

The “Inspiration Day” Model: Fostering Women’s Leadership by Connecting National Leaders with Grassroots Candidates

Evidence from around the world indicates women are leading efforts to promote good governance. These leaders in government foster participation and transparency by promoting collaboration across ideological lines and social sectors, engaging diverse stakeholders in the governing process, and bringing a unique set of concerns to policymaking.

Unfortunately, local rules, attitudes, and customs often inhibit women’s participation in government. Women need programs to build their self-confidence, make them aware of election laws and procedures, and provide them with skills to be effective candidates and leaders.

Connecting experienced national women leaders with potential female candidates at the grassroots successfully encourages women to run for office. A study of women in local political positions in Colombia, Iraq, and Serbia found that “establishing support systems, mentoring programs, and exchange of experiences with other women in leadership” builds the confidence of women and encourages them to seek office. Inclusive Security put this research into practice through programs in Liberia and Rwanda that enabled established female elected officials to nurture the next generation of leaders by sharing their experiences, priorities, and strategies with local women.

The Rwanda Experience

In Rwanda, Inclusive Security partnered with the Rwandan Association of Local Government Authorities (RALGA) and the National Women’s Council to deliver training for potential women candidates prior to the 2006 local elections. The presence of senior-level officials—parliamentarians and senior officials from the Office of the Prime Minister—as role models was a core component of the leadership training. Over 2,000 women attended 12 sessions held nationwide. Radio programming reached thousands more.

Many participants indicated that they were more likely to run for office after the training and mentoring. One participant said: “I am more determined to stand for election than ever before...my thinking was transformed...with the strategies and the advice we were given this morning, I am more confident and know now what to do.”



*Rwandan Member of Parliament Marie Claire Ingabire (center) speaks to training participants about her life experience and her political career.
Photo credit: Elvis Gakuba*

In the 2006 elections, women were elected to one-third of mayoral and vice-mayoral posts at the district level nationwide. They were chosen for two-thirds of the capital city, Kigali’s, executive committee. Nationwide, their representation increased by more than six percent.

Liberia's Inspiration Days

Inclusive Security has helped to organize Inspiration Days in rural Liberia. In March 2008, Inclusive Security partnered with CHF International to connect national women leaders with local women in Lofa County. Several established leaders, including Liberian Representatives Victoria Lynch and Regina Sokan-Teah, shared personal stories about running for office, discussed effective campaigning techniques, and spoke about the leadership skills of local women that qualify them for public leadership. Significant outreach beforehand enabled CHF and Inclusive Security to identify local women who could participate and relay the messages to women back home. Though only 30 communities were targeted, word-of-mouth led other communities to send representatives.



*During Inspiration Day, Liberian Representative Victoria Lynch shares her experiences of running for office.
Photo credit: Miki Jacevic*

The 2008 Inspiration Day launched a training series to enhance leadership skills for 100 rural women from 30 communities across Lofa County. The first workshop introduced basic principles of civic education and community interaction through small group work. A second workshop enhanced leadership and mobilization skills using case studies and role-play activities. Politics and campaign management were the central topics of the final session. Subsequent ongoing mentoring was offered. Training materials were developed with the Women's NGO Secretariat of Liberia and adapted for use by participants with limited literacy. Following the training one woman declared her intention to become Liberia's first female paramount chief, breaking strong cultural traditions of male leadership.

Building on the successes of 2008, Inclusive Security hosted 120 women from 15 different communities in Margibi County for another Inspiration Day in March 2009. Some women walked for as much as two days to gather at Kakata City Hall. For most, this was the first occasion to meet national leaders and to connect with each other.



*Inspiration Day in Kakata, Margibi County, March 2009. Members of the National Assembly offered advice to local women leaders on running for a public office.
Photo credit: Miki Jacevic*

One participant summed it best, "Before today, I thought a married woman cannot be a politician. I know now that I could be a good wife and a mother, but also lead my community." Liberian Senator Clarice Jah and Representatives Alomiza Ennos and Regina Sokan-Teah spoke to local community leaders about their experiences campaigning for public office. Several women enthusiastically announced plans to run for office for the first time.

Replicating the Successful Experiences in Rwanda and Liberia

Key to Success: Ground your work in local realities to ensure cultural relevance and appropriate planning.

→ **Recommendation:** Partner with local women's organizations and community groups to identify appropriate training participants and to ensure that training material is appropriate and adapted for local audiences.

Key to Success: Reach out as broadly as possible to women who are strong leaders, even those with limited literacy.

→ **Recommendation:** Involve leaders in Inspiration Day to whom everyone can relate. Even in the absence of formal education, leaders have proven effective at all levels of government.

Key to Success: Cultivate male allies to increase interest and acceptance of the program.

→ **Recommendation:** Invite men to identify participants and attend training sessions.

Key to Success: Plan for leadership skill training well in advance of election dates.

→ **Recommendation:** Start now! Local, regional, and national elections are often dispersed across months and years. It takes time for women to be convinced and decide to run for office. Starting early will yield big dividends.

Key to Success: Assess and track your impact.

→ **Recommendation:** Measure success by:

- the number of women who run for office who participated in training;
- the number who assumed more leadership roles in their community even if they do not run for office.

→ **Recommendation:** Conduct interviews with participants before and after training to see how their knowledge and attitudes evolve.

Key to Success: Encourage enduring relationships between national women leaders and potential local candidates.

→ **Recommendation:** Structure mentoring discussions and programs for women to ask questions and collect information.

→ **Recommendation:** Pair experienced and potential leaders to foster a long-term relationship that will enable the emerging leader to feel comfortable asking questions and seeking advice on pending legislation.

Key to Success: Maximize the program's reach.

→ **Recommendation:** Broadcast national leaders' trainings on radio, which often reaches the largest number of people nationwide. Radio also reaches the illiterate, who often are disproportionately female. Target particularly stations that broadcast nationally.

Key to Success: Provide logistical support for women.

→ **Recommendation:** Offer women transportation and childcare to enable their participation in training and elections as candidates and voters.