As is often the case, schools can be expected to play an important role in the process of promoting PPW. They are usually the only institution of education (as opposed to caretakers or self-study) that can be influenced by the state and/or supranational institutions. Schools are vital in (re-)producing social realities and have a considerable influence on both individuals and the society as a whole. Also, they offer the opportunity to compensate for differences in the way children were brought up. To use the example of technology: While some children may have used certain devices at home and are more natural with them, others may never have been in contact with them. Because this could compromise their chances of future participation in society, schools should pay attention to transferring the skills that the young generation (i.e., not based on gender) will need – “schools are a fundamental site of potential transformative social change” (Carr/Porfilio 2009: 93). In one way or another (at which level can gender equality, political awareness etc. be introduced to school systems?), schools should be considered in any medium- to long-term strategy.

5 Challenge

What will our session at MUIMUN 2012 be about? Ultimately, that's your decision. In this section, I will try to present some ideas but nothing of this is compulsory in any way.

Let's start with what might be the most difficult. The CSW per se is meant to operate without geographical constraints so what we need is a document that addresses the issue at global scale. Women's rights are rather well-respected in certain regions of the world while they are largely ignored in others. Not all regions of the world are technologised in the same way and/or to the same extent. In fact, there are enormous differences both between different regions as well as along the lines of class or status within nation states. E.g., Tyner (2003: 372) shows that in the U.S., supply of technology and, consequentially, the ability to use it, depends significantly on social backgrounds and other (often associated) attributes such as skin colour. Where do you want to place the emphasis of this session? How do you prioritise global issues and what should be tackled first?

Setting aside gender for a second, we have to ask ourselves what it takes to get someone involved with politics. Brazilian pedagogue Freire speaks of “conscientization” (becoming aware firstly of issues one

wants to change and secondly of the possibility to use political channels to achieve this goal) and “political connectedness” (politics are predominantly carried out by groups of people rather than individuals and all politicians need to have contacts and networks). In other words: One must be aware of a problem and one must believe that this problem can be solved through working together in politics (cf. Carr/Porfilio 2009: 96).

As was mentioned earlier, addressing the issue at a global scale does not automatically mean setting up a strategy that can be applied in any given situation. If the goal is to find ways of using media to enhance PPW, you will have to decide, in the course of our session, how to narrow this topic down even further. We will need (1) adequate technology and (2) circumstances under which women are able and willing to use this technology for political purposes.

5.1 Innovation and technology

Especially to reach young people (in our context: girls), more appealing means of communication need to be found than elderly people talking about “citizenship”. In certain areas of the world, the young generation(s) of today are so-called “digital natives”. For them, it is completely normal to communicate via the internet, via text messages and so on. In other parts of the world or even of the same country, people of the same age have neither of these opportunities. How can they be reached by this technology as well – so that they can benefit from the ease with which it is possible to connect with others? Especially for women it is not always to be taken for granted that using mobile phones is socially accepted, even if the economic preconditions exist.

The 2011 uprisings in the MENA region (Middle East and North Africa) could not have been possible without smartphones and social networks such as facebook (cf. Axford 2011). What better proof could there be than how quickly the respective regimes started blocking access to these networks?

Boys tend to feel more attracted by computer games and are thus often more used to handling computers and other high-tech devices (Carr/Porfilio 2009: 101) than girls. Obviously, this is another reproduction of gender stereotypes. How can it be broken? Which contents or modes could be particularly appealing to girls? Is this not again reproducing stereotypes instead of breaking them? Or is it merely adjusting strategies to the status quo? Could boys' affection to computer games even be used to advance women's rights because boys' attitudes can be influenced in this way?

5.2 Required circumstances

In a rather strong critique of the “Digital Solidarity Fund” (see below), the Economist (2005) argues that the digital divide is but a symptom of deeper problems: “Even if it were possible to wave a magic wand and cause a computer to appear in every household on earth, it would not achieve very much: a computer is not useful if you have no food or electricity and cannot read.” How can we account for that?

And there are more problems. “When I think about active citizenship, I don't think about politics,” says a girl guide in a survey. “I volunteer but politics just never occurred to me.” Similarly, in the film “Pray the Devil back to Hell”, Liberian women decide that (male) politics have failed and that it is now their turn to save the world they live in from constant war and terror. But they are very careful not to be seen as politicians but rather as peace activists. This seems to be a general trend, but especially among girls and women. Politics are not believed to be capable of solving problems. Political systems are too abstract, maybe too corrupt or in other ways distracted from the actual problems. How can political participation be made more attractive, how can faith in politics be restored or even established?

According to Fitzgerald (2010) and Carr/Porfilio (2009), politics should be:

1. More direct, with visible impacts and changes. This includes decreasing the focus on (personal) power and influence and using more solution-oriented approaches.
2. More relevant. It should be easier to include the topics that people (women?) care about in political discourses.

Traditional exegesis of cultural or religious codes or texts that are supposed to provide guidelines for everyday life is sometimes in conflict with women's rights. For instance, there are Muslim opinion leaders who believe the Quran and the reality of woman politicians to be irreconcilable. Of course, this is not the only way of reading the respective passages as the Muslim Women's League (1995) shows.

5.3 Practical issues

The best ideas are worthless if they cannot be put into practice. What local particularities exist and how do we adjust to them? How will your measures be funded? For example, in the context of working towards the Millennium Development Goals, a "Digital Solidarity Fund" was established.¹¹ Intended for eradicating the digital divide, it might be of use.

While thinking of a strategy you should also put some thought into which organisations should carry out the tasks you are designing. What can the CSW do itself? What can the relatively young "entity for gender equality and the empowerment of women" (UN WOMEN; created only 2010 as a merger of different UN organisations) that is meant to coordinate the United Nations' efforts for women's rights do? And in which areas should non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or other entities of the civil society be included?

5.4 Summary

Many aspects of the topic at hand can be described through different notions of literacy. Obviously, literacy in the sense of "ability to read and write" plays an essential role in most forms of political participation. However, other aspects are also described in terms of literacy, e.g. media literacy (the ability to critically perceive, evaluate and (re-)distribute (potentially biased) messages from the media¹²), computer literacy (the ability to use high-tech devices for different purposes) and political literacy (the ability to take part in one's respective political system, including knowing overt and covert conventions, understanding mechanisms of power, networking skills and the like). What could "literacy campaigns" aimed at this look like? Is it possible to formalise (and measure) political literacy?

¹¹ <http://www.dsf-fsn.org>

¹² This and the definitions of the other types of literacy are not final. There are many definitions being debated; the ones I provided here should suffice for a general overview.

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