

SESSION 2:

Ethical Politics

(Approx. 3 hours in total))

Session Objectives

- To consider what are ethical politics
- To imagine accountability, transparency, fairness, inclusiveness, and tolerance, in the political arena

2.1

Exercise: Balancing the Scales

(Approx. 20 min.)

Ask a volunteer or two from the group to read aloud the following story told by Mahnaz Afkhami,³ Iran's former secretary general of the Women's Organization and Minister of Women's Affairs, about a difficult choice she faced while in office.



“In 1974, when I was secretary general of the Women’s Organization of Iran, my colleagues and I were laying the groundwork for legislative reform of women’s status and the family law. We knew that any change to the family law extending the rights of women would meet resistance from many quarters.

³ Mahnaz Afkhami, President and Founder of Women's Learning Partnership, is Executive Director of the Foundation for Iranian Studies and serves on advisory boards for a number of national and international organizations, including the International Museum of Women, World Movement for Democracy, and the Women's Division of Human Rights Watch. She has over three decades of experience working at the government and non-government levels to advance the rights of women, particularly in the Middle East. She has authored numerous publications, among them *Muslim Women and the Politics of Participation*, *Faith and Freedom: Women's Human Rights in the Muslim World*, *Women in Exile*, and *Women and the Law in Iran*. Among the training manuals she has co-authored are *Claiming Our Rights: A Manual for Women's Human Rights Education in Muslim Societies*, *Safe and Secure: Eliminating Violence Against Women and Girls in Muslim Societies*, and *Leading to Choices: A Leadership Training Handbook for Women*.

“We began our campaign by conducting training sessions for ordinary women to raise their consciousness about the limitations of the existing laws on women’s right to divorce, child custody, protection from polygamy, and the like. We published booklets on the legal status of women in simple language, as well as academic studies on the impact of legislation on the lives of women. Similarly, we held discussions with policymakers, legislators, and experts at the ministry of justice and the more progressive clerics to secure their support for the changes we sought. To help us prepare the best language for the new legislation, we met with lawyers, religious scholars, and sociologists.

“Despite our level of preparation and steps to educate different interested parties, we met stiff resistance to increasing women’s rights. Our efforts often led to heated bargaining sessions. For example, we could not convince the ministry of justice to eliminate an article that stated a man has the right to prevent his wife from holding a job that is against his honor. In the balance, however, we were able to negotiate inclusion of a similar stipulation for wives. Although wives preventing their husbands from holding jobs was purely a theoretical right (no court at the time would uphold a wife’s claim), for the first time in Iranian legislative history a reference was made to a woman’s honor in her own right, distinct from that of male members of her family.

*“The law, as passed, included victories and defeats for women. We worked hard to make polygamy illegal, but after many long and intemperate discussions we reached a *détente*. Polygamy would be legal, but a man’s right to multiple wives would be limited to a second wife, under specific circumstances that made a polygamous marriage highly unlikely, and only with the permission of the first wife. And while we were not able to make headway on changing the position of the husband as head of the family, we were successful in increasing the minimum age of marriage, and including equal rights to divorce and guardianship of children after the father’s death.*

“When one of my colleagues in Parliament called to give me the news that the Family Protection Law had passed, I was jubilant. I knelt down and kissed the ground and thanked God! An hour later I held a press conference. There I faced the dilemma of having to defend flawed legislation and argue its merits, which doubtless were very significant for many women, but fell far short of ideal. Not surprisingly, I sounded more like a justice ministry official than a feminist activist. My arguments sounded alien to me, although I felt I was taking the responsible position.

“I was aware that even though this was landmark legislation in a Muslim-majority country, it was far from perfect. And yet, the revised legislation provided a platform from which to begin the next stage of women’s struggle for equal rights. The week following passage of the Family Protection Law, we were able to begin work on a new revision that could provide greater freedoms and protections for women. I learned the importance of holding on to the ideal while realizing the possible.”



Questions for Group Discussion

- Can two differing people or two conflicting political perspectives both be ethical?
- How do you make ethical choices?
- Is compromise ethical? When is it not ethical?
- How can a leader communicate a less than ideal outcome to her constituency without losing support or momentum?

2.2

Exercise: Doing Things Differently

(Approx. 20 min.)

Ask a volunteer or two from the group to read aloud the following narrative by former Irish president, and former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson.⁴



“When I was nominated as one of three candidates for the presidency, I was very much an outsider because I was a woman, I was young, and I didn’t come from a political background. My goal was to make the Irish presidency more relevant and more responsive to the people. It is an elected position, and I felt that being chosen by the people meant that the president had a duty to represent those who put him or her in office.

“Shortly after I was inaugurated, I received invitations from many civil society groups to come and open their center, or mark a ten-year anniversary, or some other community activity. Written on the invitations was advice from my secretary: ‘This event is not of sufficient importance to warrant the presence of the president.’

