Strategies to increase women’s Representation in Parliament in Small States

Good day to my fellow lead discussion panellists and to you, members!

Today we gather here to discuss strategies for increasing female representation in parliaments, particularly in small states. Present day it is recognised that in most countries, small and large polities, there is less than 30% female representation in parliaments, a standard set by the United Nations (UN) in Beijing in 1995, believed to be the threshold needed to establish proper female representation and to influence female participation at a level that would promote sustained acceptance. In my small island home Bermuda and in many regimes throughout the Caribbean, Americas and Atlantic region the threshold of 30% remains unattained; more poignant is the fact that as recent as 2004 only 15 countries in the world had reached the target (Jon Fraenkel, May 6, 2012).

Considering the inequities that prevail in gender representation, the question begs, why? And, why is it important to address this issue? Well, for those still ignorant and/or unconvincing of the importance for having appropriate levels of female representation, let me make clear that, the fundamental reason for getting this correct is to ensure REPRESENTATIVE government. Can we have true democracy if government and governance is not representative? I think not. It has been said that “under representation of specific groups in political institutions, [in] decision making and policies is considered to be a democratic problem of justice, legitimacy, responsiveness, and effectiveness,” (Celis, 2009, Phillips, 1995). More specifically, when there are only minimal female parliamentarians based on composition, governments elected are not representative and are void of the female perspective as it impacts policy and legislation. According to Karen Celis (2009), “more women MPs and the structural presence of attention for women’s interests not only contribute to just and democratic politics, but also enhance the quality of democratic decision and policy-making on a substantive level.” Let us all here accept that true and fair representation will only be realized when increased numbers of females become commonplace worldwide.

So as the theme suggest, how do we increase female representation?

There is much evidence that quotas, electoral systems, particularly proportional representation (PR), culture, economic and social status, institutional affiliations, education/experience have had positive influence regarding female representation.

1. Quotas

Indeed, “Quotas have become an important mechanism through which women today are entering legislatures worldwide,” (Tripp & Kang, 2008). Looking at Rwanda, today this
country is an example of how the quota system helped leapfrog this country into holding a lead position in female representation. Consequently other African countries, Asian, Latin American, and Middle Eastern countries followed suit. Since 2006 more than 84 countries have employed some version of a quota system to improve female representation. In countries with no party system, reserved seating works much like quotas. In adopting the quota system some have done so by voluntary means and other countries have mandated that their parliaments have representative numbers of women (France). Many of the countries which engage in voluntary party quotas seem to have better results in achieving increased numbers of female representation. It should be noted that “Quotas prove ineffective unless combined with concerted popular pressure to improve levels of women’s representation in parliament. Where quotas are introduced as part of a strong, popular, campaign to elect qualified female candidates, they tend to be far more successful than in situations where change is sought by institutional engineering alone,” (Ballington & Matland, 2004, Fraenkel, 2012). Here are some leading sentiments observed throughout various regimes:

- Adoption of quotas is demonstrative of a consensus that women should have a greater representation
- Legislatures represent a form of preferential treatment that won’t change on its own – hence quotas
- Women are held back because of cultural beliefs, societal norms, lack of economic and institutional support – hence quotas
- Quotas make people aware of gender bias in other societal institutions and make more apparent that such mechanisms are needed to balance the gender playing field
- Quotas are being adopted to enhance modernisation, to be more competitive in the political arena and to demonstrate progressiveness on the international platform

Having reviewed the use of quota systems, on examination of the Eastern European and former Soviet Republic countries where there was a high level of female representation in the 1980’s, about 50% in some sovereignies, those levels had fallen by 2000 dropping down to about 11% on average, during this same period, quotas were eliminated. The reverse was experienced in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East, where quotas had been introduced, (Tripp & Kang, 2008). This is proof that quotas can make a difference. But be cautioned that, “One cannot deal with the problem of female representation by a quota system alone. Political parties, the educational system, NGOs, trade unions, churches - all must take responsibility within their own organisations to systematically promote women’s participation, from the bottom up. This will take time. It will not happen overnight, or in one year or five years; it will take one or two generations to realise significant change,” (Birgitta Dahl, Speaker of Parliament, Sweden, Fraenkel, 2012).
2. Electoral Systems

Literature suggests that Proportional Representation and variants of PR are the ideal electoral system for enhancing female representation (McAllister & Studlar, 2002). Life demonstrates that there are examples of both PR and plurality (FPTP) that show successes and failures with female representation, (Krook, 2010). Looking at the overriding principle of PR merits ensuring female representation! But as has been iterated, more than just the electoral system factors into having a desired outcome! The electoral system whether PR or FPTP married with some form of quotas, reserved seats, list systems and that coupled with concerted efforts to raise the female profile in the community through organisation affiliation, community work, professional groups, education, solidarity etc., can be translated into further female success at the polls.

