

Reflections on Young Women Running for Office: A Guide to the Future

By Patricia Zanella
August 2021

Introduction

In order to build a more just and representative democracy, more women need to be elected to government. However, women face many barriers when running for public office including raising funds, developing meaningful platforms, and establishing their voice. Additionally, when a woman decides to enter politics, she often suffers psychological violence and harassment. There are attempts to discredit her in a way that men do not experience. Some even claim that she is too young, inexperienced, and not ready for a decision-making role, devaluing her capabilities.

While more initiatives to support women candidates are emerging, more needs to be done to achieve gender parity and respect for women in these roles. Women still often feel the need to act more like men in order to be respected. Regularly, they receive comments about their makeup, hair, and voice. Some women feel the need to change their appearance to become part of politics. In many countries, women whose fathers or husbands are in politics have less barriers to entering politics. This makes it even harder for those not part of “the club” to have political space and influence.

Barriers include misogyny, sexism, harassment, psychological violence, verbal violence, discrediting, traditionalism in political parties and financial difficulties. These are just some of the experiences women face that exacerbate the already challenging aspects of running for political office and working in politics.

“Women are underrepresented in politics in most parts of the world. This occurs despite their proven abilities as leaders and drivers of change. During our discussion, I realized that women everywhere in the world face the same challenges and hindrances as they walk their political journey; the patriarchal nature of our societies fosters the perception that women are less qualified and less competent than men.” (Habiba Nakitende, Uganda)

To overcome these barriers, a young woman in politics should focus on her voice and advocate for the policies she wants to change. She also needs to be clear about what she is running for, what she wants to do for her community, who she is representing, what her goals are and what she will do in the decision-making process.

This paper will provide insights on how to enter politics and overcome some of the aforementioned barriers based on the experiences of three young women from around the world.

Young Women Elected around the World

Running without a support base, such as a political party, increases the challenges for running a campaign. However, sometimes women run without a party to stand up for policies they believe in and against politicians they disagree with. This means that women must develop a candidate persona in order to try and succeed. The women who succeed as candidates typically are very involved in local movements that focus on community challenges. And when they decide to enter politics as candidates

their experience in movements helps to develop their personas. Movements are important because they help women establish their candidate identity without having to join a political party.

An interesting commonality about the women examined in this paper is that they were part of a social or political movement. They learned how to run campaigns, balance political debates and articulate policies before and during the campaign. They mastered how to find their voice and negotiate within the political system in order to succeed.¹ In many of the stories below, the women featured were either the first woman or youngest person to ever hold their position. They have had to use creativity and rely on their networks to support them through decision-making processes. Their stories demonstrate societal and institutional barriers young women face when running for office.

Daniela Chacón from **Ecuador** served as Vice Mayor of Quito between 2014-2016 and City Councilor between 2014-2019. Daniela was the second woman Vice Mayor in the history of Quito. She attributed her election to many factors, such as her confidence that she would be elected and that she was prepared to hold office. She felt her sense of responsibility, focus and clarity allowed her to develop a connection with the community. She remained faithful to her values and trusted her intuition throughout her campaign. Daniela also mentioned the importance of having an extremely competent team and the strategic use of social media networks. For example, she used Twitter to engage with both journalists and voters to share her platform and policies. She also studied what social media network her constituents were more active on to engage more efficiently with them.

'You need to be very mindful that you cannot change everything. You are not going to send a message that you are able to change the whole world because you cannot do it. You know, that is just impossible. You can change something for sure. So, you need to pick what are your three main things that you are passionate about. You are running for office that is connecting you with your community.' (Daniela Chacón, Ecuador)

Daniela's story also demonstrates the societal barriers women face when running for office. One of the challenges during the campaign is that constituents questioned her ability to perform the duties of the position and thought she was not prepared. Daniela's ability was questioned based on the fact that she was a woman, despite being a lawyer with a master's degree in public administration from George Washington University in the United States.

Daniela was able to overcome this barrier because of the strategies mentioned above and she proved the skeptics wrong. During her tenure, she created and implemented Quito's program that help women report sexual harassment cases in the city's public transportation system. She also co-founded the Women in Motion Initiative, a Latin American network to promote women leadership in transportation and sustainable mobility. She did this by raising her voice and commanding attention in rooms, mostly full of men, to demonstrate the need in their community.

Overcoming these societal barriers is an important first step, but institutional barriers still exist. Daniela has been an advocate for changing legislation that creates more space for women. For example, she continues to argue for gender-balanced candidate lists in Ecuador.

