

# SESSION 3:

## Where Do I Fit in as a Political Actor?

(Approx. 3 hours in total)

### Session Objectives

- To explore the role of an activist versus that of a politician—an outsider versus insider
- To examine diverse personal and political strategies: quiet diplomacy versus visible confrontation through writing, speaking out, joining a campaign, running for office, etc.
- To consider the challenge of balancing personal obligations with public obligations, balancing family needs against professional demands, in general, making hard decisions and dealing with the consequences

### 3.1

#### Exercise: Crossing the Red Line

(Approx. 20 min.)

Please ask a volunteer to read the following narrative by Masuma Hasan,<sup>5</sup> women’s rights advocate and former cabinet secretary in Pakistan.

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Masuma Hasan is former cabinet secretary to the Government of Pakistan. She was Pakistan’s ambassador to Austria, and permanent representative to the United Nations Office in Vienna and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), and other international organizations in Vienna. She was Chairperson of the Working Group on Gender and Development set up by the Planning Commission to prepare for the Medium Term Development Framework 2005-2010, and chairperson of the Group of 77 in Vienna. She serves on the board of governors of Aurat (Women’s) Foundation, a WLP partner, and other academic and development institutions.



*“When I began public service, there were very few women working in its ranks in Pakistan. There were no legal or constitutional barriers to women’s recruitment in public service. Nevertheless a red line existed between the elite cadres in the government’s bureaucracy and the National Institute of Public Administration in Karachi where I was employed. This was one of government’s in-service training organizations for civil servants which also engaged in research and consultancy. Even my male colleagues did not hope to ever break that barrier.*

*“My family were pioneers in women’s education, and my parents made no distinction between me and my two brothers. A Ph.D. degree in Politics from the University of Cambridge was an unusual achievement at that time, especially for a woman. My educational qualifications should have made all the difference between my career prospects and those of my male colleagues. However, I was at the receiving end of prevailing patriarchal and patronizing attitudes towards women’s employment.*

*“My career took many twists and turns because of my husband’s political commitment to democracy in a decade of harsh dictatorial rule in my country. He suffered long prison terms, and my children and I endured equally long periods of isolation and harassment. During this difficult time, I was transferred to the Management Services Division in Islamabad. But I never wavered in my loyalty to my husband’s commitment or in my belief that our struggle would lead to better times.*

*“After the dictatorship ended, the political environment changed. I was promoted and returned to my former institution in Karachi, becoming the first woman and first professional to head any training, research, and consultancy organization in the government. I worked hard to develop programs that brought public policy and civil servants closer to the community, and my institution became known for its bold support of public interest issues and for drawing large numbers of women to its open programs.*

*“The turning point in my career came with my appointment as ambassador and as Pakistan’s representative to the United Nations and other international organizations in Vienna. Subsequently, I was appointed cabinet secretary to the government, which is the highest post in the civil service. The red line had been crossed.*

*“The people I worked with were almost all men, but I learned that my success gave women hope and confidence in public service and even in other professions. They were wonderfully supportive and I always found time to meet them and to listen to them. Hearing that a woman occupied the powerful position of cabinet secretary, many women would come to my office with their problems. But helping individual women one-on-one was not going to provide any long-term advances for women generally.*

*“Early in my career, I realized the importance of empowering women politically in fields critical for women—such as transportation, water, education, health, and*

*the environment. So I started supporting public policies being promoted by women's groups. Some of their key recommendations, like the large reservation of seats for women in local councils and federal and provincial legislatures, were implemented by the government and have changed the political landscape in my country. Building a bridge between community and government can help women to take charge of their lives."*



### Questions for Group Discussion

- What are some advantages to working inside government? What can you achieve more easily?
- What are some disadvantages to being a government employee or holding elected office? What sorts of activities or tasks are more difficult to accomplish as a government official?
- Is there a stigma attached to activists and politicians moving back and forth between the two worlds? Why or why not? Is it easier for men or for women?
- Is political ambition for a woman different than for a man? Is it selfish? Why or why not?
- Should women vote for and/or support women because they are women? How would you make the decision?

