DEVPOLICYBLOG

Where thinking and working politically meets gender – tactics that have worked

By Jane Lonsdale and Joanne Choe
16 May 2023

Questions that repeatedly come up when supporting reform programs include: how do we work with local politics to influence change without reinforcing existing elitism and capture of power? How do we "dance with the system" whilst at the same time trying to change the system? When do we go with the grain and when do we not? Can we do both in parallel?

Thinking and working politically can achieve results, in areas such as policy influence or social accountability, when engaging with formal and informal power to build consensus amongst powerholders. But it's too often all rather male and elite. How can we go from simply fitting in with the system to changing it to work for women and other marginalised groups?

Working with so many forms of power clearly requires the smartest of tactics. Here we present some ideas that have come from practitioners who are very much thinking and working politically on gender on a daily basis.

Create informal spaces: Much reform happens around the edges of formal space. Even when we can get to the point of women's inclusion in committees or meeting invites, it doesn't tackle the deals done and positions agreed before the meeting, in beer houses and on the golf course for example. Creation of informal parallel women's spaces can shift where the underlying power lies. Women lawyers in one Pacific country initially began meeting as a group for morning walks to create a parallel informal space. They became more visible as a group convening for a healthy activity. Once the male lawyers saw the women getting organised, and sensed the power that these groups can generate and exert, the men asked to join the morning walks.

Use a Trojan horse: When working in a sector where gender equality progress is slow, such as infrastructure, first work on a promising relationship and the easier reform wins, then gradually use this relationship and traction to open up a conversation on reforms that

progress inclusion. Language can make the difference when getting into difficult conversations and spaces: for example, women in leadership becomes "inclusive leadership", rights-based approaches become "people-centered development", and inclusion concepts become "modern leadership" concepts. Working politically means being pragmatic with the use of language, at least in the beginning, and being aware of how terminology can alienate the very group you are trying to persuade.

Engage people in research processes: Who you engage in a research process matters for future influence. Involving the right people in a baseline study, for example, secures their interest in changing gender dynamics and becomes a strategic way to prepare future partners and champions to work with. Inviting those you want to influence to be part of the research process itself, so they participate in data collection and analysis, helps generate their ownership of the research findings and incentivises them to be part of the solution. For instance, inviting Ministry of Education officials to be part of the group that looks at the data collected on a survey about school place sexual harassment means those officials see firsthand the data, personal accounts and stories of those affected by sexual harassment. This affects them emotionally and makes them become champions of measures to address the problem – more so than if they were presented with the findings in a polished report.

Use positive expressions of culture: Culture is often labelled as a driver of exclusion, however, finding and talking about positive expressions of culture and faith with powerholders in the local political economy can ensure traction. For example, mapping gender equality concepts to religious and traditional expressions may help to gain validation from national cultural leaders such as MPs and religious leaders. This is not without risks and needs careful thought as to how best to elevate positive culture without validating other harmful cultural practices. But if the right balance can be struck it can create powerful entry points and alliances that would otherwise have faced blockages.

Coalitions with visibility: When negative events happen, such as violence against women, it can be very difficult for one person or organisation to call it out without significant personal risk. A coalition approach provides cover and more voice, so that over time calling out abuses of power and privilege can become more of a norm. In male-dominated coalitions, work on women's inclusion can usefully get us a seat at the table in building alliances and positions. Wherever possible, positioning women to represent or co-represent a coalition in key meetings with powerholders increases women's visibility.

Work with national and international commitments: Offering support to governments on meeting their international commitments can be a smart tactic. Working within existing policy frameworks and showing how your work advances locally determined commitments

and plans can create good will, which can be leveraged to go further. Human rights architecture is not always used to its fullest, so mechanisms such as CEDAW (The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women) and periodic review processes can provide a legitimate way to mobilise support and to hold governments to account on gender equality.

Where to from here? While this work to shift power may seem big and difficult, it is clearly possible. A long-term perspective and a portfolio approach, which mixes long horizon strategies with some quicker wins to demonstrate momentum, is essential. Learning and sharing is also much needed for inspiration and ideas. We would love to hear what has worked for others. Have similar tactics worked for you? What are your top tips?

Insights and lessons have been drawn from a range of DFAT-funded programs – including: the law and justice sector in PNG; gender equality programs in the Pacific; and economic, governance and transport programs in Indonesia, Vietnam and Myanmar – as well as from practitioners Mereani Rokotuibau, Edwina Kotoisuva, Angela Lenn, Heather Brown, Nicol Cave, Bimbika Sijapati Basnett and Melissa Collins.

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