¹ Learn more about each case study cited by watching these Online Discussions:

Young Women's Political Participation - Discussion perspectives to increase the participation of young women in politics - With Valentina Achermann, Eva Andorful, Ivana Tufegdzik and Melisa Gorondy Novak. Available on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GfFh5ZfXXV0>, and Young Women's Political Participation - Discussion campaign strategies to increase young women's representation and participation in elective posts - With Zainab Sulaiman Umar, Daniela Chacón and Corina Liebi. Available on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tkNh-Ocl7hQ>.

Another woman is **Zainab Sulaiman Umar** from **Nigeria**, a country in which less than 7% of elected offices are held by women. At 26, Zainab became a candidate for the first time and was the youngest candidate in Kano State. Her experience demonstrates the institutional barriers women often face when trying to run for office.

She found it difficult to join a major political party during her campaign. Parties usually do not give space for women to run. She discovered that without a “godfather,” or an established male political figure to endorse her, she would not have a chance. To overcome this challenge and build a space for women’s participation in politics, she denounced the barriers created by political parties and joined a smaller political party. This increased her chances to be a candidate.

Like Daniela, Zainab faced many barriers in politics. Some barriers are connected to misogynic allegations that women are very weak and cannot endure challenges of politics.² While running, she was often asked if she was married. She was verbally attacked by people saying that she was a prostitute, implying she just wanted money. She also faced physical threats. Her experience demonstrates the cultural and societal barriers women face when running for office.

“It is about what you have to give your people. What have you done in your community? What can you show in your community? Winning doesn’t even matter here. Breaking those barriers is what we need to do so that young women understand that ‘Okay. We can do something in our communities’.” (Zainab Sulaiman, Nigeria)

Ivana Tufegdzik is a young woman from **North Macedonia**. In 2016, Ivana’s political party, the “Citizens Coalition,” decided to include activists on the closed candidate list and she was among those included.³ That year, she was elected a Member of Parliament (MP). Before her election she worked as an intern for the National Assembly in 2011 and 2016, as well as an intern in parliamentary and presidential campaigns. These roles helped her gain experience and join movements she was passionate about, enabling her to become a prominent young leader in the political party.

For example, as an activist, she advocated for youth civil society organizations and was a leader in one of the largest student movements in the history of the country, “Student Plenum.” The reason she was elected was not solely based on her strength and ability to lead, but her ability to network and her experience in movements. Moreover, she became an MP because of the closed list system in the country. While closed lists can create challenges for women to join politics, Ivana has used her opportunity to advocate and create more space for young women leaders.

She proved her leadership ability by making the most out of her representative position. As an MP, Ivana serves as coordinator of the youth caucus in the parliament, Vice President of the National Council for European Union Integration, member of the Committees for Foreign Policy and for Appointments and deputy member in the Committees for European Affairs and Education and Science. She has been a very active MP and a voice for youth and education.

Conclusion

These reflections demonstrate the barriers to representative democracy and the need for gender parity and respect in politics. To fight those barriers, a young woman in politics needs to demonstrate

² See the interview about these barriers on DAILY HERALD. **Nigeria's female candidates seek victory despite harassment.** Available on: <https://www.dailyherald.com/article/20190218/news/302189978> .

³ Learn more about **Open, Closed and Free Lists** accessing ACE PROJECT. Available on: <https://aceproject.org/main/english/es/esq03.htm> .

competence, get support from her community, have real solutions to specific problems and commit to what can be accomplished.

The women above faced challenges to being elected and creating space for the next generations of young women. They are writing manifestos, creating communities, networks, connections and learning with others. While the barriers may be large, the strength of women working together can be stronger. The increase of young women elected is important to build politics with an intergenerational, and broad vision, making it possible to create public policies that respond to the problems of the different layers of society.

This article is part of a series “Young Women’s Political Representation”. This first article highlighted some of the barriers of young women political participation as candidates. The next article in this series will offer advice to young women on how to build a campaign.

The Author

Patricia Zanella is the first Brazilian in the Hurford Youth Fellow Program at the World Movement for Democracy. In this paper, she used her experience of 5 years building a political party in her country to highlight some of the barriers of young women political participation.

References

Global (International Organizations / International Databases / Networks)

ACE PROJECT. **Gender and Elections**. Available on: <https://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/ge/>.

ACE PROJECT. **Social media and women's political participation**. Available on: <https://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/ge/ge7/social-media-and-women2019s-political> .

ACE PROJECT. **Youth and Elections**. Available on: <https://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/yt/> .

COUNCIL on FOREIGN RELATIONS. **Women's Power Index - 2021**. Available on: <https://www.cfr.org/article/womens-power-index> .

INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION. **Women in Politics: 2021**. Available on: <https://www.ipu.org/women-in-politics-2021>.

