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Report

Promoting women's political and economic engagement: ambition for the future

Wednesday 28 – Friday 30 October 2015 | WP1439

In association with:



As part of:



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Introduction

1. In partnership with WEConnect International and Accenture, this dialogue investigated opportunities and constraints affecting women's participation in economic and political spheres, identifying collaborative pathways and innovative strategies to push the agenda. Bringing together predominantly female representatives from large corporations, government, associations, entrepreneurs and activists, we heard perspectives from Afghanistan, Burundi, Cameroon, China, Croatia, Egypt, Jamaica, Kenya, Kosovo, the Maldives, Malaysia, Mexico, South Korea, Sri Lanka and the United Kingdom.
2. The need to promote female participation in political and economic spheres is clear. Encouraging the next generation of women to engage with traditionally male-dominated institutions, organisations and structures could have significant impact on stability and prosperity in developed and developing countries alike. Women are a critical yet largely undervalued resource. This meeting sought to evaluate the potential impact of increased empowerment of women and girls in politics and the economy; unpack the impact of perceptions, culture and structural barriers which hinder women's economic and political participation; and identify where action could be taken to deliver results most quickly, producing recommendations for steps forward.

Context

3. This year marks the 20th anniversary of the landmark Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action on gender equality and women's empowerment. The declaration broke new ground, in terms of its unprecedented broad-based participation of non-governmental actors. It placed issues like gender-based violence firmly on the agenda for the first time. Women's rights and interests and marginalised groups have enjoyed better legal protection since. Tremendous efforts have been made to implement the Platform for Action.
4. However, in central areas of concern like the feminisation of poverty, economic and political participation and human rights, two decades on there is still a long way to go. Common challenges to gender equality around the world include a lack of political commitment, lack of resources, backlash when gains are made, the increase in religious fundamentalism, the rise of right-wing governments, and suppression of dissent and civil society movements. Economic downfall has impacted the most under-privileged members of society, exacerbated by trends towards privatisation, retraction of the welfare state, and globalisation of trade on the terms of powerful corporations and financial institutions. At the UN Commission on the Status of Women this year, delegates adopted a new declaration to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment by 2030. This included the need for greatly increased investment to meet the goals laid out in Beijing.

5. It makes economic sense to draw women into the economy and to build a diverse workforce relevant to a diverse market place. However, great imbalances between men and women still exist worldwide. The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report for 2015 shows that the economic participation and opportunity gender gap has been closed by 59%, but improvements of only 3% have been documented in the last ten years. Gaps still exist in participation, remuneration and advancement. There is an even greater gap in women's political empowerment. Only 23% of the gap between men and women in minister-level and parliamentary decision-making posts having closed in the last ten years.
6. A recent World Bank report on "Women, Business and the Law 2016" found that women's economic opportunities were impeded by one or more laws in 155 of the 173 countries covered by the survey.

Key issues

Female representation and quotas

7. Quotas can push forward social norms that are more inclusive of women. Positive case studies include WIPP, a non-partisan organisation which educates and advocates on behalf of women-owned businesses (WOBs) and which successfully lobbied US senators to ensure 5% of federal budget procurement goes to WOBS. In Kenya, without quotas on proportion of female MPs, figures never rose beyond 9%.
8. Greater visibility of women achieved through quotas in diverse areas can encourage other women to participate. In Kosovo, 32% of MPs are women, the highest in the region, due to quotas. They demonstrate to society that women can do the job as well as – or even better than – their male counterparts.
9. After a few years, quotas start to be perceived by detractors as acceptable and normal.

