

DEMOCRACY SUPPORT STRATEGIES: LEADING WITH WOMEN'S POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT

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With many emerging democracies experiencing stagnation or setbacks, providers of democracy support are struggling to tailor assistance strategies to highly varied transitional contexts. As a crucial area of international aid for democracy as well as for development more generally, efforts to bolster women's political empowerment share this challenge. Strategic differentiation not only helps identify what types of programs may be most effective in advancing gender equality in politics but also reveals how this work can be a critical lever for broader change where attempted transitions have slipped into dysfunctional patterns.

Responding to the Heterogeneity of Political Transitions

Identify and define the transitional context. Three types of alternative transitional paths merit particular attention: stuck transitions, semiauthoritarian contexts, and conflict-affected transitions. However, adding to the analytic complexity is that countries can move suddenly from one type to another or embody elements of more than one simultaneously.

Reconfigure the standard menu of women's programming. Answering three key questions can help formulate differentiated strategies for each transitional context: What are the distinctive gender characteristics of political life in this context? What are the implications of those characteristics for women's political empowerment programming? How might efforts to advance women's political empowerment become a specific lever to help a country move forward democratically?

Some Preliminary Findings

Stuck transitions. Hobbled by profoundly weak representational relationships between power holders and citizens, stuck transitions present daunting challenges for women's political empowerment work. Nevertheless, emphasizing constituency outreach work by women in parties, highlighting women's political activism for anticorruption, and building connections between women in political parties and women civic activists can make a difference.

Semiauthoritarian contexts. Underrepresentation of women in political life is often severe in semiauthoritarian countries—sharp limitations on the electoral process undercut the meaningfulness of women voting, becoming active in political parties, and competing for office. Yet, persisting with women's political empowerment work can pay off when a political opening eventually occurs and women's political actors are ready to employ strong grassroots networks to take advantage of the moment.

Conflict-affected transitions. Violent conflict damages the core political processes and institutions that are the usual focus of women's political empowerment programming. However, several areas of assistance have proved useful, including bolstering women's participation in peace negotiations, ensuring an active role of women in constitution-writing processes, and pushing for gender equality reforms when electoral and party laws are rewritten.

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