“But I felt that they were of sufficient importance! I couldn’t go to all of them, but I felt I should go to some to show that what these groups and individuals were doing was important. These community leaders were changing the face of modern Ireland—and as it so happened, a lot of those working in their communities were women.

⁴ Mary Robinson served as United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights from 1997 to 2002 and as President of Ireland from 1990-1997. She is a member of the Elders. She serves as Honorary President of Oxfam International, chair of the GAVI Alliance Board and President of the International Commission of Jurists. She is a former chair of the Council of Women World Leaders and a member of the Club of Madrid. The recipient of numerous honors and awards throughout the world including the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Obama, she serves on several boards including the Mo Ibrahim Foundation and the Global Compact. She is a professor of practice at the University of Pretoria in South Africa and serves as Chancellor of Dublin University. She is the President of Realizing Rights: The Ethical Globalization Initiative.

“I made a number of speeches on particular occasions valuing the contribution of women and making sure to include women who were supporting community activities. I was trying to make the Irish women’s movement more inclusive, so that all women felt empowered. I would hear from my constituents, ‘Oh I’m not important, I’m just a housewife.’ But I would ask, ‘What do you do in your community?’ They would say, ‘Well I run this and I manage that,’ and what you would find is that behind these self-described ‘housewives’ were very active and engaged community leaders.

“Perhaps what I was most proud of during my presidency was reaching out to women in Northern Ireland, of both Protestant and Catholic background, working-class women. It was quite exceptional for them to come to Dublin from Belfast, and secondly to come to the official residence. We had wonderful discussions, and I could see the enormous value of their efforts to reach across religious lines. These women were so courageous and knew what was necessary to build peace step by step.

“Raising the profile of women and women’s efforts to improve their communities was always terribly important to me. I really wanted the women I met to understand that they were no different than I—working hard to make a difference in their society. But I learned an important lesson about power and position as well. It really meant something to these women that I was their president, that I acted and dressed presidential. It was a privilege for them to meet with someone in high office. I learned that when I hosted delegations or traveled, that people wanted to see me with all the pomp and circumstance of the presidency, not as an ordinary citizen. I had to change my perception of how a good leader would function, and to grow comfortable with the level of decorum traditionally associated with the Irish presidency. So although I was able to change the nature of the presidency and the expectations of the president in Ireland in many ways, the office also changed me.”



Questions for Group Discussion

- How do people react to women in positions of power? What are the expectations of women leaders? What are women’s expectations of women leaders?
- What is your ideal for how a woman leader should conduct herself?
- What does it mean for a woman in power to be “genuine”?
- What do you think about President Robinson’s efforts to meet with everyday women and to honor their work in their communities?
- Do you think a woman leader is obligated to support other women and to raise the profile of their efforts?

2.3

Exercise: Code of Conduct

(Approx. 45 min.)

Divide the group into three or four teams for this exercise. Ask each team to choose a political figure (male or female) familiar to everyone on the team. Each team should take approximately 20 minutes to draft a code of conduct for the political figure (local, national, international, from any country and from any level of government).

First, each team should write on the top of a large piece of paper the following sentence, filling in the banks:

I, _____, in my capacity as _____, will conduct myself by following a set of principles and code of ethics:

Second, the teams should brainstorm what rules, principles, policies, etc., they would want their political person to observe, and record them on a large piece of paper.

Some examples are: I will not lie to my advisors, colleagues, or the public; I will not threaten, harm, stigmatize, or in anyway punish those who publicly disagree with me; I will not exercise favoritism; I will not use my term in office to benefit my own interests; My actions and policies will not discriminate against women.

When the time is up, have a representative from each team report back to the group the politician they chose, and the code of conduct that they drafted.

2.4

Exercise: Dividing the Pie

(Approx. 45 min.)

Write the following information on the blackboard for the whole group to see:

There is funding available to cover the expense of putting computers in three schools for students to use. You are on a special education committee tasked with deciding which three schools—out of ten possible candidates—will get the computers.

Divide the group into teams of three or four participants. Each team should discuss possible processes for deciding which schools should get the computers (about 20 minutes). Should there be age, economic, neighborhood, gender, or other criteria? Would it be just as “fair” to distribute through a lottery? Each team should record the questions they would ask, and the steps they would take to decide which schools will get the computers. Ask a representative from each team to report back to the group the steps and criteria they had decided upon for choosing which three schools would receive the computers.



Questions for Group Discussion

- How would you go about making your decision?
- How would you make sure that your decision was as fair as possible?
- Is it important that local residents understand how you made your decision? Why or why not?
- How will you communicate your decision to local residents?
- What will you do if local residents challenge your decision?