Other participants were less in favour of quotas:

10. Detractors perceive quotas are not meritocratic. In the Caribbean, many women's organisations lobby for quotas in politics, but their ideas are rejected by the public.
11. Although they are enshrined in law there may be few qualified female candidates to fill quotas. In Kenya, civil society was aggressive in lobbying the government to reserve 30% of government contracts for businesses led by women, youth and other minority groups, yet few women have the skills or knowledge to apply. In South Africa, 45% of board members are meant to be black South Africans but there are not enough qualified candidates.
12. Quotas do not necessarily promote norm change. In Sri Lanka, quotas of female MPs have led to political parties nominating women who toe the party line, rather than those prepared to drive progressive change.
13. Accreditation systems encouraging institutions to compete to achieve gender equality can be a more subtle and effective policy to change norms than legally enforced quotas. The Women's Business Enterprise National Council (WBENC) has developed the most valued certification of women-owned, operated, and controlled businesses, which is recognized by public, private, non-profit and government entities in the US and several other countries. The Equality Challenge Unit developed the Athena Swan Charter in 2005 to further and support equality and diversity for staff and students in higher education institutions across the UK.

Several solutions were proposed to move out of the 'quotas or no quotas' impasse:

14. Research is needed into what kinds of quotas are most effective in which contexts and why. In Mexico, legislating in favour of 50/50 gender-equal candidate lists in elections was more acceptable to detractors than a quota concerning numbers of elected officials, resulting in 42% of the female candidates being elected. Alternatively, quotas could be introduced as a temporary measure with the assurance that they be phased

out once gender equality is reached.

15. More gender-neutral language should be used when proposing quotas. A successful lesson from Sweden is to demand that 'no more than 60% of representatives be either male or female' rather than the more controversial 'at least 30% of MPs should be women'.
16. The evidence-based case for quotas needs to be made clearer. The argument needs to be advanced that current systems without quotas are not meritocratic, as they rely on male-biased 'old-boy' networks or directly discriminate against women.
17. Pursuit of quotas needs to be accompanied with broader movements to change social norms. Provision of relevant education and capacity-building for women on how they can succeed in 'a man's world' is needed alongside quotas to ensure qualified female candidates.
18. We need quotas at lower levels to ensure that women can enter at lower ranks and rise upwards, not just for women at high levels (company boards, MPs).
19. Women need more protection to participate in broader political processes. During elections in Kenya, women had access to a direct number to the police to ensure protection from gender-based violence. This should have been extended throughout the whole campaign process.

Male champions of change

Engaging male champions for gender equality is a useful avenue to pursue. There are several examples of advantages:

20. Male champions can operate at all levels, both within the home and in influential formal positions.
21. Male Champions of Change in Australia is an example of good practice with a roadmap, tools and templates to emulate. In 2010 they encouraged 22 CEOs of major corporations to bring diversity to the workplace. The number of women in management has increased by 5%.
22. The UN's "He for She" campaign placed men's involvement on the agenda
23. Strategic alliances with influential men can be particularly effective, for instance getting religious leaders on board as in the case of Sisters in Islam in Malaysia.
24. Experience from campaigning for gender equality in Kenya shows that men promoting gender equality in the political sphere are often more listened to by other men, than women.

However, there are also challenges to be overcome and issues to be conscious of:

25. Disengagement of men in what are perceived to be 'women's issues' is an issue.
26. We need to make a stronger case to men for gender equality, and we need to provide the evidence to prove that it benefits everyone, not just women. Men need clearer roadmaps on how to be champions from home outwards.
27. A solution is to use gender-neutral language to make the case for gender equality less about women, and more about human rights and benefits for everyone. Several corporations have recently changed their gender groups to embrace more neutral and inclusive language. Price Waterhouse Coopers has changed its LGBT group to GLEE: Gay, Lesbian and Everyone Else; the recruitment agency Ambition has changed its 'Women with Ambition' group to 'Gender Equality at Ambition'.
28. Lessons can be learned from psychology and marketing, by using different messages when inviting men and women to gender events, to appeal to their different priorities.
29. More education and role models are needed for boys, to show how gender equality serves their interests too.

30. While the feminist movement needs to do more to engage male champions of change, this does not reduce the need for women-only spaces when appropriate. A diversity of spaces – both women-only and mixed – are still needed. During protests in the Maldives, women-only spaces proved crucial to enable women to participate.

