

Conclusion

This study has explored the individual experiences of 33 women, drawn from eleven Commonwealth countries, who have succeeded in the political arena. Their case histories are varied, reflecting the specificities of their particular societies and national historical experience.

Some of the women in the study belong to affluent, developed societies which never had to battle colonial exploitation; others come from lands that had to wage long, painful struggles for freedom and independence. For some, success in politics has come against a backdrop of kaleidoscopic social and ethnic diversity; for others, there has been religious fundamentalism to contend with and surmount. In some cases, the battle for basic democratic rights such as universal suffrage and equality before the law was fought and won before our women politicians came on to the scene; in others, the women of our study found themselves makers of history, participating in momentous events and helping to shape the future in a very direct way.

Given this diversity of background and experience, what conclusions can we draw from these individual stories? What do the women of the study have to tell us about the challenge, at the end of the twentieth century and the start of the new millennium, of getting women into political life in numbers that embody fairness and equality? Is there a sense in which their experiences can be generalised? Can specific approaches, strategies and agendas of change be extracted from their stories and presented as having broader, or even universal, application?

Two levels of analysis suggest themselves as we attempt to answer these questions. The first pertains to the level of the individual narratives. What factors made it possible for these particular women to enter politics, sustain their political careers and rise to positions of responsibility, prominence and leadership? Examples of the factors likely to have played a role include family background; level of education; professional status; quality of family support; and personal skills, qualities and abilities. We should also be able to identify greater societal enabling factors, such as a political context of national liberation or struggle against racist oppression, or a political environment in which growing emphasis is placed on women's equality. We can, in addition, try to identify specific policies which worked to the benefit of the women politicians of this study.

Having tackled the question of how these particular individuals have been able to perform so successfully, we can then turn to the second level of analysis, which involves a shift from the particular to the general. What do these stories have to tell us about the way forward for women in a general sense? Are there certain broad conclusions we can reach – in terms, say, of policy prescriptions and political strategies? What, for example, do the case studies tell us about the relevance and importance (or otherwise) of affirmative action programmes? What should governments, not to men-

tion political parties, be doing? And what should be the priorities of the wider women's movement?

Let us look in turn at these two levels of analysis: the particular experiences outlined in our 33 case studies, and the general lessons which can be drawn from those experiences.

I. THE PARTICULAR EXPERIENCES

The case histories presented in this study reveal the variety of factors that, in different combinations and with differing degrees of emphasis, played an enabling role in the political careers of these particular women. Here, an attempt is made to identify the factors which surface most regularly in the narratives. Some of these, for example, equality within the marital and family relationship or the support provided by a gender sensitive political party, are recognised by the women themselves to be important. Other factors, such as the existence of larger societal processes of change, can be seen to contribute to the framework or context in which a woman has been able to rise politically.

I.1 Family Background

For many of the women in the study, family background and circumstances can be seen to have had a direct bearing on their entry into politics and pursuit of public office.

In some cases, families had a tradition of political involvement. Syeda Begum Sajeda Chowdhury grew up amid the ballads and stories of undivided India's freedom movement, her imagination stirred by a politically conscious father who taught her to oppose oppressive government. In Dominica, Eugenia Charles was raised in a politicised family milieu, as was Rafidah Aziz in Malaysia. For Rhoda Kalema in Uganda, her childhood was shaped by the fact that her father was a prominent political figure. The father of Annette Georges in Seychelles was, also, a significant political player who for a while served as a minister. And Cheryl Kernot, born into an Australian working class family, had a grandfather who was a Labour Party organiser. For some of the women profiled here, then, politics was in the air from the very beginning of their lives.

In socio-economic or class terms, their families show considerable variation. Some of the women grew up amid relative affluence: examples include Margaret Alva in India and Sheila Camerer in white supremacist South Africa. For Danielle Jorre de St Jorre in Seychelles, family circumstances enabled her to study abroad. But for other women, childhood was a time of hardship. In Uganda, Speciosa Kazibwe was part of a large family whose principal breadwinner, her father, was a postal worker. Josephine Abaijah in Papua New Guinea also grew up in a large working-class family. What does appear to unite these less

advantaged families is the importance they attached to getting girls educated: we shall explore this further in the next section.

Not everyone, however, grew up in a nurturing family environment. For Lois O'Donoghue, an Australian Aboriginal, there was hardly any family at all. Separated from her mother as a toddler and never to meet her father, Lois was raised in institutions that sought to cut her off from her origins and roots. For her, the impetus to become politically active would come from other sources.

