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## Let Women Rule

By Swanee Hunt

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Summary: Although women have made large strides professionally over the last century, politics remains a man's world. Significant barriers stand in the way of more women assuming positions of political leadership -- not least women's own attitudes. If serious efforts are not made to break down these barriers, the world will miss out on the benefits that women can bring to policymaking.

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### MISSING OUT

Women have made significant strides in most societies over the last century, but the trend line has not been straight. In recent interviews with hundreds of female leaders in over 30 countries, I have discovered that where women have taken leadership roles, it has been as social reformers and entrepreneurs, not as politicians or government officials. This is unfortunate, because the world needs women's perspectives and particular talents in top positions. In 1998, Francis Fukuyama wrote in *Foreign Affairs* that women's political leadership would bring about a more cooperative and less conflict-prone world ("Women and the Evolution of World Politics," September/October 1998). That promise has yet to be fulfilled.

Granted, a few women are breaking through traditional barriers and becoming presidents, prime ministers, cabinet members, and legislators. But even as the media spotlight falls on the 11 female heads of government around the world, another significant fact goes unreported: most of the best and the brightest women eschew politics. Women are much more likely to wield influence from a nongovernmental organization (NGO) than from public office.

Women are still severely underrepresented in governments worldwide. A recent World Economic Forum report covering 115 countries notes that women have closed over 90 percent of the gender gap in education and in health but only 15 percent of it when it comes to political empowerment at the highest levels. Although 97 countries have some sort of gender quota system for government positions, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, an organization that fosters exchange among parliaments, women fill only 17 percent of parliamentary seats worldwide and 14 percent of ministerial-level positions -- and most of those are related to family, youth, the disabled, and the elderly. At NGOs, the story is very different: women are consistently overrepresented at the top levels.

This pattern also holds for the United States, where 16 of 100 members of the Senate and 71 of 435 members of the House of Representatives are women. The United States ranks 68 out of 189 countries, behind a dozen in Latin America, in terms of the number of women in the legislature. Those low numbers are consistent with Capitol Hill's historic antipathy toward females. Women were denied the vote for 133 years, refused an equal rights amendment, and shut out of government-funded health research for decades. At the same time, American women have gravitated en masse toward NGOs, where they have found fewer barriers to leadership. The 230 NGOs in the National Council of Women's Organizations represent ten million American women, and women lead many of the country's largest philanthropic organizations, including the

Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Ford Foundation. As for academia, Harvard, MIT, and Princeton currently have women at the helm.

Most other countries follow a similar pattern. The number of NGOs in the former Soviet republics grew exponentially after the fall of the Iron Curtain, and women formed the backbone of this new civil society, but the percentage of women in eastern European parliaments plummeted. In Lithuania, that percentage declined from approximately 33 percent during the communist era to 17.5 percent in 1997 and 10.6 percent in 2004. According to a group of journalists in Kyrgyzstan, women head 90 percent of NGOs but hold not a single seat in parliament, even though they made up 33 percent of the legislature at the end of the Soviet era. In China, the Communist Party-controlled All-China Women's Federation functions much as an NGO does, engaging women across the country on community issues, but despite the government's claims of equality, Chinese women have rarely held positions of political power. Likewise, in South Korea, women run some 80 percent of the country's NGOs but occupy less than 14 percent of the seats in the National Assembly. The story is the same in Africa. According to Robert Rotberg, director of the Program on Intrastate Conflict and Conflict Resolution at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, "African women, who traditionally do the hard work of cultivation and all of the family rearing, also nurture NGOs and motivate civic initiatives. But they are widely expected to leave politics -- and corruption and conflict -- to men."

Women may thrive in NGOs. The world, however, needs them to take that experience into the political sphere. As the Sierra Leonean activist and former presidential candidate Zainab Bangura points out, "The real power isn't in civil society; it's in policymaking."

#### A WOMAN'S VIEW

Greater female political participation would bring significant rewards. Research sponsored by the World Bank has shown that countries with a high number of women in parliament enjoy lower levels of corruption. Another World Bank-sponsored study concludes that women are less likely to be involved in bribery and that corruption is less severe where women make up a large share of senior government officials as well as the labor force. A survey of research by Rachel Croson, of the Wharton School, and Uri Gneezy, of the University of California, San Diego, similarly concluded that women are more trustworthy than men. Consider Nigeria. The watchdog group Transparency International ranked it as the most corrupt country in the world in 2003. But that year, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala left her job as a vice president at the World Bank to become the country's finance minister, and by 2005 Transparency International was hailing Nigeria as one of 21 most improved states. Change came thanks to the indictment of corrupt officials, as well as to reform in banking, insurance, the foreign exchange market, pensions, and income taxation. Similarly, in Liberia, international policymakers have been heartened to see President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf prioritize the eradication of corruption. Knowing that foreign investment would flow only after a crackdown on the plundering culture of her predecessors, Johnson-Sirleaf fired the entire Finance Ministry staff and brought in women for the positions of finance minister, chief of police, commerce minister, and justice minister, among others.

