Women’s Empowerment Gains in Nigeria

Women are changing civil society in Nigeria. From elections to laws to the media family life, women in Nigeria are beginning to speak out and assert themselves. In the 1997 elections, 27 women were voted into Congress compared with 7 previously.

Organized women’s groups, like the Nigeria Association of Women Journalists (NAWOJ), play a key role. Their members are now almost ten times more likely to vote, nine times more likely to join a political party, and six times more likely to run for political office than previously (Figure 1).

The D&G Project

Why did these changes take place? A partial answer may lie in Phase I of the Democracy and Governance (D&G) Project supported by the US Agency for International Development, which was implemented in part by the Johns Hopkins University Population Communication Services (JHU/PCS) and the Center for Development and Population Activities (CEDPA) in nine Nigerian states. These societal changes occurred during a difficult political transition. (General Abacha’s plan to move the country toward a democracy was viewed with skepticism after he removed the interim president when the 1993 elections were annulled.)

The objective of the D&G Project was to enable women to participate more in political life and to place issues such as access to health care, clean water, children’s education and the creation and enforcement of gender-balanced laws on the national political agenda.

The D&G Project capitalized on the existing networks, strengths, and infrastructure of 31 grassroots non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Although CEDPA worked with 15 of the NGOs, JHU/PCS worked with the 16 NGOs whose results are reported here. These NGOs included women lawyers’ and journalists’ associations, market women groups, women’s religious organizations, youth advocacy groups, and theater troupes. Some groups were well established; others were newcomers. Some had only 30 members, others had more than 50,000.

Phase I

Phase I of the D&G Project was implemented between March 1997 and February 1998. The work of the NGOs addressed three main issues: women’s political empowerment, fundamental human rights and civic responsibility, and democratic participation.

The NGOs implemented community education, hands-on leadership capacity-building workshops, lobbying and advocacy initiatives and the promotion of women in the mass media, especially women political candidates. A key element of the D&G Project was its media strategy, which was implemented through a partner-

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Figure 1. Odds of Voting, Joining a Political Party, and Intending to Run for Office After Being Exposed to Various Levels of Democracy and Governance Activities

At the NGO membership level there was a distinct gain in NGO members’ overall knowledge, attitudes and behaviors regarding project issues. For example, there was an increase in knowledge of fundamental human rights and how to ensure that such rights are respected, familiarity with the political environment, and knowledge of ways to ensure the practice of democracy from 18 points to 26 points by the end of Phase I. There was an increase from 33 points to 40 points during Phase I in positive attitudes toward women’s political empowerment, including participation in decision-making in the home and community. Positive attitudes toward women’s economic and cultural empowerment within the community also increased by the end of Phase I (Figure 2). These increases were impressive in light of the lack of confidence by Nigerians in their socio-political climate at that time.

The NGO organizational level changed dramatically as a result of participation in the D&G Project with memberships in NGOs increasing by 32 percent and active members rising by 48 percent. Networking and collaboration among NGOs, including those not traditionally involved with women’s empowerment issues, improved in both quantity and quality. More non-executive NGO members have become involved in decision-making and have also required more accountability from their leaders.

At the community level benefits of the D&G Project were also seen as NGO activities reached the general population through the mass media. For example, in Anambra, D&G efforts persuaded a judge to rule that the son of a deceased testator could not evict his father’s wife from a house he had built for her. In Enugu, a Federal High Court of Appeal issued a landmark pronouncement that a widow should inherit her husband’s property. Changing such traditional barriers to women along with reducing the widowhood mourning period and adding a “Women in Politics” course at a major university are evidence that D&G principles are beginning to be institutionalized.

The data indicate that exposure to Phase I of the D&G Project had an appreciable impact. The fact that NGOs involved in the project maintained their confidence in the democratic process and created more legislative and political empowerment for Nigerian women is encouraging. These results testify to the positive contribution of the D&G Project and demonstrate the effectiveness of such a multimedia and grassroots approach to D&G reform.