## 3.2

### Exercise: What would YOU do if...

(Approx. 30 min)

This exercise invites participants to reflect upon potential situations they might face and what actions they would take in each situation. It can be conducted as a Circle Activity, with everyone answering questions in turn, proceeding around the circle.

First, write on the board or hand out sheets with the following actions (feel free to change or add actions):

- Do nothing
- Offer personal condolences and empathy
- Follow the stories in the newspapers and other news outlets
- Complain verbally to leaders in private meetings
- Complain verbally to leaders in public forums
- Write a public letter of protest (through the media)
- Write a private letter of protest (addressed individually to a concerned politician or decision-maker)

- Organize a joint letter of protest
- Participate in a rally
- Organize a rally
- Participate in a campaign
- Lead a political campaign
- Run for political office

Then, pose the following questions to the group, asking participants to choose from the list of actions or to state their own. For each question, try to elicit six to eight responses, so that participants hear a range of answers. Add actions to the list as they are suggested by participants.

- What would you do if you were growing colder and colder in the room where we are meeting, and you noticed that the windows were open?
- What would you do if your husband lost his job at a nearby factory?
- What would you do if *every worker* was laid off at a nearby factory?
- What would you do if your friends and colleagues were active on a campaign in support of a political candidate you also approved of?
- What would you do if you had signed a joint letter with six other signatories complaining about the inadequacies of services for victims of domestic violence, and now your family is asking you not to get involved?
- What would you do if many community leaders asked you to run for local political office and made promises to help your campaign?



### **Questions for Group Discussion**

- Are there personal and/or political actions that you would feel comfortable committing to? Are there actions you would not feel comfortable taking? Why?
- What sort of political person are you? What sort of political person would you like to become? Why?
- Is it possible to be personally ambitious for political power and still be ethical? Why or why not?
- Is non-involvement ever a political action? If so, what might be an example?

### 3.3

## Exercise: Inspiring and supporting women leaders

(Approx. 30 min.)

Ask a volunteer to read the story below about Daphne Olu-Williams, and her journey from concerned citizen to political leader in Sierra Leone.



*Daphne Olu-Williams was an academic for nearly two decades before civil war drove her and her family out of Sierra Leone and into Ghana for refuge. Her experience of receiving charity and the good will of others shaped Daphne's desire to give back. When she returned to Sierra Leone, she became a youth supervisor at an orphanage. She went on to found the African Kind Hearts Organization (AKHO), a community-based organization that provided relief for women and children in the seaside village of Goderich (the native home of her late husband). AKHO later expanded the scope of its activities to providing women with vocational training and business skills.*

*In 2005, Daphne attended a leadership institute in Calabar, Nigeria, organized by Women's Learning Partnership and its Nigerian partner organization, BAOBAB for Women's Human Rights. The institute experience inspired her to become involved in the women's movement. According to Daphne, her participation at the institute opened a new chapter of leadership in her life. She realized that it was not enough for her to have a vision of how her society could improve. She needed to take bold action. In particular, Daphne believed that women in Sierra Leone needed to be more actively involved in political participation. Daphne challenged herself in numerous ways to engage in the political life of her country.*

*Within a year, Daphne was appointed to serve as an Electoral Commissioner for the Western region, the largest of the four regions and the region where the capital city, Freetown, is located. Daphne went on to serve her electoral region through Sierra Leone's transition to a new, democratically elected government. The male-dominated staff of the Electoral Commission proved to be a major challenge for her. She also was subjected to all forms of sex discrimination and intimidation, and even received threats on her life. But Daphne was determined to ensure that the results of the election were credible.*

*At the end of the electoral process, the Chief Electoral Commissioner declared the election valid. For Daphne Olu-Williams, the election had been a very demanding time in her life, but also a profound opportunity for her to play an important role in the political fate of her country.*



### Questions for Group Discussion

- What are some of the events you believe could have inspired Daphne to become politically engaged?
- What role can women play, and in particular the participants in this workshop play, in encouraging and supporting women to become active in politics?



