



NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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MEMORANDUM

To: Ms. Anel Townsend, National Deputy
From: Marissa Brown, Program Officer
Christine J. Mataya, Research Assistant
Date: November 7, 1995
Re: Women's and Youth Legislative Committees

Women's Committees and Groups

Although rare, women's committees and groups do exist in some form in a variety of legislatures throughout the world. According to 1991 figures, 14 legislatures have a committee whose mandate includes women. A women's committee exists in the following nations: Angola, Australia, Canada, China, Cuba, Hungary, Indonesia, Ireland, Mongolia, the Netherlands, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Philippines, Portugal, Romania, Sri Lanka, Spain, Thailand, and Venezuela.

Despite the universal consensus concerning the importance of increasing women's participation in and access to policy-making roles, a debate over which model to follow should be noted. Some individuals argue against the creation of women's committees and assert that the solution for increasing women's participation should focus on encouraging women to play active roles in the substantive committees or party leadership. Others argue that a women's committee creates a venue in which women and men can articulate policies related to women. The bottom line for women then, is to decide which mechanism allows for greater access and exposure to the various structures of government.

1. Committees

The European Parliament Model

The European Parliament (EP) has formed a Women's Rights Committee. Originally established on an *ad hoc* basis in 1979 to produce a report on a range of problems related to women's rights in the European member states, this committee had gained permanent status as a specialized committee by 1981. It exercises minimal authority, has a small membership, introduces few legislative proposals and meets infrequently. However, it does strive to enhance its influence by concentrating on its own initiatives, mainly reports regarding issues of choice to the committee members.





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Like the other EP committees, a chairman and three vice-chairman, known as the "Bureau," conduct the formal procedures of committee business. The committee consists of full members and substitutes chosen from their political groups based on individual choice and expertise, as well as vacancies within committees. All committees tend to attract the members whose sympathies or interests lie with the subject matter of the body.

2. Interparty Groups

The U.S. Model

The Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues was established in 1977 as a legislative service organization (LSO) of the U.S. Congress. Caucus membership included legislators of both sexes and political parties and expanded to 160 individuals before its abolishment. As an LSO, Members of Congress, sharing common interest in the field, used funds from their appropriated budget to hire staff and run the caucus.

The caucus functioned as a clearinghouse of information and as an advocate of women's issues by providing the Congress with information pertinent to the lives of women. Specifically, the caucus focused on children, older women, violence, reproductive choices, health education, and the environment. In addition, it published a weekly and monthly newsletter on women's issues and legislation.

During its tenure as a Congressional body, it worked to enact significant legislation that improved social conditions for women and families. A sampling of its legislative victories include The Family and Medical Leave Act, Women's Health Equity Act and various family planning programs.

As a result of 1994 Congressional reform, the Congressional Caucus for Women's issues was terminated. It continues to exist as a Congressional Member Organization, but with no additional staff beyond the individual member's personal staff. After this reorganization, previous members of the committee founded a non-profit, non-partisan organization called Women's Policy, Inc. Although it operates external to the legislative process, it continues to advocate and provide information on women's legislative issues, much as it did before.

The European Parliament Model

The EP's intergroup on Left-Wing Women is another model for female activism in a legislature. An intergroup consists of members from different political groups with a common interest in a particular subject. This intergroup includes women from the left of the political spectrum. Most intergroups meet according to the desires of its members and are not given official recognition.





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The Polish Women's Lobby Model

After a failed attempt by the governmental Office of Family and Women's Affairs to create a women's lobby, the Parliamentary Club of the Democratic Union developed the Parliamentary Circle of Women Deputies in 1991, a group of women legislators from various political parties. Later renamed as the Women's Parliamentary Circle (WPG), the organization expanded in 1993 from one-third to two-thirds of the women senators and deputies.

According to the women who joined, the primary function of the WPG is to address the issues which are important to women, end discrimination of women in the *Sejm*, the Polish legislature, and promote integration of women into society. As written in the 1993 Declaration, one of the stated goals of the Women's Parliamentary Group is to protect the interests of women in Polish legislation being created at present and strengthening the position of women in politics and society.

Its role in the legislative process has been to influence and enact initiatives benefitting women and family. The organization worked on a bill changing the method of calculating taxes to protect single parents. The WPG was involved in amending the Family and Guardian's Code and in pursuing liberal abortion rights for women.

Besides taking an active role within the *Sejm*, the Women's Parliamentary Group promotes women's organizations and issues within the nation. Among its many tasks, the organization cooperates with other women's groups dealing with problems of legislative significance and it promotes the understanding of women's issues through participation with researchers and journalists. In addition, the WPG holds community meetings to discuss family and women's topics.

Youth Committees

Similar to the debate over the best model for women's access in government, there is disagreement over the efficacy of creating separate committees specifically for youth issues. In the United States, there is neither a youth committee in Congress nor one in the executive branch. The mechanism for support and access to the government is through various youth organizations and programs. Instead of creating new mechanisms of reform, these organizations attempt to reform the existing structure by advocating for youth issues in the context of more universal topics of concern.





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The European Model

Once again, the European Parliament, perhaps because it can play only an advisory role, has taken an active lead in dealing with social issues. In 1979, the previously disintegrated Youth and Culture Committee was reinvented as the Committee on Youth, Culture, Education, Information and Sport. Like the Women's Rights Committee, it is less powerful, has a smaller membership, meets infrequently and introduces fewer legislative proposals. Since it is not a major player in the EP, it focuses on introducing reports that highlight and reflect issues members deem significant to youth.

After the 1989 elections, the youth committee was renamed becoming the Committee on Youth, Culture, Education, Media and Sport. As a possible indicator of growing influence, membership on the committee increased from 22 to 31.

The South African Executive Branch Model

Indicating the growing relevance of youth issues within governments, the South African government is in the process of organizing a youth commission. Although discussion of its composition, terms of reference and duration of commissioners in office are still taking place, it would be located in the President's office at the national level and in the Premier's office at the provincial level. The commissioners in charge of these bodies are to be appointed by the end of November. If these youth commissions are of interest, we can follow up by pursuing more in-depth research.

In South Africa, there has been great concern with the need to bring all people into the policy-making process. As a result, the national parliament and provincial legislatures have incorporated various mechanisms to enhance transparency and access. Within a system of greater public participation, society-wide concerns for women and youth could be addressed, buttressing any in-house organization with a similar mandate (see attached article "Lifting the Lid").