Electing and appointing women to positions of political leadership turns out to be good for the broader economy as well. There is a correlation between women holding political office and the overall economic competitiveness of a nation. Augusto Lopez-Claros, chief economist and director of the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Network, argues that "the Nordic countries seem to have understood the economic incentive behind empowering women: countries that do not fully capitalize on one-half of their human resources are clearly undermining their competitive potential." The high percentage of women in parliament in countries such as Rwanda (almost 49 percent of members in the lower house), Costa Rica (40 percent), and Mozambique (35 percent) suggests that it is not simply a nation's affluence that causes more women to assume leadership positions. If that were the case, the relatively prosperous United States should be in the top ranks of countries sending women to Congress instead of lagging behind countries such as El Salvador, Nepal, and Tajikistan.

In 2000, an Inter-Parliamentary Union poll of 187 female politicians in 65 countries found that 80 percent of the respondents believed that increased representation of women renews public trust in government, which in turn helps economic welfare. The politicians cited examples from countries as varied as El

Salvador, Ethiopia, New Zealand, and Russia in which political activism by women led to "tangible improvements" in social services, the environment, the safety of women and children, and gender equality.

Worldwide, female legislators as a group tend to concentrate on helping marginalized citizens. In the United States, for example, Democratic and moderate Republican congresswomen are more likely than men to focus on socially conscious legislation. Perhaps female politicians take such concerns to heart because they have often honed their skills in the NGO arena. Chilean President Michelle Bachelet, for instance, returned from exile in 1979 to work with children of people who were tortured or who disappeared during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. South Korean Prime Minister Han Myeong Sook was a social activist (and political prisoner) during her country's military dictatorship.

The lessons women learn while leading civil society may also explain why they have "higher moral or ethical standards than their male counterparts," according to the International NGO Training and Research Center. Hannah Riley Bowles, professor of public policy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, found that when negotiating for jobs, American women asked for 15 percent less than men did, but when negotiating on behalf of others, women's demands increased substantially. (No such difference was found among male negotiators.) Carrying that tendency into the political sphere, "women may hold back when promoting their own candidacy or securing the resources they need to rise to the fore," argues Bowles. But they can be "fabulous advocates for their constituents."

Given these qualities, it is no surprise that women's involvement in political negotiations tends to solidify conflict resolution. "If we put women in leadership, they have a degree of tolerance, an understanding that allows them to persist even when things seem to be very bad," notes Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, a South African clinical psychologist who worked in grass-roots NGOs during apartheid and helped establish the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Unlike men, she continues, "women have the power and emotional inclination to hold onto hope when it comes to negotiating with former enemies." As documented by the Initiative for Inclusive Security, in numerous settings, women have joined forces across party lines to shape peace agreements, sponsor legislation, and influence the drafting of constitutions.

They also come to the table with a different perspective on conflict resolution. Women are more likely to adopt a broad definition of security that includes key social and economic issues that would otherwise be ignored, such as safe food and clean water and protection from gender-based violence. This sentiment was expressed to me by South Korea's Song Young Sun, the National Assembly's military watchdog. Most of the men she serves with define security as protecting South Korea's territory against North Korea, she said; she believes that security considerations should also include "everything from economics to culture, environment, health, and food."

## A MAN'S WORLD

If having women wield political power is so beneficial, why are there not more female leaders? A fundamental reason is that women themselves are not eager or willing to stand for political office. Women view politics as a dirty game, and their loftier standards may keep them away from the grit and grind of it. More than 200 public officials and NGO leaders throughout Kyrgyzstan responded to a 2004 United Nations Development Program poll by saying women would bring transparency, "a strong sense of responsibility," and "fair attitudes" to politics. But Nurgul Djanaeva, who heads a coalition of 88 Kyrgyz women's groups, bemoaned the situation: "The only way for me to feed my family, while working in government, is to be corrupt, so I'd rather work for an NGO and have a living wage."

It does not help that politics has traditionally been a man's world, and that many men -- and some women -- want to keep it that way. A woman may be considered "too soft" for political leadership -- or "unfeminine" if she runs. Often, however, it is women themselves who doubt their own leadership abilities. According to the 2000 World Values Survey, women comprised 21 percent of respondents in Chile and 45 percent of respondents in Mexico who agreed strongly with the statement that men make better political leaders than women do. This distinct lack of self-assurance persists across cultures. According to research by the political scientists Richard Lawless and Jennifer Fox, authors of *It Takes a Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for*

Office, American women were twice as likely as men to describe themselves as "not at all qualified to run for office," even when their credentials were equivalent. Only 25 percent of the women saw themselves as likely or very likely winners, compared with 37 percent of the men.

