

## Women on the Move in Politics Worldwide

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There is undoubtedly, an invisible barrier against women in politics. This barrier consists of old stereotypes. The most important one that keeps women from top political positions is the male held belief that women are not tough enough. In Britain, Germany and the United States, the countries I work in, as well as in most of the world's nations, one essential characteristic expected from a leader, is toughness. Toughness on crime, toughness in negotiations, toughness in dealing with the interests of other nations. And sometimes toughness in war. But women do not share the belief that women are not tough enough. It is certainly not the view of Mrs. Thatcher in England, Mrs. Golda Meir in Israel, Mrs. Bhutto in Pakistan, or Mrs. Aquino in the Philippines. As a matter of fact, these women have proven the contrary, some of them even waged war, and they gained worldwide respect. But old stereotypes take a long time to disappear.

The first steps in this direction have been taken. Although neither Al Gore nor George Bush have chosen a woman as vice presidential running mate, Al Gore very seriously considered choosing Diane Feinstein, one of the two senators of California, for this position. And the reason, she was not chosen, is a tactical one rather than a choice against her sex, since California is secure to be won by Al Gore anyways. In addition, the two independent competitors for President of the U.S., Pat Buchanan and Ralph Nader, each chose a woman as running mate. And they both made sure to take minority women to signal their support for minorities. Pat Buchanan chose Ezola Foster, a black ultra conservative, who was leader of the proposition 187 effort to deny illegal Mexican immigrants social services, and Ralph Nader chose an Indian activist. The leader of the opposition in Germany is a woman for the first time in the history of Germany, and she might get a chance to stand for the highest office soon.

Although 54% of the world's population are women, statistics show that they are heavily underrepresented in public life. But Politicians are realising that women have become a very important voting group and they shape their campaigns and issues accordingly. The fact, that women vote, does not in itself make them so important, but rather their unwillingness to vote along party lines. They have an outsider's view of politics. Surveys in Great Britain have shown, that a lot of women are rather amused at watching politics. The real thing that counts for them are three things: issues, issues, and issues again. Whatever party or rather candidate offers alternative and realistic solutions to problems that directly affect women and their families, will tend to get their vote. Parties have difficulties recruiting women, because many women do not want to commit to an ideology. Rather, They would pick and choose what is in their immediate interest. They make out the majority of swing voters, unpredictable till the last moment before the election.

Having said this, there is but one area where women are even more active politically than their male counterparts. Political groups addressing single issues, the environment, education, health care, pensions, in short, all kinds of non governmental organisations, consist of more women than men. Here, women dare to go up against the bastion of male politics. These groups may be very effective at times, but they do not put women into the position to write the laws. But the NGO's do show the political concerns of women and they prove that there is a very real political interest of women in politics. What they say here, should not be ignored by

politicians. In Europe, the green movement has influenced politics to the extent, that politicians now have to factor their demands into their campaigns at the peril of losing votes if they don't.

In Britain and America and to a certain extent in Germany the leading politicians are very aware of this: Women's demands have shaped the campaigns of Bill Clinton, Tony Blair and Gerhard Schroder to a visible extent. Bill Clinton and Tony Blair likewise, started a "listening to what women want" program to attract women's votes at the ballot box.

Tony Blair has offered to make things easier for women in the workplace, Bill Clinton has installed laws to enable lower middle class students a better and affordable education, and Gerhard Schroder has committed himself to a government in tandem with the Greens, the party with the highest female participation and he obviously took pains to have a high percentage of women in his government. Under their watch there are more women members in parliament than ever and more women in key positions. And it does not look as though this is just a passing fad.

In today's world, more and more women can choose their lifestyles and they consider this to be their right. They will vote accordingly. To understand what they want, one has to take their complaints seriously; and politicians today have to do so at the peril of losing them as voters. Besides, in doing so, they get at the roots of some basic problems their nations may face in the future. So, at long last, what is it, that women want?

I will just mention three most predominant issues that women care about:

First; they want politicians to deal with POVERTY among women.

Interestingly enough, the most prominent demand of the early women's movement of the sixties, equal pay for equal work, has been met relatively fast. But women still make up the highest percentage of poor people in this world. Therefore it is not surprising that poverty is one of the topics that interest women most.

In North America, 80 % of people living below the poverty line are women, mostly single mothers. In Great Britain and Italy, governments are striving to reduce poverty which is most prominent especially among older women of their population. In Germany, after the re-unification, women were laid off work fastest, they now make up a huge bulk of the unemployed in Germany, and this does not take into account the women who do not report themselves as unemployed, who simply have given up hope.

Although women get equal pay for equal work now, they do not, and there lies the problem, get equal work. Many of them have to interrupt careers after childbirth. Most Governments, but there are exceptions, in Sweden for instance, do not encourage companies to forward the careers of women who are off and on again at their workplaces.

And women make up the highest rate of part time workers, since they very often cannot find suitable paid care for their children or they are unable to pay for daycare. Part time jobs are lower paid, and with their low pay women cannot afford daycare, without daycare they cannot take on full working hours, a vicious circle, that needs attention by compassionate and creative, politicians who can see the advantage of content mothers for their societies.

In addition, a lot of the professions open to women, nursing, assembly line work, teaching, taking care of the elderly, are traditionally underrated and therefore underpaid. Women therefore make up the highest rate of low paid workers. While economically disadvantaged, women are at the same time expected to take on for free their nations most important task, the bringing up of the children for a better future. Unless the situation of mothers changed this future looks rather bleak.