Knowledge, education and capacity-building

31. The need for education to facilitate women's political and economic participation was widely discussed. Education is needed which raises awareness of women's existing rights.
32. In many countries, legislation exists to protect or promote women, regarding equal pay and right to promotions, against sexual harassment in the workplace, or rights to reproductive health, but more is needed to make women and wider society aware of these rights. For instance, Sisters in Islam in Malaysia conducts training and other activities to spread awareness of women's rights in the country.
33. Education on women's rights legislation could be effective if undertaken by the state apparatus or alternative channels depending on context.

Women need additional skills training to take advantage of opportunities:

34. Quotas and other affirmative action are ineffective if women do not have the expertise and experience to take these opportunities. Women-led businesses (WLBs), especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), need more training in how to successfully bid for large contracts. Entrepreneurship training was also mentioned, and the UK and other industrialised countries could learn from emerging economies on this issue.
35. Training needs to be available to help women transition from motherhood back into the workplace, or move between careers.
36. Such capacity-building needs to be tailored to context-specific needs, whether greater training is needed in formal or informal economies, for start-ups, SMEs or large corporations.
37. Women need skills training on strategy, public speaking and delivering key messages, engaging with the media, using social media to increase visibility, and networking.

Education is needed which promotes gender equality:

38. Such education must reach people at young ages, and touches people across society, whether parents, young people, journalists, judges, teachers, etc.
39. This education can combine curriculum reform in schools with non-formal education programmes in other institutions, and promotion through the media.
40. Encouraging girls to be confident and to engage in traditionally male spheres such as trade and politics is important, as once they reach late childhood their aspirations and expectations are already formed.
41. This education also needs to provide positive role models for boys. For instance the GREAT Initiative in the UK runs gender training with teenage boys in London on positive masculinity and gender equality.
42. Education or gender training must expose how gender, and female subordination, is socially constructed and that social norms can evolve and change. This need is particularly great in countries where religious fundamentalism is on the rise, and where religiously-sanctioned constructions of gender cannot be challenged.

Networking, alliances, visibility and mentoring

43. Creating networks and alliances to further gender equality is a key priority. There are key areas which need investment:
44. Women often have fewer networks than men, and lack important contacts. As they may

face greater attacks on their work than their male colleagues, or can be excluded from nepotistic 'old boys' networks' based on their gender, they need support networks even more.

45. There is a need for greater collaboration and sharing of ideas across institutions. There is not as much collaboration as there could be between non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working on common goals, and between NGOs and key institutions like the government and media. NGOs could engage more with governments and parliamentarians for further-reaching impact, whether in lobbying or provision of training.
46. Greater funding opportunities should be made available for spaces for networking and sharing ideas. A significant challenge is that the most beneficial outcomes of such events can be intangible and long-term, when funders want short and medium-term quantifiable goals.
47. Participants at networking events need to find ways to sustain the alliances made during such encounters, potentially through social media platforms, to keep momentum and ensure meaningful collaborations.
48. Networks should enable knowledge sharing, to help women create connections and extensive networks in key fields, including with champions – whether they are influential men, faith leaders, or supporters working in the media.
49. Proficiency in technology and social media is a key skill women need to acquire to develop their networks and increase their visibility. During the occupation of Tahrir Square in 2011, Egyptian activists used projectors and sheets to present pop-ups films exposing police brutality. Twitter hashtags are a powerful way to get attention: #shoutingback, started by online campaign Everyday Sexism received 20,000 examples of sexual harassment in public within 24 hours of opening in 2012.

Several positive examples of networking initiatives and alliances were identified:

50. In the Maldives, contact with key UN bodies proved crucial for associations and the opposition party to lobby the government over human rights.
51. The WBENC, founded in the US in 1997, supports WLBs through hosting a database where women can advertise their businesses and network with government and corporate members.
52. The Women's Parliamentary Caucus of Pakistan created in 2008 works collectively on one platform across party affiliations for the cause of women. They have achieved landmark legislation protecting women's rights, including recent criminalisation of acid attacks. The Women's Equality Party, created in 2015, is the first political party in the UK dedicated solely to gender equality in politics, business, pay, parenting and caregiving. They demand an education system which encourages gender equality, equal treatment of women by and in the media and an end to violence against women.

