

Women and Governance: A Place at the Table

Zarrin T. Caldwell **OneWorld US**

"Striking changes in women's lives over the last 50 years have brought shifts in work roles, family lives, political and educational access, and social awareness. What is now more obvious than ever is what has not changed, or rather what has barely begun to change—namely, women's under-representation in positions of power and leadership."

***- Mary S. Hartman, Director
Institute for Women's Leadership***

The recent election of female presidents in Africa, Latin America, and Europe is being hailed by many as a seminal moment for the advancement of women in politics. But a deeper look at the current political gender balance shows that women still have a long way to go to gain an equal footing in the global halls of power.

Recognizing this, the international community has encouraged countries to keep at least 30 percent of seats in national parliaments reserved for women, as a stepping stone to a time when women will hold fully half the world's positions of leadership. Because women's priorities are usually different than those of men, they are more likely to press for laws that benefit families, women, children, and traditionally marginalized groups. Indeed, when women are full participants in the democratic process, there is greater likelihood that a society's policies will better reflect the needs of all its citizens. Beyond that, a 2005 report from the U.N.'s Millennium Project notes that, when women are well-represented on governing bodies, the overall quality of governance tends to rise and levels of corruption sink.



Political rally in Nigeria © Centre for Development and Population Activities

Taking Stock

According to world averages compiled by the international organization of national parliaments, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), only 15-16 percent of legislative seats worldwide were held by women as of November 2005. Regional averages are quite diverse—ranging from women holding some 40 percent of seats in the Nordic countries to only eight percent of seats in the Arab states. In Europe and the Americas, these figures hover at or just above the global average. According to U.N. documents, women's representation in parliaments rose in nearly 100 countries in the 1990s, while it declined in only 30. This tally includes impressive success stories like Rwanda,

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where women now hold 48 percent of seats in parliament. But from a global point of view, the aim to have nearly a third of all parliamentary seats reserved for women is still a long way off—only a handful of countries have actually met this target.

women as of November 2005

There have also been 27 elected women presidents and 42 women prime ministers since 1945. The elections of three more women heads of state—Angela Merkel in Germany, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in Liberia, and Chile’s Michelle Bachelet—made political waves in the latter part of 2005 and early 2006. Bachelet, for one, put women’s rights front and center in her campaign and has a record of improving laws for women relating to divorce, sexual harassment, and domestic abuse. Johnson Sirleaf is the first elected female president in Africa and managed to defeat a popular football star in Liberia’s first election after 14 years of civil war. But whether these new leaders have the will and capacity—given other priorities—to bring unique proposals to the table remains to be seen.

Gaining Local Power

Global trends in women’s participation in national governments are one barometer of change, but these statistics don’t tell the whole story. Women in positions of local power are often better placed to promote meaningful change than those at the highest levels. Women’s leadership on local governing councils (*panchayats*) in India, for example, has made them more responsive to “community demands for infrastructure, housing, schools, and health,” notes the Millennium Project. Current trends toward decentralization are expected to give more women an increased opportunity for political participation in local communities and, in fact, women’s participation in local politics is rising, with benefits expected to be seen by rural women in particular.



A women’s meeting in New Delhi, India © Peter Armstrong

wider networks, they can become transformational actors in their communities, notes the report.

Some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are working at these local levels and designing programs to encourage women to participate in the democratic process. A report on gender equity and political participation from the International Center for Research on Women and the Centre for Development and Population Activities (CEDPA) challenges the view that political power is fixed. It claims that giving women greater control over the circumstances that affect their own lives—through training, network-building, and consciousness-raising, among others—can both raise self-esteem and help women gain greater decision-making power. Once women realize that they can have this kind of power, especially in working with

The Nicaraguan NGO Cenzontle (Center for Democratic Participation and Development) provides a prime example of this kind of political empowerment. The group involved 150 women in interviews and workshops “to explore issues of power and self-esteem, gender equity, women’s rights, and leadership.” As a result of these programs, the women began to identify new roles for themselves in society and to take a more active part in public decision-making in Nicaragua, says the above-noted study.

Women and Peace

The international community has also started paying more attention to the important role of women in peacemaking. It was only recently, in 2000, that the U.N. Security Council passed Resolution 1325, outlining specific recommendations for member states to increase the participation of women in peace processes and, among others, ensure the protection of women and girls in situations of armed conflict.