I.2 Educational Level

A high level of educational attainment characterises most of the women in the study, suggesting that access to secondary and higher education was an important enabling factor in their subsequent political careers. Almost all the women profiled here are graduates, with some holding higher degrees.

In many cases, a woman's access to education was integral to her affluent or middle-class roots and upbringing. In India, there was nothing unusual about Margaret Alva, Sushma Swaraj and Promila Dandavate going to college; all three came from relatively well-to-do families with a tradition of educational achievement – even if in Promila Dandavate's case the parental expectation was of a daughter simply marrying and settling down.

In some instances, however, the atmosphere was hardly congenial to women's educational progress. All three political leaders from Papua New Guinea profiled here had to struggle for schooling and qualifications in a milieu that did not identify the education of girls as a priority. In Australia, Lois O'Donoghue had to battle against racial prejudice and the assumption that, as an Aboriginal, she was "fit" only for domestic work.

Sometimes, a girl from a relatively disadvantaged background was encouraged to pursue her studies by socially enlightened parents. Speciosa Kazibwe in Uganda recalls that her father, a rural postal worker, appreciated the value of education and had no prejudice against sending his daughter to school. Janat Mukwaya, also from Uganda, feels a strong debt of gratitude to her mother, a midwife, who made her children's schooling a priority and devoted much of her earnings to their educational needs.

I.3 Professional Status

In line with their high level of educational attainment, most of the women in this study have a professional status outside their political careers. Among the professions, lawyers and teachers predominate. Examples of qualified lawyers include Margaret Alva and Sushma Swaraj in India, Joyce Newman in Australia, Eugenia Charles in Dominica, Sheila Camerer in South Africa and Janat Mukwaya in Uganda. The teachers portrayed here cover every part of the educational spectrum, from schoolteachers such

as Enny Moaitz in Papua New Guinea and Urmia Johnson in Guyana to university lecturers such as Rafidah Aziz, the Malaysian economics professor who so suddenly found herself in Parliament.

Other than teachers and lawyers, there are to be found in this study doctors, nurses, and social workers. In a number of cases, women improved their professional status after returning to higher education as adults; an example is Rhoda Kalema in Uganda, who began her career as a secretarial worker and stenographer but who later studied adult education and social work at Edinburgh University.

1.4 Choice of Spouse/Partner

Most of the women in the study identified a supportive attitude on the part of their spouse or partner as a significant element in their political success. While the degree of support a woman may have received is difficult to measure, and while we need to allow for the possibility that in some cases acknowledging the support of a spouse is an automatic reaction, the choice of marital or life partner does seem to be important for a woman politician.

In some cases, marriage brought a woman into a political partnership. The most striking example in the study is that of Janet Jagan, whose marriage to Cheddi Jagan in Guyana not only carried her to a distant land, but also propelled her into a life of political activism. Another significant and productive political partnership is that between Promila Dandavate and her husband, Madhu Dandavate, in India.

Such partnerships may, however, attract questions and even controversy, particularly where a woman is seen to "inherit" high office from her husband. While Janet Jagan can be seen to have a political identity and a historical contribution all her own, independent of her late husband, her decision to run for the presidency has been seen by some to contain dynastic elements. Similar debate might attach to the case of Viola Burnham, who before her marriage to Forbes Burnham was not politically active, but who later became her country's Vice-President and deputy Prime Minister.

The more general experience traced in this study has been of husbands or partners actively backing women's decisions to become politically active. In Bangladesh, Syeda Begum Sajeda Chowdhury was encouraged by her husband and his circle of friends to join the Awami League. In the case of Margaret Alva in neighbouring India, husband and father-in-law combined forces to persuade her to enter politics.

But perhaps even more important than this support at the outset has been the willingness of many life partners to provide continuing support, financial, emotional and in the sense of sharing childrearing and domestic responsibilities. For Kee Phaik Cheen in Malaysia, the readiness of her husband to underwrite her political career has made a world of difference.

In Canada, Sheila Finestone pays tribute to her supportive spouse, while Thérèse Lavoie-Roux acknowledges the importance to her career of a husband who was willing to act as “mother and father” to their young family.

1.5 Positive Personal Qualities

Beyond family circumstances, socio-economic background, educational attainment, professional status, and choice of life partner, the personal qualities of individual women emerge as important factors in a successful political career. All the women profiled here reveal themselves as purposeful and determined. In some cases, these qualities have enabled women to combat and overcome extremely adverse circumstances: an example is Lois O'Donoghue, the Aboriginal woman from the Australian outback. Strong personality traits are also apparent in Frene Ginwala, the South African ANC activist whose persistence has played a key role in sensitising the ANC leadership and cadres to the centrality of gender justice.