Mentorship across generations and genders is an important aspect of supportive networks.

53. Desirable mentors maintain their integrity and authenticity, are genuine and approachable and help you build your strengths rather than focussing on your weaknesses.
54. Many women acknowledged the importance of having a strong female mentor, but men can also make valuable mentors, teaching women how to navigate a man's world.
55. Men can benefit from mentoring women also - becoming champions of change and gaining understanding of the challenges faced by women in gaining equal opportunities.
56. We need to change the misconception that mentorship is something only women need. Men and women can also mentor each other, making each other aware of their

experiences and perspectives.

57. Younger individuals can mentor older ones, for instance in terms of technological skills.
58. Women leaders need to consider their successors, and make sure if they leave their post they have prepared a strategic continuity team to carry on their interests.
59. Mentees of all ages and genders need to articulate what they need and want to achieve to get the best from their mentors.

Overcoming structural barriers

60. Specific structural barriers prevent full women's economic and political participation, including:
 61. Women predominate in informal sectors or small scale businesses with low access to capital, mechanisation processes and export markets, despite driving up to 75% of GDP in some developing countries.
 62. Micro-finance credit loans often have high repayment rates which disadvantage those already marginalised from access to capital.
 63. Smaller women-led businesses and NGOs acting for women's equality have difficulties applying for or implementing large public or private sector grants and contracts. The issue is less a shortage of funds, and more the lack of capacity to draw on existing opportunities.
 64. Procedures such as registering businesses or declaring tax can be in complex or even foreign languages, requiring capacity that may not be available to smaller organisations, though this is not specific to women.

Positive examples addressing such barriers include:

65. Ovamba Solutions Ltd is the first lending platform created to fund African SME businesses. It has a strong track record of enabling WLBs to receive training and accreditation to access capital from institutional investors.
66. AusTrade and UK Trade and Investment provide support to enable businesses to expand internationally and access export markets. They have clear models which can be emulated.
67. The Commonwealth Businesswomen's Network (CBW) is an online platform based on the principles of talent, training and trade, designed initially to enable WLBs to scale up beyond the start-up stage. Women can share knowledge and experiences, and smaller companies can tender together to access large contracts.

A holistic life-course approach

Promotion of gender equality must be undertaken across the life-course and in diverse social spheres to influence cultures:

68. People's constructions of gender are strongly influenced by stereotypes they are exposed to in childhood, so role models and education are needed at young ages.
69. As all areas of life are interconnected, gender equality needs to be mainstreamed across social spheres from education, the media, politics, markets, religion, health, etc., in order to be effective.
70. The implementation of progressive legislation or policy is affected by wider cultures, whether in the family, workplace, institutions or broader society. Barriers in any one cultural sphere undermine positive steps in other domains.
71. A holistic approach needs to consider the ways gender intersects with other constructions of identity, whether race, ethnicity, age, (dis-)ability, religion, sexuality, etc., to create multiple experiences and forms of (dis)advantage. Intersectionality makes women a highly heterogeneous group.

72. This can pose challenges to deciding on the focus of campaigns, and risks more powerful women speaking on behalf of other more socially under-privileged groups.
73. It creates the opportunity for gender activists to collaborate across different groups and make connections with broader agendas like human rights and sustainable development.

International experience and cultural relevance

Participants identified the advantage in sharing international perspectives and adapting these experiences to find solutions to specific cultural contexts. There are several positive examples of replicating initiatives across contexts to build on collective power:

74. The US-based WBENC went international in 2009, with 17 countries now represented.
75. Founded in 2001 in the US, WIPP went international in 2014, with branches in the UK, Australia, Canada and Latin America.

