

# Paths to Empowerment: Women and Political Participation

*By Marilee Karl*

**P**olitical participation is a major path to women's empowerment: to increased decision-making power and greater ability to influence matters that affect our lives in the community and the larger society. In the broad sense, participation in politics goes far beyond electoral politics: voting and election to public office.

Women's political participation is greatest in grassroots and community organizations, in non-governmental and people's organizations, in feminist organizations and networks, in workers' movements and in other social and political movements for the transformation of society. Often comprising the majority of participants, women are in the forefront of the environmental, peace, human rights, consumers and other movements. Women have mobilized in massive numbers to contribute to liberation movements and movements for democracy.

When it comes to leadership and decision-making positions within most of these organizations and movements, women are a distinct minority. This situation, however, is beginning to change. The growing strength of the global women's movement and increasing gender awareness is forcing many organizations and movements to examine their explicit or implicit discrimination against women. Women are forcing not only male-dominated structures but also processes to change.

Moreover, women have successfully incorporated their perspectives into many organizations and movements and have brought their issues to the agenda. In the field of human rights, for instance, women successfully mobilized to bring women's rights as human rights onto the international agenda of the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in

June 1993 and incorporated their demands into the Vienna Declaration. This effort was the result of women's worldwide mobilization at the local, national, regional and international levels.

Women have also brought significant changes to movements for liberation and democracy, which in the past have frequently considered women's concerns to be secondary or divisive issues. Women have forced these movements to make the struggle against oppression of women a priority, to be carried on simultaneously with other struggles.

Further, women in non-governmental organizations and people's movements have refused to be confined to so-called 'women's issues' in the narrow sense, but are affirming the right to bring women's perspectives to all issues.

## **Women in electoral politics**

While women are increasingly mobilizing and empowering themselves in groups, organizations, networks and movements worldwide, women's participation in electoral politics is significantly smaller.

Although women have gained the right to vote and to be elected to public office - often through long, hard struggle - in most countries of the world they hold few elective

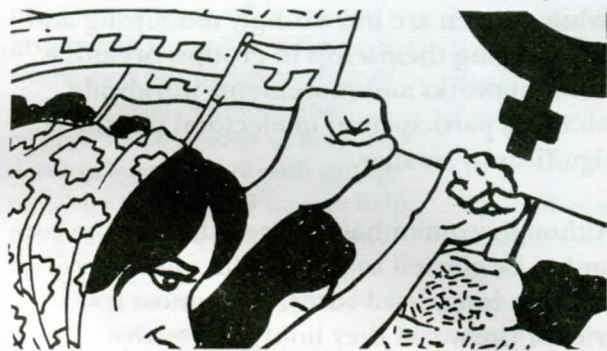




positions from the local to the national levels. Worldwide they comprise only 10 per cent of members of parliament. And while figures are difficult to come by at levels below national parliaments, women make up an extremely small minority of the representatives in legislative bodies at any level. The same is true for other elected or appointed political offices from village councilors to town mayors to cabinet ministers.

According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), which regularly gathers statistics on the numbers of men and women in parliaments, women held more than 20 per cent of parliamentary seats in only 11 of the 171 national parliaments that existed as of June 1993. Seychelles led the list with 11 women or 45.8 per cent of the 24 members of its single chamber. The other countries are: Finland (39 per cent), Norway (35.8 per cent), Sweden (33.5 per cent), Denmark (33 per cent), the Netherlands (29.3 per cent), Iceland (23.8 per cent), Cuba (22.8 per cent), Austria (21.3 per cent), China (21 per cent) and Germany (20.5 per cent). Women held less than four per cent of parliamentary seats in 36 countries.

Overall the total number of women parliamentarians in the world has dropped from nearly 13 per cent in 1989 to 10.1 per cent in 1993. The greatest decrease has been in the former socialist states of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union which have gone from one-party to multi-party systems. Some of the decreases have been dramatic, from 34 per cent to less than 4 per cent in Romania. One explanation for this is that the real power in these countries was not in the parliaments but in the decision-making bodies of the one party



that controlled the government. In these bodies, women accounted for only about five per cent of the leadership.

At the ministerial level, women hold only about four per cent of positions worldwide. In 1990, women held more than 20 per cent of ministerial posts in only four countries: Bhutan, Colombia, Norway and Sweden, ten per cent or more in another 17 countries, and no posts at all in over 80 countries. Most of the ministries headed by women are in the areas traditionally considered women's concerns, such as health, welfare, culture, education and women's affairs. Since such ministries often have a low priority in many countries, women in these ministries are hampered by lack of financial and human resources. Nevertheless, they have been able to make substantial contributions in these fields, but have been prevented from doing likewise by their exclusion from ministries in the areas of economics, finance, justice, defense and foreign affairs.