The traditional role society expects women to play does not spur them on to political leadership either. Reconciling political life with family commitments was the primary concern of the female politicians surveyed in 2000 by the Inter-Parliamentary Union. Women usually believe that their obligations to family members -- including parents and in-laws -- as the primary caregiver are incompatible with holding public office. Rebeca Grynspan, former vice president of Costa Rica, voices the dilemma: "Society doesn't provide conditions under which we can do our jobs with tranquility and leave our children home with peace of mind, even if we can count on stable, supportive partners." The pressures for women to stay home and tend to their families are compounded by conservative religious doctrines. A fundamentalist interpretation of Islam threatens women's nascent political hopes in countries such as Kuwait, where women gained the right to vote and run for office in the 2006 elections but did not win any parliamentary seats. Similarly, Afghanistan and Iraq, where new constitutions reserve a quarter of parliamentary seats for women, are in danger of backsliding into a collision with resurgent extremism. In the West, the Catholic Church in such countries as Croatia urges women to focus on family rather than public life. Likewise, most women in U.S. politics find their views incompatible with the religious right: in 2004, only two of the 14 female senators, compared with 48 of the 86 male senators, voted consistently with the Christian Coalition.

Even when women want to run for political office, they encounter roadblocks. In most countries, male political party gatekeepers determine candidate lists, and the ordering of candidates on the lists is a fundamental factor in determining who goes to parliament. It takes more than affirmative-action measures, such as quotas or reserved seats, to ensure women's places on those lists; it takes parties' will. According to the Harvard political scientist Pippa Norris, who analyzed the 1997 British elections, the Labour Party showed rare resolve in setting aside for women half of the seats from which members of parliament were retiring and half of those considered "most winnable." That move doubled the total percentage of women in parliament from 9.2 to 18.2 percent of all seats. More typical, however, is the complaint of a Bosnian politician who told me wryly that her place on her party's candidate list dropped precipitously, thanks to backroom hacks and men muscling their way to the top.

Money constitutes another barrier for women. Coming up with fees to file as a candidate or run a campaign can be daunting. Few countries have emulated the creation of organizations such as EMILY's List ("EMILY" stands for "Early Money Is Like Yeast"), which raises contributions across the United States for Democratic pro-choice women.

The financial squeeze can be further compounded by the threat of physical harm. According to Phoebe Asiyo, a prominent Kenyan member of parliament for more than a quarter century, the greatest expense for women running for parliament in Kenya is around-the-clock security, which is necessary because of the danger of rape, a common intimidation tactic. Mary Okumu, a Stanford-educated Kenyan public health expert, was beaten up when she stood for election in 2002. Okumu says that she and other candidates routinely carried concealed knives and wore two sets of tights under their dresses in order to buy more time to scream during an attempted rape. Male opponents were also at risk of physical attack, but Okumu says that "for women political aspirants the violence also includes foul verbal abuse, beatings, abduction, and death threats."

Given prevailing social norms and the numerous barriers to entry to the political arena, as well as women's own perception of politics as a dirty game, it is unsurprising that many women turn away from elected office, believing that they have a better chance of achieving results in the NGO realm. In 1991, as a child, Ala Noori Talabani fled on foot from Saddam Hussein's army. Fourteen years later, she was elected to the interim Iraqi National Assembly. She seemed a model legislator -- a well-educated, articulate former diplomat equally comfortable among villagers in Kirkuk, politicians in Baghdad, and policy analysts in Washington. Yet in 2006, she left politics in frustration to work with an NGO so that she could focus on the problems she cares about most: honor killings, domestic violence, and rape.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

The forces excluding women from political leadership are so strong that only a serious and comprehensive effort can bring about change. Fortunately, governments, foreign-aid organizations, think tanks, and academic institutions can stimulate both the supply of and the demand for women in the political arena.

At the most basic level, national governments should implement "family-friendly" policies, including straightforward measures such as easier access to daycare, flexible office hours, and limits to evening meetings. But in some countries, to be effective, policies will have to be designed according to more progressive interpretations of religious doctrine regarding gender roles. In 2004, Moroccan King Muhammad VI personally backed a new version of family law that was compatible with sharia and that gave women equal rights. His support of gender-sensitive legislation also increased women's political representation (from two in 2001 to 35 in 2002 of the 325 seats in parliament's lower house) and made Morocco one of the most socially progressive countries in the Muslim world. In May 2006, thanks to another of the king's initiatives, the first class of 50 female imams graduated from an academy in Rabat. They are expected to do everything male imams do except lead Friday prayers in a mosque.

