

Consolidated Response on Women and Referenda

This consolidated response is based on research conducted by iKNOW Politics staff and contributions submitted by the following iKNOW Politics experts and active members: Hon. Lucienne Robillard, served as MP and a senior Cabinet Minister at the provincial level in Quebec and at the national level in the Canadian Parliament; Julia Brothers, Election and Political Process Senior Programme Officer/NDI; Stephanie Lynn, Resident Senior Programme Director- NDI Malaysia and Burma; and Dr. Moha Ennaji, Professor of Linguistics, Culture and Gender Studies.

Question:

I would appreciate if you can share with me the experiences from other countries that have gone through referendum (i) what gender issues emerged, how they were addressed and (ii) what lessons we can learn from the processes?

Grace Achieng Okonji, Southern Sudan

Introduction:

This consolidated response highlights the important role that women play in referendum campaigns. It also discusses the importance of active participation of women and sensitivity to potential barriers to women's participation in a referendum, especially in a post-conflict environment. The consolidated response provides examples from countries that have gone through the process of referenda and details how women and gender-related issues were addressed on these occasions.

Referendum – Definition and Context

A Referendum is defined as a general vote in which a particular proposal is either accepted or rejected by an entire electorate. Julia Brothers, Elections and Political Process Senior Programme Officer at the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), underlines that referenda can create special opportunities and challenges for the population of a country, especially for women. Ms. Brothers clarifies that referenda are unlike regular elections, where voters select their choices among multiple candidates:

“Referenda allow voters to make a choice on a direct legislative issue, such as national independence or the adoption or amendment of a constitution or other law. This often involves summarizing a very complex issue down to a simple “yes/no” question.”
(Brothers, J. Expert Opinion. 2010)

It is not uncommon to see referenda carried out in crisis situations, where women play an essential role in pushing the process forward. Stephanie Lynn, NDI Senior Programme Director in Malaysia and Burma, draws attention to referenda in conflict or immediate post-conflict situations where women are often particularly motivated to end violence. Also, men may be in hiding, deceased or jailed, leaving them out of the political process on election day. (Lynn, S. Expert Opinion. 2010)

An example is taken from the Kenyan Constitutional drafting which is currently taking place on the role of women in referenda in preventing conflict. Ms. Brothers says in this respect:

“Kenya is currently involved in deep public debate drafting a new constitution to be adopted by referendum. One proposed change would introduce the requirement that political parties nominate women representatives to regional assemblies. Women parliamentarians are joining the debate on this particular change. Some women who oppose the move see it, not as a positive step for increased female representation, but as an opportunity for favouritism on an ethnic or regional level. UN resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and security (2000) recognized the fundamental role of women in the areas of peace security and development. This role has been especially concretized in

the UN peace keeping missions where women civilian and uniformed personnel are playing an important role in preventing conflict, promoting peace and assisting in post-conflict reconstruction within UN peacekeeping operations.”

In addition to this, Dr. Moha Ennaji, Professor of Linguistics, Culture and Gender Studies, gives an example of a women’s initiative for peace in South Asia (Cambodia and Viet Nam) which has been coming together spontaneously for women and men in the cause of peace and non-violence. (Ennaji, M. Expert Opinion. 2010)

Women and Referenda

As explained by Ms. Brothers, Referenda often involve specialized issues so important that the population is asked to decide on them directly. These issues usually relate to fundamental rights of citizens or the larger fate of a nation — issues that will inevitably have an impact on women. For this reason, it is important that women are represented in the process of deciding on the content of the referendum. (Brothers, J. Expert Opinion. 2010)

Also it is very important for female elected officials, community leaders and civil society groups to take part in the process of referenda to make sure that the whole community is represented, especially if the vote will be held on a new constitution or an amendment to a constitution which may include or omit important clauses affecting women:

“Whether the referendum is developed through elected officials or submitted by civil society, women elected officials, women leaders and women interest groups should have a seat at the table. This can ensure that women will have more input in the issue at hand and will better understand how the issue may impact women”. (Brothers, J. Expert Opinion. 2010)

Gender Issues during a Referendum:

1. Voter Education

Women can face many obstacles to participation during a referendum campaign, especially in developing countries. In some countries women and girls are more disadvantaged than men and boys in receiving education. This has an immediate impact on lower literacy rates among women and creates barriers for their effective participation in politics and public life. (Consolidated Response: Working with Women Candidates and Women Voters During Elections. 2009. p.2)

Ms. Brothers highlights that voter education is essential to a fair and credible referendum process. For instance, voters do not always have the information to make informed decisions about the issue at stake, and instead may make decisions based on partial knowledge or misinformation. Hence, voter education becomes even more important when a population does not have much experience with elections, or when the population has a high rate of illiteracy or poor infrastructure for information sharing. Because women are often disproportionately affected by illiteracy and may be less exposed to public information, special efforts should be made to educate women voters on the subject of a referendum and its impact on women. (Brothers, J. Expert Opinion. 2010)

Ms. Brothers especially emphasizes the importance of educating voters when it comes to a constitutional referendum, where mainstream issues of interest to the general population, such as the electoral system, may overshadow issues that directly affect women. Also, all laws or constitutional clauses, whether they seem to directly relate to women or not, should be reviewed by a gender specialist to analyze their potential impact on women. Voter education efforts may be tailored to inform women about the specific aspects of the constitution that will affect women directly or indirectly. Women's organizations can serve as sources of impartial, specialized information for women around the country. (Brothers, J. Expert Opinion. 2010)

As an example, Ms. Brothers talks about the Kenyan Constitutional Referendum which took place in 2005.