There are also challenges and issues to be conscious of when transferring ideas across cultures:

76. One-size-fits-all approaches are rarely successful, and we should be wary of fashionable concepts if they do not work in specific contexts. Experience from Egypt showed that 'entrepreneurship' can be a highly risky livelihood strategy for people to embark upon if there is little state support or capital available and so should not be promoted indiscriminately.
77. Institutional independence and national sovereignty, combined with strong networks within and between countries whose members advocate in favour of progressive and liberal gender policies, are needed to overcome charges of imperialism against international actors promoting gender equality.
78. Governments, international bodies and funders should aim for a supportive rather than directive role when providing foreign aid or development assistance.
79. Grassroots activism remains crucial, as it can be harder for ruling elites to dismiss demands made from within countries as they cannot blame 'Western' agendas being imposed from outside.
80. It is important to identify influential leaders in specific contexts. These may be religious actors, in other cases may be the state, or business leaders of either gender.
81. To promote gender equality, messages need to be carefully tailored to the specific cultural context to be effective.

Recommendations for action

Policy makers

82. Develop common policies across and between countries to make political and economic environments more enabling for women. Actors must be able to sit together at the same table, speak the same language and share common examples of best practice.
83. Collaborate more with women's associations who are more in touch with the grassroots and women's priorities. NGOs often have high levels of expertise in areas such as providing education and capacity-building.
84. Create more independent commissions to ensure that human rights are assured. Human rights training should be mandated for teachers, judges and security forces.
85. Conduct more research to inform sound evidence-based gender policy. More gender disaggregated data is needed to identify gender bias, for instance in terms of who is accessing economic support programmes, healthcare services, training programmes etc. Metrics currently used do not necessarily capture the right data. Collaboration is

needed with actors at the grassroots to design more appropriate measures and indicators. More research is needed to measure outcomes of existing policies.

86. Create the right tax incentives and frameworks to encourage women's economic participation, which addresses access to finance, markets and training.
87. Make procedures as simple and accessible as possible, for instance registering a business.
88. Develop more accreditation systems to promote greater gender equality and diversity in public institutions and private businesses, for instance percentage of WLBs in public sector procurement.
89. Deliver more training and education to give women skills to participate more in the economy. This needs to be tailored to the cultural context, but also needs to fit current markets by training women in skills which are in high demand and low supply. Important areas include capacity-building to enable WLBs to scale up, or for women to re-enter the workforce after child-rearing.
90. Engage in outreach and awareness-raising to make women aware of opportunities which already exist.
91. Create legislation and policy which translates existing human rights legislation into practice, e.g. practical solutions to support female workers like on-site childcare in the workplace and shared maternity and paternity leave; equal pension rights; legislation to ensure more equal representations of gender in the media.

Public funding bodies and procurement

92. Create accreditation frameworks which ensure a proportion of public procurement contracts are earmarked for SMEs and WLBs. As the largest employer in many countries, the government has a strong potential to influence norms among private companies who deliver public services to consider the social impact of their supply chain.
93. Streamline and simplify public sector grants, make them smaller and more tailored to the needs of women's organisations.
94. Provide more opportunities for women to network and share experiences, recognising that the outcomes of such initiatives may not be easily quantifiable in the short or medium term.
95. Provide training to assist SMEs and WLBs in applying for contracts and funding, as the forms include complex language.
96. Make language more accessible and reduce the requirements for basic contracts.

Private funding bodies and corporations

97. Consider the social impact of their practices and supply chain. For instance, micro-finance enterprises with high repayment rates are harmful to those already marginalised by reduced access to capital.
98. Make credit and capital more accessible for WBOs and SMEs to scale-up, and without onerous repayment rates.
99. Support diversity as it makes strong economic sense. Positive examples of corporations like Ambition show that companies who take care of their workforce and beneficiaries are more productive and efficient in the long term.
100. Invest more in capacity building to facilitate collaboration with WOBs, for long-term positive impacts on both sides. Currently the focus is on cost-saving or profit-making ventures.
101. Unbundle large contracts to make them more accessible to SMEs, as private sector contracts are often too big for WLBs. Alternatively, frameworks can be put in place so

that high-level tier suppliers must give a certain proportion of their contracts at lower tiers to SMEs and WLBs.