UNITED NATIONS. **Call to Action - On Young Women's Political Participation and Leadership. 2020**. Available on: <https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Call-to-Action.pdf> .

VISUAL CAPITALIST. **Mapped where women hold the most and least political power - 2021**. Available on: <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/mapped-where-women-hold-the-most-and-least-political-power/> .

WOMEN’S DEMOCRACY NETWORK. **Get Involved**. <https://www.wdn.org/get-involved>

WOMEN 2 WOMEN. **International leadership program**. Available on: <https://www.epwomen2women.org/>

WOMEN'S LEARNING PARTNERSHIP. **Leading to Action: A Political Participation Handbook for Women**. Available on: https://learningpartnership.org/sites/default/files/resources/pdfs/FINAL%20VERSION%2014345_Political_Manual_V5.pdf .

Africa

GENCED. **The participation of young women in politics and leadership in Ghana**. Available on: <http://www.genced.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/the-participation-of-young-women-in-politics-and-leadership-in-west-africa-1.pdf> .

NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE (NDI). **A campaign Manual for Women Candidates in the Sierra Leone Local I Government Elections (2008)**. Available on: http://www.ndi.org/files/2350_sl_womenmanual_engpdf_08182008.pdf.

Asia

ASIAN DEMOCRACY RESEARCH NETWORK. Available on: <http://www.adrnresearch.org/main/> .

EAST ASIA INSTITUTE. Available on: <http://www.eai.or.kr/main/english/intro05.asp>.

INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGY AND POLICY MYANMAR. Available on: <https://www.ispmyanmar.com/>

NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE (NDI). **Political Campaign Planning Manual - Malaysia**. Available on: https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Political_Campaign_Planning_Manual_Malaysia_0.pdf .

Europe

ALLIANCE F. **Political Voice of Women in Switzerland**. Available on <https://fr.alliancef.ch/helvetia-vous-appelle> .

EUROPEAN PARTNERSHIP FOR DEMOCRACY. **European democracy support network**. Available on: <https://epd.eu/> .

FRIEDRICH AND NAUMANN STIFTUNG. Available on: <https://fnf-europe.org/> .

FRIEDRICH EBERT STIFTUNG. Available on: <https://www.fes.de/> <https://www.fes-london.org/about-us/friedrich-ebert-stiftung/>.

Office for Democratic institutions and human rights - OSCE. **Handbook on promoting women's participation in political parties**. Available on: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/f/120877.pdf>

SWEDISH INTERNATIONAL LIBERAL CENTER. Available on: <https://silc.se/en/> .

Latin America & Caribbean

ASUNTOS DEL SUR. **Mujeres activando**. Available on: <https://www.mujeresactivando.org/> .

FUNDACION CIUDADANO INTELIGENTE. **Projetos**. Available on: <https://ciudadaniai.org/projects> .

I KNOW POLITICS. Respuesta Consolidada de la Discusión en línea sobre Juventud en Política. Co-Convocado con UNDP4YOUTH. **International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics**. Available on:

https://iknowpolitics.org/sites/default/files/consolidated_reply_youth_political_participation_sp.pdf

INSTITUTO DE LIDERAZGO SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR. Cursos. Available on: <https://ilsb.org.mx/cursos/> .

INSTITUTO UPDATE. **Eleitas** - Mulheres na Política. Estudo e série audiovisual sobre o imaginário das mulheres latino-americanas no poder. Available on: <https://www.institutoupdate.org.br/eleitas/>.

POLITIZE. **Lugar de mulher é na política**. Available on: <https://www.politize.com.br/lugar-de-mulher-e-na-politica/>.

OAS. ESCUELA DE GOBIERNO - **Curso Mujeres Candidatas Electorales**. Available on: http://www.oas.org/es/sap/dgpe/escuelagob/novedad_cursomujerescandidataselectorales.asp .

North America

ALL IN TOGETHER. Women leading change. Available on: <https://aitogether.org/>

BARBARA LEE FAMILY FOUNDATION. The Essential Guide, 2019. Available on: https://www.barbaraleefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Essential-Guide_20th-Anniversary.pdf.

EMILY'S LIST. Trainings. Available on: <https://www.emilyslist.org/run-to-win/trainings>.

IGNITE NATIONAL. Available on: <https://ignitenational.org/>.

SHE SHOULD RUN. Available on: <https://www.sheshouldrun.org/>

Oceania

FIJI WOMEN'S FORUM. **Women in Politics Campaign handbook**. Available on: <https://www.pacwip.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Women-in-Politics-Campaign-handbook.pdf> .

PACIFIC WOMEN. **Women in politics campaign handbook**. Available on: <https://pacificwomen.org/resources/women-in-politics-campaign-handbook-2/>