

CONSOLIDATED RESPONSE ON THE INVOLVEMENT OF YOUNG WOMEN IN POLITICS

This consolidated response is based on research conducted by iKNOW Politics staff and contributions submitted by Julie Ballington, Program Specialist for Partnership between Men and Women, Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU); Kate Coyne-McCoy, Regional Director, Emily's List; Tuğba Kalafatoğlu, Founder of V♀TE Women in Politics; and Susannah Shakow, Director of the Running Start .

Question

I'm a young woman and I would like to start exposing myself to politics. I am already a member of a political party in my country and I would like to know what should be my next step?

Introduction

As numbers of women in politics around the world increase, young women may become more inspired to take part in politics. This may in part be because more women than ever before receive higher education, participate in the global workforce, and hold professional decision-making positions, which in turn should lead to a strengthened role and status of women in society. Additionally, more women in politics can serve as positive role-models for young women who aspire to make policy changes in their countries. At the same time, women face more barriers than men when entering politics, which is even more difficult for young women who, in some instances, face double discrimination of age and gender. For instance, the Inter-Parliamentary Union's survey of Members of Parliaments indicates the following:

"The aggregate responses to the survey confirm the common belief that parliamentarians tend to be older than middle age. Nearly 60 percent of respondents were over 50 years of age, with no significant variations between men and women. However, of the three percent of parliamentarians between 70 and 80 years of age, all were male. Just over 10 percent of respondents were aged between 30 and 40 years, and less than one percent were aged between 20 and 30 years. This may suggest that parliamentary politics holds little interest for young people, or perhaps

that they encounter many obstacles to winning a parliamentary seat.”
(Ballington, J. p. 8. 2008)

This consolidated response highlights the skills and techniques that young women can use to get involved and gain recognition in politics. The response specifically highlights the importance of developing strong communications skills, building support networks both within and outside political parties, volunteering and getting involved in community and non-profit organizations, and staying informed about socio-political issues.

Networking within a Political Party and Civil Society Groups

Building informal and formal networks is an important step toward gaining access to political circles, resources, and critical information. Such networks can be formed within the political party one belongs to or outside of it through connecting with women’s organizations, non-profit institutions, media, social clubs, and community-based institutions and projects. According to the survey conducted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), for women to enter politics the strongest motivation next to serving their countries was to improve the lives of other women, followed closely by improving the lives of the community in which they live. At the same time, 18% of surveyed women mentioned the membership in a local or district council, 17% highlighted working with non-governmental organizations, and 16% pointed out social work among the critical channels, besides political parties, used by women to enter politics. Nearly twice as many women (20% as opposed to 11%)

“Networking is very important. It is essential to the empowerment of women. I have used it to gather advice from different sources when I need to solve problems. When I see a problem, I can call my colleagues and say, “I have this problem with my district; what do you think I can do?” They’ll tell me how they addressed similar problems. Networking means helping each other, especially because gender empowerment is a new issue in the world, particularly in Africa. I need my international women colleagues to watch my back while I watch my front. And I will watch their back while they watch their front. That is networking, and that is caring.”

Quote from the iKNOW Politics Interview with Alomiza Ennos-Barr, Liberian Representative and Chair of the Women Legislative Caucus.
<http://www.iknowpolitics.org/en/node/9077>

as men entered politics through civil society and non-governmental organization (NGO) activity. (Ballington, J. p.16. 2008) Therefore, young women need to consider the importance of getting

involved in civil society and non-governmental organizations and community work to advance in politics.

Being able to draw on experiences and knowledge of members of formal and informal networks can be critical for a person entering politics. Such connections may not only grant access to important resources, but also make one's name known in the community and involve the person in community life and social projects. For instance, having access to various support networks can help to fundraise during political campaigns, get support from prominent political leaders on key issues, and receive valuable advice and support from colleagues. To gain access to such networks, Susannah Shakow, Director of the Running Start, recommends the following:

“Make sure that people know your name and can make connections between who you are and the good work you have done in your community. This is called networking. Stay involved with people you volunteer with and for, and consistently search for more opportunities to help people out. This is particularly valuable to the leaders in your community. People always remember those who work hard to help them out.” (Shakow, S. Expert Opinion. 2009)

The importance of getting involved in community work and activities has been pointed out by a number of experts and women leaders who have already established themselves in politics. In her interview with iKNOW Politics, Ms. Winnie Byanyima, former Member of Parliament from Uganda, points out that she used her community involvement and connections in her political campaigns:

“I used non-traditional techniques in my campaign that questioned and exposed the old political culture and norms in my country. I reached out to poor people in their communities and homes, going door to door. While other politicians shunned those who lived in the slum areas, I visited women in their kitchens everywhere and listened to them. My techniques were criticized by other politicians who felt that I had an unfair advantage.... I stuck to my outreach strategies and continued visiting women in their little kitchens and gardens under the sun while they did

their chores – speaking and listening to them about their struggles. This excited women and made them feel that they had power through voting.”
(Byanyima, W. Interview to iKNOW Politics. 2007)

Additionally, it is important to network and build support within political parties. iKNOW Politics Regional Coordinator for Asia-Pacific, Tristanti Mitayani, mentions that after joining a political party, it is important to get noticed by the party members. Ms. Mitayani advises to participate in party events and sessions and get involved in important party sessions. She adds that it is important to speak up and express your own opinion in front of other party members and, if needed, to take sides on issues important to constituents and community.

Another way to become active and to participate in party policy processes is to advocate for establishing women’s and youth sections within the party, if they do not exist yet, or to participate in the activities of the existing branches. Through these branches, it may be possible to advocate for internal party programs that help young women to run for the public office, to enrich campaign skills and to build a support base. Tuğba Kalafatoğlu, founder of V♀TE Women in Politics, suggests becoming involved in party’s women’s and youth branches and to be active in their work by spearheading or initiating new projects, reaching out to young voters, organizing events on key electoral issues, etc. Ms. Kalafatoğlu points out that this kind of involvement can add value to party’s work and to help a young aspirant to win party’s nomination and support in the future. (Kalafatoğlu, T. Expert Opinion. 2009.)

Youth and women’s sections of political parties can also assist young women to develop a “power base” within the party, which provides them with influence and credibility even in political cultures where young women’s voices are frequently ignored. According to Anita Vandenberg, iKNOW Politics Project Manager, through the capacity to quickly mobilize party members in large numbers for internal party votes (for leadership candidates, policy resolutions or other elected party positions), party rallies and media events, young people can often gain significant bargaining power within the party. Additionally, young women who demonstrate their capacity to lead blocks of young party members will be taken seriously by the senior party establishment. Anita Vandenberg mentions that young women in political parties should never hesitate to run for positions of leadership, even if it is only to become the head of the youth section. Too often young women will do all the work campaigning for someone else, but shy away about putting

their own name forward. Even if they lose, the experience of running for a position will provide valuable experience and lessons for the future.

Young women involved in politics should also remember that they have the advantage of time. Whereas older women who enter politics have only a few chances for electoral success, young women can afford to take risks. This is the moment to advocate loudly for what one believes in and to test one's own limits. Young people in politics, especially high school and university students, are often forgiven more readily for their mis-steps than senior elected officials, therefore one should take the opportunity to try different approaches and learn the lessons while being young.

As mentioned above, building support systems and having access to formal and informal networks requires being active in party life, volunteering for local community initiatives and projects, taking chances, and speaking up on critical issues.

Developing Strong Communications Skills

Research shows that with the pressures and costs of political campaigns, the art of communication is a vital skill for political figures. Not only have communication channels become more varied and far-reaching, but they also demand more accurate and simple messages to be channeled through them to target audiences. Tuğba Kalafatoğlu, founder of V♀TE Women in Politics, points out:

“To be a good leader, you need to be a good communicator. First of all, you need to send your message across effectively, which is a vital part of being successful in today's political world. Whether you want to have a simple conversation, speak in your community, make a presentation or negotiate, learning the skills to communicate clearly will help you to improve your success rate.” (Kalafatoğlu, T. Expert Opinion. 2009)

In addition to having strong communications skills, it is important to maintain continuous communication with target audiences, including professional contacts and community leaders.