“The 2005 referendum faced a dearth of impartial voter education efforts as many major civil society organizations were actively campaigning for or against the new constitution. Illiteracy, especially among women, remained a persistent challenge among the voting population—so much so that symbols, a banana for “yes” and an orange for “no”, were used on the ballot. During the run-up to the referendum, many women’s organizations, including the United Nations Development Fund for Women, took up voter education efforts, using public forums to educate female voters. These meetings gave women opportunities to debate details of the proposed constitution and express their opinion in safe environments.” (Brothers, J. Expert Opinion. 2010)

2. Engaging women in Referendum Campaign Processes

Lucienne Robillard, a former Canadian MP, Cabinet Minister and member of the Quebec provincial assembly, who was a key organizer of the “no” campaign during the 1995 Quebec independence referendum, remarks that it is very important to include women in referendum campaign processes. She suggests that this can be achieved through having women as spokespersons, engaging women’s associations and community groups, organizing gatherings specifically for women, and encouraging women to think about the future of their countries for themselves and their children. (Robillard, L. Expert Opinion. 2010)

Stephanie Lynn emphasizes that there should be campaigns that clearly address what women could gain from a referendum, as this would help increase their participation. Lynn, S. Expert Opinion. 2010)

Julia Brothers confirms that, as in any election, campaigning for a referendum can involve lively debate between supporters from both sides of the issue. Political competition in a referendum may not fall along traditional partisan lines and may, in fact, unveil new opportunities for participation of women that fall outside of the party structure:

“Civil society organizations and new political leaders often play an enhanced role in referenda alongside parties and party elite. Women can and should play an active role

in the debate and campaign surrounding the election.” (Brothers, J. Expert Opinion. 2010)

Ms. Brothers gives as an example the Montenegro Referendum for Independence in 2006:

“Although women did not play prominent leadership roles, women were fully integrated into the campaign efforts on both sides of Montenegro’s referendum on independence. Women participated in extensive door-to-door canvassing and engaged in other forms of campaigning to build support for their respective positions.” (Brothers, J. Expert Opinion. 2010)

3. The Phrasing of the Referendum Question

Ms. Brothers explains that because most citizens will not be in a position to review the full documentation behind the referendum, the framing of the issue — and especially the question posed to voters on the ballot — is of particular importance. Referenda often ask citizens to vote on a single question, or a series of questions, that represent a complex issue or set of laws:

“Therefore, it is essential that the referendum question contain clear and concise language that is impartial and easily understood by citizens. Just as in the development of the referendum issue, framing of the issue and the drafting of the question should involve input from various groups, including women. Diverse input from elected officials and civil society organizations can help ensure that the question is phrased in a neutral way that does not misrepresent the issue at hand”. (Brothers, J. Expert Opinion. 2010)

4. Timing of Polls and -impact on Voter Turnout

Ms. Brothers highlights that when a referendum is held, it may be combined with another poll (e.g., an ordinary general election), or held separately. Holding a referendum alongside a regularly scheduled poll may help increase turnout by minimizing the burden on voters. This can be especially important to women, who may find it difficult to leave responsibilities at home or at the workplace to vote on more than one occasion. On the other hand, if the subject of a referendum is particularly important and deserving of focused attention by the electorate and

political leaders, it may be important to hold the poll separately. (Brothers, J. Expert Opinion. 2010)

5. Observing Referenda

Just as in any electoral or political process, Ms. Brothers mentions that domestic monitoring organizations should observe the referendum, monitoring the development and phrasing of the issue, the campaign—including the potential abuse of state resources, polling procedures and the implementation of the referendum issue. Women can play an important role as observers, paying particular attention to the inclusion of women in the drafting process, voter outreach and education for women and women’s experience voting—all of which have an important impact on the overall process. . (Brothers, J. Expert Opinion. 2010)

Conclusion

Women’s role and active participation in national referenda is important to ensure that women’s concerns and interests have their bearing on fundamental issues related to the organization of the state (constitutions, independence, etc). Experts recommend that those engaged in referendum campaigns should involve women through voter education and outreach, and through engaging women’s civil society organizations. They also recommend that referendum questions are clearly framed, and that the timing of a referendum consider particular issues faced by women (security, mobility, household responsibilities, etc)... Additionally, it is very important to include women in the management of referendum polling stations and processes.

Further Readings

- iKNOW Politics. Consolidated Response on Working with Women Candidates and Women Voters During Elections, 2008. See: <http://www.iknowpolitics.org/node/6490>
- iKNOW Politics. Consolidated Response on Training as a Strategy to empower Women in Politics in Latin America, 2009. See: <http://www.iknowpolitics.org/node/10393>
- Referendum definition: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Referendum>
- Montenegrin independence referendum, 2006: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Montenegrin_independence_referendum,_2006
- Kenyan constitutional referendum, 2005: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kenyan_constitutional_referendum,_2005
- Expert Opinion: Examples and best practices of Gender Mainstreaming in Economics and Social Legislation in the Americas: <http://www.iknowpolitics.org/node/8752>
- Constitution and Legislative Reform: <http://www.iknowpolitics.org/node/268>
- Costa Rica: Interview with Epsy Campbell, President of the Acción Ciudadana Party of Costa Rica: <http://www.iknowpolitics.org/node/3840>