So, what women want from politicians in America and European countries is that politicians should finally recognise - or NOT do so at their political peril - that female poverty poses a real threat to a nation's present and future welfare. And, to reduce poverty, women stress four demands:

- 1) better and more daycare centres, so that women can work more effectively for a true well-being of their families;
- 2) a higher minimum wage, or an introduction of a minimum wage, so that they can afford to bring up their children in dignity, with proper health care, education and hope for their future lives;
- 3) more flexible working hours, so that women can combine WHAT THEY HAVE TO COMBINE: working AND bringing up a child to become a future productive citizen; and, last but not least,
- 4) the recognition of time off from the workplace for child rearing as a way for their pensions to be built up.

Secondly, women want their politicians to deal with HEALTH CARE in the broadest and in the most narrowest sense on the word.

Polls show that women are very concerned about health care. The most obvious reason is that they are the ones who are confronted with their families' health most directly. They nurse the children, and, if necessary, their spouses or elderly parents at home., When you spend most of your time at a workplace, you might hear that one of your colleagues is ill, but, in most cases, you will not see that colleague. When you are his or her mother, daughter, sister or his wife you will be very close to this person's needs twenty four hours a day.

Whether this person can get all the support and help that he or she needs becomes a vital question for the well being of the whole family. Doctor's visits, operations, medication, special care might be difficult to get, unaffordable or take up all the resources you have. The costs of health insurance, what they can deliver and - if you live at the lower income level - whether you can have any at all, will decide your fate.

But the concern for a family's well being is also responsible for a broader concern about health. Women are very aware of environmental hazards to their children. Although they do not often participate in the actual law-making, they will block any legislation that poses a real or believed threat to the children. For this, the future of their children ,they are willing to join non governmental groups, and instead of being annoyed by it, which they often are, heads of state should thank them, because here they find really altruistic concern for the future, which they could wisely utilise into an early warning system of what might have to be politically addressed for a prospering future of the nation.

To those who argue that we cannot achieve all this in our life time and that health coverage for everybody is too expensive I would say, time is not on the side of male politicians and male interests. It is on the side of female voters and female interests. And the more female voters engage the more male politicians will relinquish their power. We have Adam's rib and sometimes we must use it to club common sense into our dear male partners on this planet.

Thirdly, women as present and future voters are pushing EDUCATION.

Here, the women of the United States have shown the women of the world that their vote matter. After many years of fruitless complaints and strenuous lobbying, of organising small activist groups they finally got the choice to vote for a presidential candidate who showed the most concern for the pressing educational problems of their country. Women elected Bill Clinton. They have learned that there really is a difference in educational politics now and that the concern for education has finally sunk into the country's bigger conscience. The government implemented laws to improve teaching quality at school, to improve the

availability of education and to reduce violence at schools which seriously threatens a lot of students' performance at school.

The extent to which the education of their children leads women to take a political stand even against stupendous odds may be proven by Zakia Rehman a Pakistan woman who founded an NGO that is solely dedicated to children and women welfare, especially the provision of free education. She certainly does not please the majority of male citizens of her country and she is the object of hatred among them, she has been threatened on the phone, her office has been stormed by dozens of armed men, but she will not give up, because the stakes, the children's education and welfare, are too high to just give up. The protests of males in her society against NGO's go as far as defamation of character. A mullah in her village will keep on saying things such as: The women who work for NGO's are not of good character. But as long as there are no better educational facilities she will keep on doing what she does. If she can do this in a tiny village in Pakistan, who will say that the odds are too high against the furthering of education in the United States or Europe, or Mexico?

To further a child's education, so that it has a chance for a profession that matches its talents and need, so that it can become a well informed citizen of a nation that is facing the 21<sup>st</sup> century and needs well trained citizens to compete in a faster and faster moving world of technological progress, and so that it can live a life in dignity does not seem a too shabby issue for women. The question is, will male politicians worldwide get the message?

And then, there is the case of the young Japanese women. Latest surveys in Japan have become rather startling for its male population.

Young Japanese women do not voice their protest at elections. They do not stand up for a particular strong fight for any of the women's issues. They do not protest in the streets. But they suddenly, all at the same time seem to have decided to marry late - in their mid thirties - or even never, to work hard for their careers, to not give their careers up for children and to refuse to be good girls. They just refuse to function the old way. They are now the nation's most powerful consumer group, they are the ones who start up the most successful and biggest Internet companies. And more women than men who finish university training find jobs afterwards. The new Japanese economy to which the old corporations are only now adjusting, demands a higher flexibility and creativity, and women seem to just have that. They are suddenly turning into a political factor to be reckoned with. Right now, journalists and politicians are flabbergasted. But to get the wayward women back into some semblance of organised family units they might have to think "less poverty", "better education" and "better health care".

In a woman's world, even something like the demand of British female Members of Parliament to install a more suitable breast feeding place on the premises of Westminster than just the disabled bathrooms the men refer them to, does not sound so funny. After all, there are 120 new female Members of Parliament now and no place for them to put their new borns into daycare. They have to bring them, and they need a room of their own.

Finally, there is the case of Emily Lau a democratic legislator in Hong Kong; whom my husband and I are helping without any charge. She is up against one of the most repressive and totalitarian regimes in the world, China. She has great courage and staying power. She may not win her fight for more liberty and decency for the people of Hong Kong but the Chinese will know she is there. When you think things are bad, consider her and all the other women who are going up against all odds, with two steps forward and one backward, but always a better future.

It's worth it. Or, as Nana Konadu Rawlings, the First Lady of Ghana, put it: "The empowerment of women is the empowerment of humanity".