Political Participation

The economic transformations that over the past decade have changed the dynamic of international trade and development are matched by a global movement toward democratic government. The former has expanded the range of development options available to countries; the latter increases the likelihood that the policies these countries pursue will more accurately reflect the immediate and long-range priorities of their people.

Anything that restricts the scope of public participation not only weakens a country’s democratic foundations but also has the immediate effect of limiting debate over its development priorities. No barrier is more pervasive than the laws, institutions, and traditions that relegate women to subordinate roles in public life, and USAID supports a wide variety of initiatives promoting women’s political participation.

Many of these activities help train women to stand as candidates for formal political office in village councils, provincial legislatures, and national parliaments. Others support local and national organizations in running public education campaigns to provide women with basic information about their country’s electoral process or about pressing public issues, from the details of national budgeting to the issues at stake in constitutional referenda.
Strengthening Democracy At the Grassroots

By helping women—especially poor women with limited access to information or other political resources—take active roles in public affairs, these activities do more than enable women to affirm their basic human rights as citizens. They also increase the likelihood that emerging democracies will adopt policies that reflect the needs and priorities of the entire community.

In 1997, Thailand was adopting a new constitution. With USAID support, the Women and the Constitution Network, a coalition of nongovernmental organizations and individuals, sponsored 45 workshops across 32 provinces to provide women voters with information about the range of individual rights delineated in the charter and the means for having these rights enforced by local and national government agencies. Because 85 percent of the participants at these workshops were themselves women leaders active in local rural women’s groups, the project was more than a simple public education campaign. The grassroots network it helped create and mobilize serves as a public interest watchdog.

Similar workshops have been conducted with USAID support in Bolivia, where 2,000 women leaders received training in procedures for registering voters and candidates for local public office. And almost 4,000 women in the Dominican Republic participated in a USAID-funded program bringing local women’s groups together with municipal authorities to discuss social reform issues.

These public education campaigns help women understand the political processes of their countries and create opportunities for women to join the public debate about political issues. Equally important to increasing women’s political participation is the
Agency’s support for technical training so women can compete in the formal political arena as candidates for local and national office. The benefits of these workshops extend far beyond the comparatively few women who are able to participate in this training. When the Platform for Action was being debated, only 10 percent of the members of national legislatures throughout the free world were women. USAID is confident that only by investing in the recruitment and training of women candidates at the local and national levels can this number be increased.

**Women at the Polls And in Parliament**

In the Philippines, the Agency supported a regional program provided by the Center for Legislative Development. The Center conducted workshops and seminars in the Province of Cotabato so women could debate public issues and identify local priorities. Of 30 women who participated in one year’s training program, 27 went on to become candidates for municipal or provincial office, and 21 women candidates trained by the Center won local office in North Cotabato.

Training women as candidates was especially important in Peru, where recently adopted election laws required that 25 percent of the candidates for town council and congressional offices be women. USAID provided financial and technical support to the four regionally based nongovernmental organizations that coordinated a national campaign to recruit and train women candidates. Working principally in the country’s poorest regions, where women’s political participation was usually lowest, the program helped generate an unusually high voter turnout. More than 2,200 women were elected to town councils, and the proportion of women among elected officials increased from 8 to 24 percent.

While Peru’s elections were shaped by the need to implement electoral quotas, elections in Russia were shaped by the elimination of these gender mandates. The Communist Party traditionally apportioned symbolic representation among various party constituencies, including women. The dissolution of the Soviet Union brought an end to party-controlled elections. The number of women holding public office declined dramatically.
To help reverse this trend, Russia’s Congress of Women of the Kola Peninsula approached the International Republican Institute in 1996 seeking assistance for training women to stand for elective office or manage nongovernmental organization campaigns on women’s issues.

USAID joined with the Institute to provide communications and campaign management training. By 1997, the Congress of Women of the Kola Peninsula was fielding candidates for the Murmansk City duma. Of the 17 seats that make up the duma, 12 were won by women.

The effort to build networks of community organizations so women can debate political issues, develop leadership skills, and establish themselves as viable candidates for political office led USAID to support the formation of “100 Women’s Groups” in Nigeria. As its name declares, this nongovernmental organization is an aggregation of local women’s associations active in promoting political and social reforms. It oversaw training sessions to prepare women candidates for local and national governmental office, for traditional council positions, and for administrative offices in parastatal agencies. Forty-three women candidates the nongovernmental organization supported for national office won election in 1999.

The Global Women in Politics Program, which operated from 1995 to 1999, was the Agency’s largest initiative supporting women’s political activism. With operations in 15 countries, this program provided technical and financial assistance to help local activists organize women’s groups to promote social reforms and provided grants so that well-established groups could continue to grow. It conducted workshops on citizenship rights and responsibilities and helped women launch legal reform efforts targeting domestic violence, child abuse, and other issues important to local communities. It offered campaign training for women candidates and governance training for women elected to public office. In Africa, Asia, the Near East, and Latin America and the Caribbean, the Global Women in Politics Program worked to break down the social and legal barriers to women’s political participation.

In early 2000, USAID completed a program to educate women about standing for elected office in Mali. The program highlighted the political experiences of 20 leading women.

“... for every women cabinet minister, there are literally millions of other women working in villages and barrios, classrooms and courtrooms, to promote opportunity and justice for women.”

–Madeline Albright, U.S. Secretary of State
activists in printed, video, and audio format. The materials produced by this project allowed each woman to discuss the challenges women face in Malian society when campaigning for public office and the methods each adopted to overcome these challenges. Political parties and major civic groups now use these materials in public campaigns to encourage more women to participate in Malian politics.

Because poverty, illiteracy, and ill health are among the most common barriers to women’s political participation, the efforts of USAID to educate women and young girls, its anti-poverty programs, and its support of basic human rights directly promote the goal of helping women participate in the public life of their communities.

Few investments USAID makes will produce the returns to be gained from women’s political investment. The development path that emerging democracies pursue will be determined in large part by whether women gain greater access to the political arena. USAID’s investments are helping expand the base of these democracies to include women. As women increase their political activism, they will increase their influence over the pace and priorities of their countries’ future development. Improving democratic processes in turn ensures that the development choices these countries make will reflect the needs and interests of the whole society. USAID’s investments in women’s political participation may seem modest, but they will bear fruit for decades to come and are among the Agency’s most important contributions to international development.

“...we are striving to help women bring down the barriers to political participation as advocates and voters, legislators, and leaders.”

–Madeline Albright, U.S. Secretary of State