Although few women reach the position of president or prime minister of their country, several women have played prominent roles in world politics as heads of state or government. One need think only of Indira Gandhi or Margaret Thatcher. However, most women who have reached these positions are lone women at the top and few have made special efforts to clear the path for more women to reach high levels of government. An exception is Gro Brundtland who, as prime minister of Norway, appointed a cabinet with 50 per cent women.

### Obstacles to women's political participation

Why are there so few women in elected or appointed government positions? There are several major reasons for this. For one thing the whole political culture and style is male-





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dominated and alien to women. In most countries women have a shorter history of participation in electoral politics than men and less experience in campaigning, public debate and relations with the mass media. And many women are themselves ambivalent about entering the political fray.

When women do enter electoral politics, they face innumerable obstacles and deeply ingrained gender discrimination at all levels. This begins with political parties which are a major path to election or political appointment. While women make up a substantial portion of party membership in most countries, few women hold leadership positions and are seldom put forward as candidates for elections. Participation in party activities is frequently incompatible with family and household responsibilities which still fall mainly on the shoulders of women: for instance, meetings are held late at night and child care is not provided. Moreover, women face discrimination and exclusion from positions of power. Women have been able to band together to challenge this situation and demand change in only a few places.

Women's weak economic position is also an obstacle: few women have access either to substantial funds of their own or to other sources of funds, and generally lack the experience or the connections needed to raise the money for running a successful political campaign.

Women also encounter many obstacles on another major pathway to political participation: that of the national and international civil service. While women form a large portion of the secretarial and lower professional levels in many countries, they find their way blocked to high levels of the civil service by the usual manifestations of gender discrimination. Interestingly, in the United Nations system,

women make up about 40 per cent of the lower professional levels when entrance is through examination, but the percentage of women declines dramatically on the higher levels where positions are filled by appointment from middle-level professionals or from the outside.

Political power today is increasingly exercised by government bureaucracies and high political offices are often filled by appointments from the top levels of the civil service, so that women's exclusion from this sphere significantly weakens their opportunities for political participation and power.

Given the prevailing situation in electoral politics, many women have opted to work for political and social change outside the system. However, an increasing number of women have felt this work needs to be complemented by strengthening their positions within the political power system. Without decision-making power and control at all levels, the gains women have made are too easily ignored and eroded. Too many of the major economic and political decisions in the world are being made without the input of women. There is a growing conviction of the need to influence policy and political decisions not only through lobbying and other actions on the outside, but through wielding political power in decision-making positions too.

### What difference do women make?

Looking at the few women who have made it to the top in politics, it would seem that women politicians do not behave very differently from men in the same positions. While



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there are exceptions to this, women who are isolated in political positions, either because they are one of only a small percentage of women in politics or because they have no links with women's organizations, do not bring distinctive issues

or perspectives to the agenda. In fact, such women sometimes go to some length to deny that they might have any different concerns or ways of doing things because they are women. Many will announce plainly that "I am not a feminist". In their situations, any taint of feminism could be deadly to their political career. As a tiny minority among male politicians, women sometimes internalize the dominant male political culture and find that they have to be better than men at playing the male political game in order to succeed.

Women also represent a wide range of political views from left to right and women politicians are by no means all progressive. Many women in politics come from an elite and have more in common with men of their own class than with the disadvantaged majority of women. Moreover, women face a world dominated by powerful economic and political forces on which it is difficult for anyone to make an impact.

However, where there is a critical mass of women in politics - 30 per cent or more - as in several countries of Scandinavia, women can and do make a difference in politics, especially when they are linked with strong women's organizations. A strong women's movement and gender awareness in society also creates a climate in which women politicians are able to bring about changes in the political processes and issues.

A critical mass of women in politics can bring to the agenda issues of crucial concern to women which are often otherwise neglected or relegated to second place: contraception,

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abortion, violence against women, gender discrimination, maternity leave, child care. Women legislators are more responsive than men to the needs of all persons in society, especially women, children, the elderly, the other-abled, minori-

ties and the disadvantaged, and are more concerned with issues such as environment, education and welfare. A strong group of women in politics can make a difference by bringing women's perspectives to all issues on the political agenda: foreign affairs, economics, trade, justice, military, peace, etc.

Where there are significant numbers of women in public office, they have successfully transformed not only the political agenda, but processes. Studies have shown that women in politics tend to be more practical and realistic, more open to working collectively and to change. Women's perspectives and priorities change the working climate of politics and make it possible for both women and men to engage in political activity without having to sacrifice their personal lives and families.

### **Increasing women's participation in politics**

A number of strategies and mechanisms are being used to increase women's participation in electoral politics. Some of these are mechanisms set up by government, such as quotas, while others are arising from the collective action of women.