Anita Vandenberg, iKNOW Politics Project Manager, mentions that young people in politics should be careful not to burn bridges with their colleagues, community groups and party members, because this can negatively affect their future involvement in political life. The relationships made during early years in politics, regardless of whether on a winning or losing campaign, can be the strongest ones in a later political career. Kate Coyne-McCoy, Regional Director with Emily's List, also suggests:

"Make certain that you are keeping all your contacts in some data management system and promise to communicate with them at least twice a year. Send a periodic update to some of those folks by email, and then send them a holiday card. Use a combination of methods of communication, but communicate with everyone on your list, personal contacts, professional contacts, and political contacts, at least twice per year." (Coyne-McCoy, K. Expert Opinion. 2009)

Part of succeeding in sending a message and communicating effectively is knowing the audience and preparing carefully to address the issues and needs of that audience. The manual published by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) mentions that knowing who and how many people will be listening is critically important. Therefore, researching the demographics of the audience and tailoring one's speech accordingly is key to communicating successfully. The manual further recommends considering the size of the audience. While small groups are more attentive, larger ones need more drama, humor and emotion to hold their interest. (Seven Tips on Writing a Better Speech. NDI.)

The importance of communicating effectively both in writing and orally is one of the key steps toward succeeding in politics and getting the message across. Political leaders, particularly young leaders and aspirants, should pay special attention to developing strong communications skills through practice, mentorship programs and training.

Staying Informed and Knowledgeable

In a time when information and knowledge is so wide-spread and accessible, it is important to stay abreast of current political and socio-economic trends and developments both nationally and internationally. Speaking about the ways of staying informed and knowledgeable about current issues, Susannah Shakow, Director of Running Start recommends:

“This includes everything from reading the news to studying the history of politics, particularly in your country. Keeping up with current events is a great start and the first step to getting involved. It is really important to reach a comfortable level of proficiency when it comes to awareness. Also, knowing the history of situations allows for the opportunity to make connections between past and present.” (Shakow, S. Expert Opinion. 2009)

Staying informed may not only help to analyze current and future issues faced in a community or country, but also makes the person a credible source of information for others and gives the person a reputation as an expert on a particular issue. This is particularly important for young leaders who want to build credibility and a strong reputation among colleagues and within socio-political networks. Ms. Trisanti Mitayani, iKNOW Politics Regional Coordinator for Asia-Pacific, recommends remaining updated on current political issues and following news using various types of media such as TV, internet etc. She adds that knowing situation in other countries provides a broader perspective and understanding of the political situation around the world, which one can apply to one's own situation.

Additionally, staying knowledgeable may require participating in various training events and leadership programs, where a young aspirant can not only learn practical skills on how to succeed in politics and hold political campaigns, but also enrich his or her knowledge drawing on the experiences of peers from around the world. Most leadership programs provide training on decision-making, communications and message development, addressing the media, goal setting, confidence building, and negotiation skills. These are skills needed to advance in politics. It is important to participate in such programs and training events to constantly strengthen skills and knowledge of new trends in the political process.

Increasing Involvement in Social and Political Life

Establishing strong relations within your community, social and political networks, and interest groups requires being actively involved in their projects and initiatives. This can be done through volunteering one's time to implement these projects, attending meetings of local council boards and public events, serving on the board of community organizations and institutions, and mobilizing other people around a cause. Tuğba Kalafatoğlu, founder of V♀TE Women in Politics, advises the following:

"... establish good relations with your community, which you can do by getting involved in the issues that interest you. If you can't find any organization that matches your interest, you can start your own organization that has a mission to help the community. Additionally, you can start writing columns in a weekly newspaper or you can create your own blog." (Kalafatoğlu, T. Expert Opinion. 2009)

Another technique to get involved in the community is to listen to people's concerns and try to make them known within the community and local leadership. Ms. Kate Coyne-McCoy, Regional Director of the Emily's List, suggests the following:

"Take a map of the district out and identify 10 places that are geographically evenly distributed. Identify one person in each of those ten places to open their home for a couple hours so that neighbors and friends can get together and discuss the issues facing the district." (Coyne-McCoy, K. Expert Opinion. 2009)

An integral part of getting involved in social and political life of your community and to get one's name known is to volunteer personal time. Volunteerism has played a particularly important role in strengthening connections with the community and community leaders. The more opportunities one takes to volunteer, the more valuable it is to the individual and the community. Volunteering is also valuable because it provides hands-on skills, values, and knowledge. (Shakow, S. Expert Opinion. 2009)

Conclusion

Being a young woman entering politics requires a lot of work and time. Experts suggest building support networks within a political party, community and civil society organizations that may promote the issues important to the young aspirant and support his or her candidacy in the future. Experts also suggest getting actively involved in activities of non-profit organizations, community and political parties. Additionally, it is important to stay informed and knowledgeable about socio-political and economic issues in the candidate's country and around the world.

Further Reading

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