Within the party the use of reserved seats for women, quotas and the placement of women in key political roles will help promulgate female representation. Women must be seen in lead positions, they must be seen as capable of leading, and they must have increased opportunity to lead. In Rwanda women who make up close to 50% of the parliament brag that because their numbers are great no longer feel that their male colleagues see them as different, they are accepted equals, they no longer feel that they are there to focus on women’s issues but on the issues and their presence alone assures a more wholesome perspective on policy formation and decision-making (Devlin and Elgie, 2008).

3. Culture and Institutional Affiliations

Historically, politics has been seen as an arena preserved for man. How many of us here today can speak of polities that we know through direct experience or through our historical annals when women could not vote? In Bermuda, female suffrage was not realised until 1944. Similar circumstances have been repeated globally. This phenomenon placed women at a disadvantage such that currently much effort is still spent just trying to change the attitudes and mindset of societies’ perspectives on female leadership. In 2005 some islands such as Nauru, Palau, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu and Tonga had no female representation, though this changed in Tonga in a by-election, with a female emerging as the successor, (Fraenkel, 2012). It must be inculcated in the minds of all that, “Excluding women from positions of power diminishes democratic development, and weakens political leadership by depriving society of potentially strong reservoirs of talent,” (Fraenkel, 2012). So, how best are such historical perspectives eradicated?

In various societies, for example, war torn and impoverished countries females are responsible for the family. Many such societies through the informal economy have witnessed the rise in the female and she subsequently has a stronger voice – a more
influential say. When other groups recognise the role of these women and these women realising their power, they can then use it as a tool to sway the installation of female representation within political arenas. As other sectors in society appreciate the voting power of these women especially in small communities where as few as 20 votes and less, it becomes crucial to the success of their own organisations to embrace them. These women can use their influence to be elevated into key positions were they can have direct say in decision making and in policy/legislation.

In political party organs females are often responsible for membership drives, fundraising constituency outreach and the like. Within such bodies these women must use their influence to encourage increased female representation at the MP level. Recognising their own worth first and then using it to make connections and build bridges with females in other institutions, like churches, community groups, sports clubs, and professional organisations in general and specifically female professional organisations, etc., will span far in helping to mould the thinking regarding female representation and leadership. Kenworthy and Malami (1999) did studies that posited that “Women’s share in professional occupations is positively linked to women’s representation,” (Tripp & Kang, 2008). If in our respective homelands there exists a shortage of professional women’s groups both in Party sectors and the larger society, then I believe it incumbent on us lead women to be instrumental in organising such. A Bermuda Branch of the IWF has been established. This forum provides a stage for women to network globally. Women must remember that there is power in numbers and that those of us observed in influential posts must us that influence to impact the attitude of others so that they more readily accept women as capable leaders – so that this translates into increased representation at the polls and ultimately in parliament. Delvin & Elgie (2008) studying the Rwandan parliament, quoting Dahlertup, said that the “numbers do count” in that they guarantee the continued presence and normalisation ... of women’s issues on the agenda.”

4. Education/Experience

How do education and experience positively impact female representation on the political front? First the two impact separately and in tandem.

Regarding education, it helps in terms of reassuring the public and others one wishes to influence, that having the essential educational background validates the individual, and promotes the woman’s aptness and capability. This proves true for those particularly holding public office. However this does not replace the gains one makes when fostering good relations through community actions. This speaks to the experience which can provide the crucial link for a person and indeed, for a woman to build the bridges to catapult her to the political platform. Developing a successful professional reputation, and engaging in community organisations such as churches, parish councils, women’s professional clubs and groups, schools, local political venues, helping agencies for
women and children and the public in general, all pave the way for an easier and smoother public acceptance. The report on women in Rwanda by Devlin and Elgie (2008) depict such. It also highlighted female solidarity. These type efforts if successfully manoeuvred provide the experience, support and public recognition needed to garner wider support for and on the political stage. Krook’s (2010), reported that varying combined conditions in the east and west have influence on increased female representation.

Secondly, education is important in terms of ensuring through schools, through media, the importance of female involvement to promote representative government. And once people see women involved, successful, responsive to female issues, the public through firsthand experience understands that women can perform on this level. Developing Youth parliaments with strong female participation from local schools, likewise serve to advance the notion that women can lead, they can be parliamentarians. In Bermuda and other Caribbean nations the youth parliaments are thriving and have solid participation from both sexes.

Conclusion

The shortage of female parliamentarians prevails whether in large or small countries and the solutions to counter such remains the same in essence. Blair’s Labour Party in 1997 introduced all women shortlist in many constituencies which resulted in his party having 28% female representation in parliament while the Conservatives had 9%. With concerted efforts change will happen. Having a strong female presence in various arenas and using this, the female influence will help advance female representation. Fostering bridges with other civil society organisations and continual education of the public all pave the way to future success for female representation. The effort must cross all boundaries socioeconomic, ethnic, gender, age and partisan. The effort must be relentless.

References