### Circle Activity

Starting with yourself, have each woman around the circle finish this sentence\*:

“I can help women participate in governance and political action by\_\_\_\_\_.”

\*There are no right or wrong answers. Women can help women by registering to vote and voting, by canvassing for a candidate, or by raising strong and confident girls and fair-minded boys. All of these actions and thousands of others will help women help women to change the world.

## 3.4

### Exercise: Choices and Obligations

(Approx. 45 min.)

Ask a volunteer or two from the group to read aloud the following personal story of Asma Khader<sup>6</sup>, Coordinator of Sisterhood Is Global Institute/Jordan (SIGI/J) and human rights advocate.



*“I am the eldest of three daughters. As is the custom in Jordan, until I was ten years old, my father was referred to as Abu Asma (father of Asma), and my mother as Um Asma (mother of Asma). My parents were under a lot of pressure from their families because they had no sons, and so they decided to try to have another child. When I was ten years old, my brother Samir was born. Within one hour of his birth, I suddenly realized that everyone around us was calling my father Abu Samir (father of Samir), and my mother Um Samir (mother of Samir). It was*

<sup>6</sup> Asma Khader, a lawyer and human rights activist, is General Coordinator of Sisterhood Is Global Institute/Jordan, a WLP partner, former Minister of State and Government Spokesperson for the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, and former President of the Jordanian Women’s Union. She is a member of the Arab Lawyer’s Union, the Arab Organization for Human Rights, and the Executive Committee of the International Commission of Jurists. She was instrumental in creating a legal literacy and legal assistance program for Jordanian women. Elected to the Permanent Arab Court as Counsel on Violence against Women, she is a leading advocate to strengthen legislation outlawing honor killing.

as though I had disappeared. Even though I was the eldest, Samir was a boy, and because of this in the eyes of my relatives he was the most important child.

“At first I was really angry and hurt. For months I acted out by not doing housework expected of us daughters, and instead played with boys—who people seemed to think were so much more important. I was lucky, though. My father was a thoughtful and educated man. He could see what I was feeling and spoke to me about how important his daughters were to him.

“The experience left its mark on me. I understood that women and girls need someone to fight for them. As I grew older, I often found myself advocating for my girlfriends, standing up for them when I felt they were being discriminated against. It was a natural thing for me to become a lawyer and to support women’s rights.

“By the time my own daughters were born, I was working very hard and long hours as an advocate. When my second daughter was just five years old, she told a neighbor, ‘I never want to be a lawyer. I never see my mother. When I grow up, I want to be a government teacher who can come home at noon.’ I felt very torn. On the one hand, I really was passionate about my work, and on the other hand I was worried that I wasn’t being an attentive mother.

“One day when my daughter was a teenager, by chance she came with me to the prison where I was meeting with a client. She was upset by the terrible conditions at the prison. She wanted to know how I could sleep if I thought that there might be innocent people in the prison. She asked me a lot of questions that day. Still, no one was more surprised than I when she decided to study law herself. I was shocked. If I had listened to my heart when my daughter was five, I would have left the legal profession. Today my daughter is a lawyer, and she also is involved in human rights. I feel, finally, at peace with the choice I made.”



### Questions for Group Discussion I

- In our country, do women and men face the same challenges in balancing family and professional life?
- What are some factors that limit women’s political participation?

Make two columns on the board, and ask the group to brainstorm the obligations of men to their family and the obligations of women to their family:

Women’s Obligations To Their Families	Men’s Obligations To Their Families



### Questions for Group Discussion II

- What is the same about these two lists? What is different?
- What did you learn from this exercise?
- How would women's obligation to their families affect their opportunities in political participation?

