



Policy Brief: **Advancing Women's Caucuses in Legislatures**

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This policy brief is part of a series derived from a three-year field program on the role of women in Rwanda. More broadly, these briefs provide policymakers, donors, and program planners with strategies for the consolidation of democracy in post-conflict societies.

Caucuses are important for bringing together legislators outside the confines of political parties. Such bodies create bridges among representatives of different interests and ensure the cross-fertilization of ideas. In post-conflict societies, caucuses help the legislative branch bridge social divisions and curb executive authority.

Women's caucuses are particularly useful for strengthening the voice of an under-heard constituency. They increase the confidence of female legislators, who often have less political experience than male colleagues, by providing a vehicle for mentoring new policymakers. Thus more broadly, women's caucuses enhance democratic processes and strengthen legislatures.

In Rwanda, the women's caucus has significantly advanced the role of the legislature. In 1996, during the transitional government, lawmakers established the Forum of Rwandan Women Parliamentarians (Forum des Femmes Rwandaises Parlementaires, or FFRP), a caucus to which all female members of parliament belong, irrespective of political party or ethnicity. Given the number of women in the legislature, the FFRP is powerful. Since 2003, Rwanda has had the world's top-ranking parliament in terms of women's representation. Today, women constitute over 56 percent of the elected lower house of parliament. The FFRP capitalizes on its considerable size within the Rwandan parliament and is a channel for strengthening the country's legislature.

The FFRP's objectives include building the capacity of female parliamentarians and advocating for the inclusion of a gender perspective as laws are developed and introduced. Through the FFRP, women have achieved ambitious legislative goals. Discrimination against women in nationality and citizenship laws has been reduced. Women's rights to inheritance and land ownership have been secured.

The FFRP's leadership in developing gender-based violence legislation has been particularly important. The bill is the first substantive piece of legislation initiated by the legislature rather than the executive branch. The FFRP's development of the GBV legislation was groundbreaking in that it included community perspectives and male parliamentarians. Leveraging donor support, the caucus strategized advocacy and other actions that made the bill relevant to all of Rwandan society—not just women. Through the National Women's Council, which is active at the national, provincial, and local levels, the FFRP convened citizens nationwide for public discussions regarding gender-based violence. These consultations created backing for the bill and provided data for the drafting. Caucus leadership invited male parliamentarians to co-sponsor the bill, further broadening support and appeal for the legislation.

The Rwanda example illustrates how supporting women's caucuses fosters good governance. This is an effective model for bringing women into government, enhancing a parliament's attention to social issues, increasing legislators' capacity to draft inclusive laws, and strengthening the legislative branch of government.

Findings and Recommendations

Finding: Legislatures gain legitimacy and credibility when they reflect the composition of society

→ **Recommendation:** Support the implementation of electoral law and constitutional quotas and reserved seats for marginalized groups, particularly women.

Finding: International support is indispensable to the creation of a strong legislative branch and inclusive lawmaking in post-conflict settings.

→ **Recommendation:** Fund programs that build the capacity of members of parliament to produce and promote legislation. Such efforts may involve providing professional staff for members or committees, training on legislation drafting, and educating both parliamentarians and citizens on the roles of the legislative and executive branches.

Finding: Cross-party caucuses moderate the influence of parties' agendas and promote the cross-fertilization of ideas. For success, caucuses must allow any interested legislator to participate (i.e., they should not be limited to certain parties or to individuals named by political parties).

→ **Recommendation:** Support the creation of cross-party caucuses, emphasizing the value of inclusive governing structures.

Finding: Having public consultations on legislative topics builds the legitimacy of government, connects parliamentarians with constituents, generates useful data for drafting legislation, and sensitizes the public on policy issues.

→ **Recommendation:** Encourage consultative policymaking, especially on socially sensitive issues.

→ **Recommendation:** Allocate funds to pay for consultations with constituents in connection with pending legislation.

Finding: Women's caucuses, and caucuses in general, are useful channels for programs and funds to strengthen legislatures.

→ **Recommendation:** Support cross-party women's caucuses financially and technically.

Finding: When parliamentarians purposefully engage across gender lines to pass legislation, the relevance of an issue is highlighted and collaborative policymaking is encouraged.

→ **Recommendation:** Ensure that all programming for legislators involves men and women.

→ **Recommendation:** Ensure that training for members of parliament includes the value of and approaches to working with colleagues of the opposite sex.

Finding: Women can lead in promoting democratic governance.

→ **Recommendation:** Support programs to enable women to fulfill their potential as legislators. An emphasis on skills such as public speaking, law drafting, advocacy, coalition building, and proposal writing will pay particularly high dividends.