1.6 Historical Context and Greater Societal Forces

For many of the women in this study, their political ascent has taken place in the context of larger, societal processes of change. It cannot, therefore, be accounted for purely in terms of their individual experience and circumstances.

For Frene Ginwala and Nkosazana Zuma in South Africa, political high office has come about as the result of their participation in the front ranks of the struggle against apartheid. They are part of a powerful liberation movement that embraces political emancipation, socio-economic change and the outlawing of inequalities, including discrimination against women. It is through this movement that their energies and talents have been recognised, mobilised and actualised.

In the case of Lois O'Donoghue and Ethel Blondin-Andrew, the struggle of aboriginal peoples for equality and justice has formed the context of their political rise. For Motia Chowdhury, Bangladesh's “daughter of fire”, becoming politically involved was inseparable from her country's national liberation struggle. In India, Promila Dandvate is part of a larger battle against oppressive survivals from the past that continue to bear down upon women and to deny them their equal place in society. Janet Jagan in Guyana was drawn into politics through her trade union activity.

More generally, the women of this study have entered the political arena in a context where traditions of male pre-eminence are under challenge. In most of the societies portrayed here, women's equality and gender justice have become live issues, placed firmly on national agendas by the growing weight of the women's movement, both domestic and international. Several of the women in this study mention the encouragement

they have derived from belonging to political parties or movements that are embracing such change.

In Seychelles, for example, Sylvette Frichot lauds her party not only for recognising the contribution women can make, but also for its concrete actions of placing women in pivotal posts and giving them responsibilities outside the conventional realm of “women’s issues”. She sees the party and movement to which she belongs as the basic enabling factor behind her own political success. A similar position is taken by Cheryl Kernot in Australia, a former party leader who freely acknowledges the debt she owes to that party’s “woman-friendly” history and experience.

This is not to discount or minimise the very major obstacles that continue to be placed in the path of women’s advancement. Nor is it to overlook the uneven development of the women’s movement, which continues to be weakly expressed in some of the societies explored here. The point is that, to a greater or lesser degree, each of the women in this study has benefited, in political terms, from this situation of challenge and change. In South Africa, for example, Sheila Camerer’s experience suggests that even the conservative National Party is being obliged to accept a greater role for women. In India, too, the traditionalist Hindu majoritarian party, the BJP, has had to come to terms with the growing political consensus in favour of affirmative action for women.

I.7 Policy Factors

Policy changes, whether at the level of government or within political parties, can be seen to have acted as enabling factors in a number of our case studies.

One such change has been the introduction of quotas for women, whether at state level or within the structures of political parties. In Bangladesh, both Syeda Begum Sajeda Chowdhury and Jahan Ara Begum entered parliament in the first instance through an affirmative action programme that reserved a certain number of parliamentary seats for women. Speciosa Kazibwe in Uganda had a similar experience.

Other policies, while eschewing formal quotas, have lent women seeking to enter politics a helping hand. In Malaysia, Rafidah Aziz was “parachuted” by her party into a comparatively safe seat as a way of getting her into parliament. And Thérèse Lavoie-Roux in Canada received all-important financial support from the Québec state Liberal Party.

II THE GENERAL LESSONS

The 33 women whose political lives are presented here cannot, it bears emphasis, be taken as a representative sample of the wider experience of women in politics. To the extent that generalisation is possible on the basis of their individual experiences, this must be tentative. However, the lives of these women do illustrate aspects of the larger picture. They pro-

vide pointers to the types of strategy that may be enhancing or facilitating women's political empowerment. Similarly, they suggest that certain paths may be blind alleys that are better avoided. And these case histories set out some contentious issues within the worldwide movement for women's equality, issues that seem certain to remain at the centre of debate over the coming years.

II.1 Affirmative Action

The women of this study illustrate the divergence of opinion that currently exists in relation to affirmative action as a strategy for getting more women into public office.

Some women oppose the very notion of quotas, which they see as smacking of tokenism and as depriving women of the chance of rising through their own merit. In Papua New Guinea, where one parliamentary seat out of a total of 109 is reserved for women and where even this level of quota has not proved workable, politicians such as Nahau Rooney are clear that women must "earn" their place in parliament. In Australia, where there is no state-mandated affirmative action programme for women in politics, Jocelyn Newman states her preference for "incentives" and incremental change. For Kee Phaik Cheen in Malaysia, another country which has not yet introduced quotas for women in its legislative bodies, it is important to be treated by male colleagues as an equal and "not as the product of a quota system."