In an address on the topic of women and peace in 2002, U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan noted that inequalities between women and men tend to be exacerbated during armed conflicts, that women and girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation, that women and children make up the majority of the world's refugees and displaced persons, and that women are often forced to provide domestic or sexual service to camps of armed forces. Annan went on to say, however, that women are also the key to the solution of conflict. Women's groups and networks, he said, have provided "imaginative strategies" and "flexible networks" for addressing conflict, and have worked to preserve "social order in the midst of chaos."

A 2005 report produced by the women's development fund at the United Nations (UNIFEM) notes that prospects for peace are improved by "tapping into women's understanding of the challenges faced by civilian populations." The report goes on to cite a number of examples where women have made distinctive contributions to peace negotiations, including forming the first cross-party parliamentary caucus, composed of both Hutus and Tutsis, in post-war Rwanda; catalyzing peace negotiations in Sri Lanka; and building trust between Protestants and Roman Catholics in Ireland as a foundation for the peace talks there.

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There are numerous examples of peace activities led by women, with women's organizations serving as an important catalyst for this work. One such effort is the Mano River Women's Peace Network, a network of activists from Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia, which encouraged women's participation in the peace process in West Africa. Among other successes, it was able to convince regional leaders to sit down for peace talks. (Their work was featured in CODEPINK's book, *Stop the Next War Now; Effective Responses to Violence and Terrorism*.)

There are also groups like the Four Mothers, which advocated for the unilateral withdrawal of Israeli troops from southern Lebanon and became one of the most influential groups in Israel. The Women Building Peace Campaign, which has documented some of these efforts, adds that "women are not simply passive victims. From Northern Ireland to Burundi, from the Middle East to Colombia, women are working towards constructing new visions of peace and security, which place human concerns at their centre." The Initiative for Inclusive Security (formerly Women Waging Peace) offers a wealth of other case studies from Bosnia and Herzegovina to El Salvador.



A peace rally in Washington, DC. © CODEPINK: Women for Peace

Despite this multitude of inspiring stories of women's involvement in peace processes, NGOs cite both progress and setbacks at the international level. Gender-sensitivity training for peace operations has improved and women

have become more involved in post-conflict reconstruction, explains a recent report from the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security. Nonetheless, it adds, “women are still often ignored or excluded from formal processes of negotiations and elections.” Limited resources—especially for training women on formal peace processes and for developing national action plans—hampers remaining work. Women’s groups point out that protecting refugee women and ensuring justice for victims of sexual violence in times of war are remaining challenges that need far more attention and resources.

Challenging Stereotypes

In looking at women and war in a broader context, Kavita Ramdas, president of the Global Fund for Women, asserts that an expansion of militarism—she uses American militarism as an example—is a threat to women’s security everywhere. “You essentially root out the feminine aspects of any culture as that culture becomes discordantly masculine, and that has huge repercussions on how women are treated,” she says. This raises the question of how to create a global culture where the qualities that both men and women bring to the table are better balanced.

Both male and female stereotypes hamper progress towards equality

Historically, it is men that have held power in society, and ingrained stereotypes about women have prevented them from taking their rightful place as equal partners—in areas such as peacekeeping, governance, and in corporate management. Despite better political representation for women in some countries, underlying negative attitudes about women’s leadership still exist. Although women’s relationship-building skills are gradually getting more attention, the more aggressive management traits associated with men have tended to take precedence in both the halls of government and in the boardroom. A recent survey of nearly 300 corporate leaders found that corporate thinking is dominated by male-held stereotypes that women are poor problem solvers (and therefore ineffective leaders). As such, women continue to have lower status than male counterparts—as evidenced by the fact that just over one percent of Fortune 500 CEOs are women.

But, stereotypes about women aren’t the only problem. There are stereotypes about men too that hamper progress towards equality. In many countries, for example, there are a lot of social pressures for men to resort to certain kinds of behaviors to demonstrate their “machismo,” or masculinity. This may impel them to be violent towards women, to sexually harass them, or to not take women’s leadership seriously. Innovative programs to redefine masculinity to include offering more support to women and families have been implemented (such as Program H in Brazil), but due to budget constraints and a sometimes broader cultural resistance to gender equity, such programs have generally been small in scale.

Adds the U.N. Population Fund’s “State of the World Population” report for 2005, “Gender equality, and the social transformation it implies, is most likely to be achieved when men recognize that the lives of men and women are interdependent and that the empowerment of women benefits everyone.”

Get Involved Today!

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