Associations and activists

102. Lobby at both levels of policy/legislative change and implementation. Changes in policy or legislation do not necessarily result in desired outcomes if political will, awareness and resources are not dedicated to implementation, which is where associations need to remain alert and active.
103. Go beyond concerns of welfare and mutual support to recognise the political clout and potential for effective lobbying of women's associations and interest groups. For instance, influencing public policy to support women workers and WLBs whilst ensuring human rights.
104. Raise awareness of existing national and international legislation so that women can claim their rights, and call governments and companies to account where they fall short of requirements.
105. Approach governments and the private sector to promote associations' services, particularly as providers of education and capacity building.
106. Develop networks and collaborate as much as possible with allies on issues of mutual concern. UN bodies and international groups can be powerful allies in cases where states are abusing human rights of their citizens. Activists in particular need strong support networks and assistance from wider organisations and institutions. Trade unions are another influential actor to collaborate with.
107. Continue engaging in protest as a highly effective form of direct action which raises visibility of issues. Although protest in many contexts is becoming increasingly dangerous, the documentation and sharing of human rights abuses through social media provides ways to strengthen a campaign both by documenting the core issue, and any crackdown on the campaign itself.
108. Harness social media as much as possible. Associations can seek out training opportunities, and provide training and examples of best practice to other allies in their network.
109. Press for gender-friendly accreditation frameworks, such as proportions of WLBs in public and private supply chains, or diversity-friendly workplaces. Associations with significant membership can then exert significant consumer power to change norms.
110. Make a strong and coherent case for why women's economic and political participation across social spheres is beneficial for the whole of society to support associations' campaigns.
111. Engage with male champions of change, especially those influential in male-dominated spheres whether the media, politics, or religious circles.
112. Continue to challenge religious fundamentalism. Engaging some religious leaders on issues of gender equality can be very difficult, especially if these demands are perceived as imposition of a Western, secular agenda. However, religious leaders are often sensitive to popular opinion and must be seen to reflect the views of their supporters. Grassroots lobbying from within religious communities can be very effective, and seen by religious leaders as reflecting legitimate rather than 'outsider' concerns.

Conclusions

113. Participants took a solutions oriented approach to the challenges outlined throughout the meeting, noting that a lot of what could be done would not need policy change, but rather movement from the ground up to work towards equal economic and political engagement of women and men.

114. There is a clear need to reframe the discussion away from a gender-based prism and towards terminology that promotes equality of opportunity for men and women – towards balance and inclusiveness.
115. Equality of legal rights for women was agreed to be the basis for all other work to stem from.
116. The importance of people was a strong theme - building networks (including this group), using existing networks to reach out, connect and consolidate to ensure that smaller groups are embedded with larger movements. Mentoring, advocating, engaging with potential male champions and supporting other women as collaboratively and inclusively as possible were also proposed as important initiatives.
117. Collecting data and evidence of the socioeconomic benefits of greater equality of engagement to deliver a powerful message was highlighted – to change policy and ensure that international initiatives are strongly supported. It was suggested that encouraging the media to become partners in sharing this story and treating women more equally in the press, broadcast and social media would help spread the word.
118. The question of quotas arose – are they a means by which to speed up history?
119. Initiatives that were proposed included a “made by women” trademark/logo; creating a means by which to form an umbrella group with a common purpose to harmonise global initiatives on equality; including equality and gender balance in the curriculum from the start; creating networks of young people (boys and girls) and amplify role model stories through those networks; encouraging all those engaged to contribute to the Roadmap for 2020 and better data collection to make an empirical and economic argument for policy/legislative change; taking existing initiatives like Women Impacting Public Policy (WIPP) and WEConnect to as many countries as possible.
120. Finally, creating a level playing field for all genders and minorities will involve adequate training to allow access to the same opportunities – whether in negotiating skills, contracting, bidding for grants, applying for finance, debating, caregiving – and may require changes in legislation to enable those barriers to opportunity to be removed.

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Wilton Park | December 2015

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