Others, while conceding some value to affirmative action, see it as a short-term strategy with a limited shelf life. For Jahan Ara Begum and Syeda Begum Sajeda Chowdhury, whose initial entry into the Bangladesh parliament was facilitated by a system of reserved seats for women, quotas should be timebound. They are conscious of the pitfall of patronage, pointing out that, in their experience at least, women who enter legislatures through this route may be seriously circumscribed in their actions.

But for others still, constitutionally mandated affirmative action is seen as essential to getting women into politics. In India, where despite decades of democratic electoral practice the proportion of women in state and national legislatures remains low, there is now broad party political support for the plan to reserve one third of seats in these bodies for women. This consensus finds expression in the views of Margaret Alva and Promila Dandavate, women from different political traditions who both strongly support affirmative action.

The experience of democratic South Africa seems especially instructive here. It is surely significant that in the process of nation-building following the dismantling of the apartheid state, affirmative action to get women into public life has figured prominently. In the narratives presented here, ANC women leaders set out how this was done and deal frankly with the obstacles along the way. They make the point that getting women

in equal numbers to men into the delegations at the all-party talks proved very significant: inexperienced women embarked on a learning curve and the negotiating process was forced to take women and their concerns into the reckoning. They also highlight the importance of the decision taken by the ANC back in 1992 to have women constitute at least one third of candidates on its list.

The fact that in South Africa nearly one quarter of parliamentarians are women – the seventh highest proportion in the world and the highest within the Commonwealth and the island-state of Seychelles in second place – speaks to the potential contribution of affirmative action strategies.

II.2 Linking Political Empowerment to Broader Change

A recurrent theme in the case histories set out in this study is the need to link the political empowerment of women with the broader struggle for social and economic emancipation. The argument goes that without the involvement of ordinary working women in campaigns to improve their socio-economic conditions, access to education, and general control over their lives, the representation of women in political bodies will continue to be low.

In India, Promila Dandavate makes the point that broad strategies, including mass education and training, are essential to help women overcome their historical disadvantage. Janet Jagan of Guyana, whose own political career developed out of trade union activism, has a record of linking women's political and socio-economic demands reaching back to the 1940s. For Gertrude Roberts in Dominica, economic empowerment is "the key" to greater involvement by women in politics.

II.3 Steps Governments Need to Take

Beyond affirmative action, there are a number of steps governments could take to facilitate the position of women in politics, suggest some of the women in this study. Simple, practical steps such as providing creche facilities in parliament can make the world of difference to women who have to juggle political and family commitments. Parliamentary hours are not immutable and can be amended to fit in with women's agendas.

II.4 Steps Political Parties Need to Take

In addition to introducing quotas for women on party electoral lists, various steps are recommended to political parties as a means of raising the representation of women.

Reflecting the fact that a number of the women in the study rose to political prominence through the women's wings of their political parties, one suggestion is that women's wings be given greater autonomy of action and decision-making. In Malaysia, Rafidah Aziz advocates a stronger voice for women's wings in the selection of candidates.

Several women advocate affirmative action at all levels of the party, not simply in relation to electoral lists. For example, Napsiah Omar in Malaysia favours a fixed minimum level of representation for women at the annual assembly of her party.

Financial help for women activists is identified as a further step political parties could take. And there is broad agreement that parties can do significantly more by way of preparing women for office through on-the-job training and skills development.

II.5 Steps Women Need to Take

Finally, the women in this study suggest strategies that women themselves should adopt towards the goal of political empowerment.

One recommendation is that women actively seek the support of male colleagues, especially where the latter show sensitivity to gender issues. Frene Ginwala of the ANC articulates this position when she affirms that the battle for women's equality is not, and should not be presented as, a struggle against men.

There is broad agreement, among the women whose stories are told here, that women in politics need to build their organisational and management skills. They need to foster assertiveness and to combat gender stereotypes that may affect their own self-perception.

There are, however, divergent views on where women who have successfully entered public office should concentrate their efforts. Some believe they should avoid "ghettoisation" in women's issues, instead opting for "hard" portfolios that have traditionally been the province of men. Through such a strategy, the argument runs, women will prove their parity with men.

Others argue that women who are politically successful should never stop seeing themselves as part of an ongoing struggle. "Their job," insists Frene Ginwala of the ANC, "is to help remove the structured obstacles which they themselves have overcome."