



IMPACT STORIES

TRINIDADIAN WOMEN GAIN GROUND AT THE BALLOT BOX

 **UN WOMEN**  **FUND FOR GENDER EQUALITY**

Photo © Courtesy of Abraham Diaz/The Trinidad Guardian

Campaigning isn't always so much fun. "We go to every single house. Sometimes we meet up with unfriendly dogs; sometimes we have to cross ditches and have boots on to make sure we don't slip in the mud," says 51-year-old dentist and now local councillor Hilary Bernard.

All the hard work paid off in October 2013, in her second bid for public office, when she handily won the local election to represent the Arima northeast electoral district (population 4,028), in the northern central part of Trinidad.

Having grown up in what she describes as a strict and traditional "chauvinistic" household, Hilary is used to shattering expectations. She went against her parents' wishes and struggled financially to pursue her goal of attending dentistry school in the United States. "The worst thing that you can tell me is that I can't do something," she chuckles.

With her dentistry degree in-hand, she returned to Trinidad and Tobago and opened a private practice. She got involved in her local church, and through helping others and seeking justice, she started seeing local politics as the means to make needed changes. After losing her first election in 2010, she decided to try again, but be better-prepared.

Hilary is among the more than 100 women candidates who have been trained by The Network of NGOs of Trinidad & Tobago for the Advancement of Women, a national "umbrella" organization for all women's organizations in the country, and a grantee of UN Women's Fund for Gender Equality. Potential candidates from across party lines go through a rigorous

eight-module training course, called "Train, Run, Win and Lead". They learn about the basic functions and responsibilities of government, communications, leadership and gender-responsive budgeting.

Arlene Ramdeo, 41, says the training gave her the confidence to speak in public spontaneously and in any setting. She also ran unsuccessfully in 2010 but was elected shortly after being trained in 2013, beating out three male contenders for the district of Erin, in the southwestern part of Trinidad.

With support from UN Women's Fund for Gender Equality, the Network of NGOs in Trinidad and Tobago is training women to be more effective in running for election. They seek to learn the rules, use the rules and change the system.

"Before, I could not speak to the public but when I finished that training, I was well versed," says Arlene. "They also showed us how to budget, how to listen to people first before you make a decision. That was very useful advice."

Hilary also describes the training as an eye-opener. "It helped me see that it was quite OK and acceptable for a woman to put herself forward. Before that it seemed that to be a woman and aspire to leadership was being 'pushy'." Since the training involved women from all the political parties, she says they learned that women could be rivals without being enemies.

“We learned to run a campaign without smearing anyone, no poison darts or throwing stones. I was able to focus on the positive, what I could offer, and be sympathetic to what I saw as failings of my predecessor.”

Since the beginning of the programme, there have been over 96 training sessions, including forums and symposiums on communications; governance and government responsibilities; gender budgeting and gender-sensitive policymaking; and strategies for running a campaign. The Network keeps in touch with all its participants thereafter, constantly offering specific sessions.

The programme aims to train and support at least 700 women by the end of the project cycle, including current and prospective women candidates in 14 municipalities and the Tobago House of Assembly (THA), general elections candidates, youth and activists. It seeks to bring about a process of change towards inclusive and participatory local and national governance with expanded capacity in the municipalities and THA for gender-sensitive planning.

Results of the programme are already visible. Half the training participants who opted to run in the 2013 local elections won seats, almost all formerly held by men.

The ultimate goal is to develop women’s political capacity to learn the rules, use the rules and change the system. It seeks to raise awareness among women about their right to equal access to, and full participation in, power structures and decision-making, as guaranteed in conventions and declarations subscribed to by Caribbean governments, such as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which the Network witnessed take shape at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995.

“The training, forums, workshops and networking opportunities not only build individual capacities in participants but foster an atmosphere for collaboration that allows for solutions to be identified that is beneficial to all,” says Terry Ince, Project Manager of the Network’s Women’s Leadership in Local Government Project.

In June 2013 a steering committee was formed for the creation of a women’s caucus made up of current and past councillors of all political parties. The committee fosters cross party collaboration with the common goals of engendering local government and empowerment of female councillors. Hilary is taking a leadership role in the shaping of the caucus and is one of the steering committee members.

UN WOMEN’S FUND FOR GENDER EQUALITY

The Fund for Gender Equality is a grant-making mechanism within UN Women dedicated to the economic and political empowerment of women worldwide.

Since its launch in 2009, the Fund has delivered grants of USD 56.5 million to 96 grantee programmes in 72 countries. Guided by UN Women’s mandate, the Fund supports civil society organizations based on strategic priorities to advance women’s rights and gender equality in their countries.

In 2015 the Fund will launch a third global call for proposals to support the post-2015 agenda.

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The Network has also offered technical assistance to women candidates vying for national party leadership, as well as to their campaign teams, and will run training programmes leading up to the 2015 parliamentary elections.