## 3.5

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### Exercise: Role Models

(Approx. 45 min.)

Have the group name all the different roles women have in society, such as mother, housekeeper, doctor, teacher, engineer, driver, accountant, lawyer, domestic worker, minister, seamstress, and so on. Record participants' answers on the chalkboard. When the list reaches 40 to 50 roles, stop and go on to the next step.

Divide the group into pairs. Ask each pair to:

- Choose the ten most important roles for women identified by the group.
- Rank the top ten roles in order of importance with "1" being the most important and "10" being the least.

Reconvene the group and ask a representative of each pair to share their list.



### Questions for Group Discussion

- Was this an easy or difficult exercise?
- Did the partners agree on most of the list—yes or no?
- Was anyone persuaded by her partner's viewpoint? Explain.
- What was the area of greatest agreement? What was the area of least agreement?

## 3.6

### Exercise: Past, Present, and Future

(Approximately 20 min.)

Ask a volunteer to read the following narrative of Tolekan Ismailova<sup>7</sup> about stories and events that influenced her choice to become a human rights activist.



*“As long as I can remember, I have been a human rights activist. Even when I was a little girl, I understood that in my part of the world women were second-class citizens. All power in the home and in society is dominated by men. In our Parliament, we did not have a single woman until 2007, although in Kyrgyzstan there are so many talented women leaders. The policies that control electoral practices and passing legislation are controlled by people who want to hold onto their money and power—and they are men.*

*“My grandmothers used to tell me stories about refugee children dying from cold and hunger. They would be sold for food by their parents. Daughters were given away more frequently because sons were viewed as more important to the clan. But these terrible stories are not just things of the past. In this decade, refugees fleeing violence and unrest from places like Andijan in Uzbekistan or the Chechen Republic are attacked or ‘disappeared.’*

*“Kidnapping of young women is still a common practice for men seeking brides in Kyrgyzstan. These bride kidnappings are supported not only by the young men and their friends but by the families of the women. They defend their acquiescence by saying that the brutality is just an ‘ancient tradition.’ Hundreds of young girls in Kyrgyzstan are victims of kidnappings, which are often violent, and can result in injury—and even death. There are many stories of young women who are kidnapped and then cannot return to their parents even if they are able to escape. Because they have been kept out all night, their virginity is put into question, and custom dictates that they be considered ‘damaged’ and no longer fit for marrying another.*

<sup>7</sup> Tolekan Ismailova is a human rights defender in Kyrgyzstan and the Director of Human Rights Center/ Citizens against Corruption (CAC), a WLP partner; a founder of the NGO Forum of Kyrgyzstan (1996), which played a key role in the development of the non-governmental sector in Kyrgyzstan; and the Founder and first President of the Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society, which united Kyrgyzstan’s NGO sector during a national campaign on civil society education and monitoring of elections. The recipient of several international awards for her work as a civil society activist and human rights defender, Ismailova was also the first Reagan-Fascell Democracy Fellow from Central Asia in 2002.

*“My grandmothers hoped that I would have a different life than they had. They wanted me to be strong-spirited, well educated, and independent. They were afraid that I would suffer domestic violence and other harsh practices tolerated in our patriarchal society. My grandmothers wished that I would have a good life—that I would make my own choices about how I want to live.*

*“Thanks to my parents and my husband, who was a journalist, I was able to be independent, and to act on my aspirations to change my society. I have always been a human rights activist, and I will remain so until women are treated with dignity and have equal rights. I knew that if I were to challenge injustice suffered by women in my country, I would need to act, to speak out, and not fear to take risks.”*



### **Questions for Group Discussion**

- How did this story make you feel?
- Are there events in your past that influence who you are today?
- Are there commitments you have made to make the world a different place for the next generation?
- What do you want to change most?