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POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

This presentation will focus on experiences with expanding the political space for women in the Democratic Republic of Congo where the DRC office of the National Democratic Institute (“NDI”) manages a capacity-building program for political actors with a particular emphasis on women and youth.

The presentation will highlight the following:

1. **The challenges facing women in the DRC in general and women politicians in particular** – Here we will draw from an excellent gender assessment report for the DRC commissioned by USAID that highlights the limitations imposed on women by the prevailing patriarchy and traditional cultural norms and attitudes. There is a zero-sum perception in which men who are threatened by the notion of gender equality believe that this concept automatically translates into complete role reversal as opposed to a mutually enhancing partnership.
2. **Opportunities and challenges in the political landscape in Congo** – Here we will discuss the highly charged and contested political space in DRC dominated by ethnic rivalries and personality-driven politics. Political personalities who have means dominate and often control the political landscape. Candidates for political office are left to fend for themselves by their parties. Since the majority of women politicians have limited resources, their ability to compete is severely constrained. Women politicians, at least, are more predisposed than men to come together and even work across political lines.
3. **Social issues in DRC** – Results of a survey conducted by NDI revealed a pronounced disconnect between the discourse and actions of elected officials on the one hand and the aspirations of Congolese people on the other. Not enough executive and legislative action has been taken to create employment, address education and health care needs or to develop the infrastructure necessary to attract the requisite investment to advance economic development goals.
4. **The birth of FPEPA** – NDI spearheaded the establishment of a network of non-elected women politicians whose aim is to bridge the gap of understanding between elected politicians and the general population. Before the advent of FPEPA, non-elected women held aspirations to become elected without adequately reflecting on what role they might play as non-elected politicians. Over a two-year period, NDI helped this network to develop a more sophisticated understanding of social issues in order to enable them to advocate more effectively for more decisive executive and legislative action on a range of social issues. This in turn better prepares them for performing more optimally as elected officials if and when they assume political office.
5. **Emergence of stars** – Many development practitioners assume that all women will necessarily work more effectively than men when given the space and intellectual and other resources to do so. However, just as with men, in every group, there are those who are commitment to social advancement and others who are mere opportunists seeking to gain personally from participating in an international development initiative. NDI’s work with FPEPA was not exception.
6. **Blog Pilot – Connecting stars and supporting women politicians in Africa** – Here we will describe a blog project piloted by NDI-DRC which seeks to support the emergence of female political stars in DRC (and eventually in Africa)



Key words are: Women, Politics, DRC,