#### **Quotas**

In a few countries, quotas or reserved seats in legislative bodies have been established for women. Such measures are controversial especially because the numbers of seats set aside for women are generally insignificant. It is all too easy to fill these with token women and then dismiss the question of gender disparity. Quotas can also be interpreted as a



ceiling for women. Nevertheless, this mechanism may be the only way that women can get a start in politics in some places.

Quotas have been used more successfully to increase the number of women in the leadership of political parties and in their election lists, particularly where there is already a strong group of women within the party pressing for changes. In Scandinavia, women party members can use their strength to demand quotas as a means to achieve gender parity. Several parties in Norway and Denmark, for instance, provide that 40 per cent of candidates be women; and in some countries women are voicing the demand for 50 per cent in party leadership and electoral lists.

### **Women's branches of parties**

The influence of the global women's movement and growing gender awareness is changing the character of the women's sections of some political parties from the 'housekeeping branch' to strong organizations capable of making an impact on the party. Unfortunately, many women's branches are still limited mainly to pouring the tea and stuffing envelopes or, at best, to mobilizing the support of women for the party. Some women's organizations have also been coopted and weakened through absorption into the political party.

### **Women's political parties**

Women have formed their own political parties in a number of countries, including Canada, Germany, Iceland, Nigeria, the Philippines, Russia and Spain. For the most part, these parties have served mainly as a venue for women to come together to organize and train themselves to work in politics. Most of them have been short-lived and have made little impact. However, the recently formed Women in Russia Party, whose party platform

included the restoration of social benefits such as free medical care and child care, received eight per cent of the vote in the December 1993 elections and obtained 25 seats in the lower house of the Russian parliament.

### **Autonomous women's political organizations**

Women have also been organizing strong autonomous women's political organizations to support women candidates, lobby political parties, legislative bodies and governments, conduct educational campaigns, and provide training for women in politics. Some have been able to make alliances with political parties and other political organizations from a position of strength.

### **Women's units or ministries in government**

During the United Nations Decade for Women, many countries established women's ministries or units. However, most of these were poorly funded and had little or no power to influence policy. Rather than strengthening women, many succeeded only in marginalizing them further. Today some of these units have been strengthened and given a mandate to endure gender awareness in other government units and bodies. For this purpose, several such women's units have undertaken gender awareness training with men and women in various government bodies.

### **Associations of women in politics**

Women politicians have also organized themselves in caucuses or associations at different levels. On the international level, women members of the IPU have begun to hold a Meeting of Women Parliamentarians twice a year and have set forth demands for gender balance in its work and are developing a plan of action to address the imbalance of men and women in politics.

The strategies and mechanisms that women are using to

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increase their participation and power in politics are very specific to their particular situations and vary greatly from country to country and from local to district to national level. Women's efforts have resulted in only modest successes so far. Nevertheless, there is room for cautious hope for greater achievements in the future.



Women who have played a major part in movements for liberation and opposition to dictatorships have been keen to share the political power in the new governments. Although they are determined not to be dismissed once the struggle is over, the new governments have been, without exception, overwhelmingly composed of men.

In Namibia and South Africa women have been very vocal in their conviction that the new governments should not be sexist and that women must be fairly represented in them. Their efforts in this direction have included educational campaigns for women about their rights, gender awareness campaigns for both men and women, the formation of women's organizations that can act as training schools for women's political participation and as watch-dogs and pressure groups for women's rights in political parties and bodies. Women also called for a minimum of 30 per cent women among the candidates for election of the African National Congress (ANC) and formed coalitions for women's rights cutting across parties.

In Latin America where many countries moved from military dictatorships to parliamentary democracies in the 1980s, women have been

in the forefront of grassroots organizations and other political movements in opposition to the dictatorships. They found, however, that while almost all political parties gave lip service to women's rights, this was mainly a political ploy to get women's support and vote.

In Chile, women played a major part in the movement for the return of democracy and, as this gained momentum, women from all sectors and diverse political parties came together in an umbrella organization to formulate women's demands for inclusion in the party platforms. Their slogan was "For democracy in the home and in the country." However, the 1989 elections resulted in a parliament and government overwhelmingly dominated by men. In preparation for the 1993 elections, women strengthened their efforts to support the campaigns of women candidates and to build alliances with both men and women. One political action group, *Mas Mujeres al Parlamento* (More Women in Parliament), successfully supported the campaign of a woman running on an explicitly feminist platform.



## The challenges ahead

The road ahead is full of challenges for women's participation in politics. Strategies must be developed and strengthened to give women access decision-making positions within different political power structures. Strategies must also be developed to strengthen women as a constituency which can make its demands felt on political parties and governments and become a force to support women in politics.