NGOs and governments have an important role to play in equipping women with the confidence and skills necessary to run for office. Grass-roots programs could help recruit and train women across the political spectrum. The Cambodian organization Women for Prosperity, for instance, has prepared more than 5,500 female candidates for elections in Cambodia. Embassies abroad could encourage established female officials to mentor new candidates, learning from the Forum of Rwandan Women Parliamentarians. In 2006, Rwanda's female parliamentarians returned to their districts to rally women to run for local office, increasing the proportion of female mayors and deputy mayors in the country from 24 to 44 percent in one election. Outsiders ought to boost the profile of Liberia's Johnson-Sirleaf, the only elected African female head of state, who recently urged female officeholders, "Don't stop with parliament. Join me. I'm lonely." The Initiative for Inclusive Security, which has brokered relationships between hundreds of female leaders in conflict regions and thousands of policymakers, is a creative and strong model of an external player working to encourage women's political participation. And governments should look to replicate innovative political party reforms that ensure gender equality, such as those promoted by Michal Yudin's group in Israel -- WE (Women's Electoral) Power -- which has pressured Knesset members to increase funding for parties that exceed the quota for women's participation.

Supporting transparent and equitable campaign-finance rules would also help women in the political arena. Women told me that when they have to choose between their children's school fees or their own campaign, their children win. Government campaign subsidies spread across political parties help level the field. Governments should go further by rewarding parties that boost the representation of women on their candidate lists and penalizing those that do not.

Female politicians also need to be protected. In Afghanistan, where women running for parliament in 2005 were attacked, local and international organizations asked governors, chiefs of police, tribal elders, and other community leaders to provide security details. At least one candidate who reported threats had police protection 24 hours a day. Security measures reassured women that state and community leaders backed their right to engage in politics.

Finally, and most important, governments ought to support quotas for women at all levels of government. In systems with proportional representation, "zippering," requiring that a woman be in every second or third slot on a ballot, has helped raise women's numbers; still, women rarely appear in the top two ballot slots. Although quotas may initially result in female members of parliament being taken less seriously, the upside far outweighs the downside, since quotas propel women into politics. Sixteen of the 19 countries -- including Cuba, Iceland, South Africa, Spain, and Sweden -- that have parliaments in which at least 30 percent of the members are women have implemented either legislative or party quotas.

#### LESS SWAGGER, MORE SWAY

Women's community-based wisdom, fresh ideas, and commitment to the social good may be the best news in domestic policy today. They have much to contribute to decisions regarding the environment, security,

health care, finance, and education. In foreign policy as well, the world could use more sway and less swagger.

A critical mass of female leaders will change norms; that may be why President Bachelet appointed ten women alongside the ten men in her cabinet. Of course, there are exceptions, but generally speaking, stereotypical "feminine" qualities (such as the tendency to nurture, compromise, and collaborate) have been confirmed by social science research. The world needs those traits. With so many intractable conflicts, conventional strategies -- economic sanctions, boycotts, or military intervention -- have clearly proved inadequate. Women's voices would provide a call from arms.

None of these benefits to domestic and foreign policy, however, will be realized if just a few women reach positions of leadership. The few women who now make it to the top of a predominantly male hierarchy, and who do not come out of a women's movement, usually have attributes more similar to those of most men. Indira Gandhi, Margaret Thatcher, and Golda Meir had more "masculine" qualities than many of the men they bested, and they pushed little of the social agenda commonly of interest to women in politics. General wisdom about critical mass would predict that approximately 30 percent of officeholders have to be female for a significant effect to be felt on policy. As Anita Gradin remarked to me about her experience as a member of Sweden's parliament, the same group of women who were once in a small minority in the legislature talked, acted, and voted differently when their proportion increased significantly.

The more women shift from civil society into government, the more political culture will change for the better, and the more other women will follow. Advocates of women's leadership need to stop their handwringing over whether gender differences exist and appreciate the advantages women have over men's brawny style of governance, whether because of biology, social roles, or a cascading combination of the two. In the meantime, however, they will have to put up with some paternalistic responses, such as the one I received from a colonel at the Pentagon shortly after the United States' "shock and awe" attack on Iraq in 2003. When I urged him to broaden his search for the future leaders of Iraq, which had yielded hundreds of men and only seven women, he responded, "Ambassador Hunt, we'll address women's issues after we get the place secure." I wondered what "women's issues" he meant. I was talking about security.

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