

Mongolian Women Tackle Political Issues

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The past 70 years in the history of Mongolia have seen many accomplishments as well as failures regarding women in development. Following the 1921 Revolution, political equality between men and women was proclaimed and legally consolidated. Efforts were made to involve women in political decision-making.

Of those elected in 1931 to local public bodies, women accounted for 30 percent. Six headed the Aimag (provincial) administration. Sixteen women worked as ministers, deputy ministers and heads of government agencies. About 40 women led cooperatives and many of them worked as section chiefs at industrial enterprises as well as chairpersons of state farms. In 1949, 14 women were elected to the State Baga Hural, the country's legislature.

In the legal field, laws promulgated since 1921 have proclaimed equality between men and women in all spheres of life but in spite of these legal provisions, women still experience discrimination. During the totalitarian regime, laws only had a symbolic meaning because all powers were concentrated in the communist party. The country's legislative, executive and judiciary bodies served only as accessories. Although violation of laws was commonplace, women did not protest through the judiciary. The party, not the law, ran the country.

Unequal status of women most clearly appears in the implementation of women's right to vote and run for election. Legislative body members were appointed by the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP) while people's participation in elections was a mere formality. Women had no influence at all in legislative decision making. The attempt to expand women's representation at the govern-

ment level by officially imposed quotas and administrative methods turned out, in fact, to be nothing but an artificially invoked campaign.

Has Mongolia succeeded in the past half century to maintain and increase the level of participation of women in decision-making that it had achieved back in 1931? Why then are there only three women out of 76 members of the parliament and none in the recent government cabinet? How many women really participate in the decision-making process of Mongolia at this time? There is prevailing ignorance and lack of awareness of women's issues today.

In 1990, a multi-party political system was established for the first time in Mongolia, and free and fair elections to the parliament were held. In 1992, a new constitution was promulgated. During this difficult transition period from a centrally planned to a market economy, Mongolia is now confronted by post-socialism phenomenon. Now, accomplishments of the past 70 years tend to wear out and the mistakes, accumulated in this period, have aggravated. Women's political conditions are being shaped in an entirely new environment and yet their participation in decision-making is still decreasing. This phenomenon is characteristic not only of Mongolia, but also of other former socialist countries.

Mongolia does not have provisions for national focal points for women's issues and their corresponding implementation mechanisms. This failure is linked to the political repression of the period starting from the mid 1930s to the 1940s. This is one side of the problem. Without a proper understanding of the historical period when the communist party ideology was above the law, correctly defining women's problems today nor working out suitable policies to address these problems, would not even be possible.

Although many problems concerning women accumulated during the communist period, the MPRP waged a wide-ranging propaganda campaign declaring that its policy towards women achieved greater results than ever before, a campaign that continues up to now. The MPRP even blames democratic reforms as the primary cause for failure. The misrepresented statistical data and comparative achievements between the pre-revolutionary period (1921) and the present time artificially distort women's concerns. Women faced problems even before the 1989 democratic revolution.

In 1924, the women's organization was initiated by the MPRP. Like all public organizations in socialist countries, it was financed by the state. All working women were formally taken in as members. In reality, it had no political power and influence. In May 1990, a congress of the Mongolian women's organization was held to reorganize its structure and activities. The reorganization also brought a change in their name to the Mongolian Women's Federation. While the Federation has declared itself non-partisan, it supported the MPRP during the first democratic election of 1990 by mobilizing its staff to work during the election campaigns. This move lost the trust of Mongolian women which paved the way for the creation of other non-governmental and independent organizations and a revitalized feminist movement in the country.

For the first time, Mongolian women were involved in the democratic revolution. This new generation of women courageously participated in creating democratic processes and contributed actively to the political struggle. They played an important role in the 1990 and 1992 democratic elections to the parliament. Last summer the Liberal Women's Brain Pool (See networks, page 34), together with the women for social progress movement, launched an independent campaign supporting P. Ochirbat, the opposition's candidate for president. As a result of these activities, women have gained more exposure to politics. A recent phenomenon in Mongolia is the election of women as leaders of newly formed parties. However, the parties still need to adapt a new approach to women's issues and their participation in decision-making.

The following factors contributed to women's minimal participation in political decision making : 1) A system of social relations and subordination rooted in the male-dominated civilization, reflecting the orthodox male-centric mentality was introduced in Mongolia after the 1921 Revolution. 2) Experience shows that irrespective of the legal recognition of women's equality and the impressive number of educated women-professionals, in conditions where the whole nation lives in poverty, women have no real opportunity to participate in government. 3) A government policy on women's issues is lacking. 4) Only men were consistently educated and trained for leadership. Very few women had opportunities to pursue post graduate training, not because of restrictive policies but tradition. 5) Women themselves have been strongly influenced by male-dominated societies and have little faith in their own capabilities to take on top level leadership.

Hence, if women's issues are to be successfully dealt with in Mongolia, women's organizations should work towards transforming the social and mental attitude toward and of women and raise women's concerns as a political issue.