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Conclusion

Julie Ballington

In 1965, women constituted 8.1 per cent of members of parliament globally. By 2002, this number had increased to 14.3 per cent. Nearly four decades have passed, and this minimal progress globally means that the ideal of parity remains a long way off.

In francophone Africa, the participation of women in parliament stood at 8.5 per cent in 2002 – lower than the global average. Even though some states, the international community and women's organizations have begun to implement broad strategies to further empower women politically, there are marked variations in the representation between countries. There remain many obstacles to overcome before gender equality in decision-making positions and women's participation in politics can be achieved. Moreover, for those women already in politics, the challenge is to be able to use their power effectively.

This handbook has sought to provide an overview of the achievements that have been made in increasing women's access to parliament. It has also highlighted key challenges that confront women seeking election to decision-making institutions, notably parliament. In so doing, it has suggested some concrete strategies that may be employed to overcome these obstacles, and to change the political environment and to promote one that will ensure gender equality. It has also sought to move beyond the quantitative dimension of political participation, to the qualitative aspects of enhancing women's parliamentary input and effectiveness. The six chapters in this volume, supported by country case studies from francophone countries and further afield, have dealt with different dimensions of the process, from overcoming the obstacles to parliament, to breaking down the barriers, to how they can input effectively in the legislative process.

Identifying the Obstacles

Many obstacles that impede women's access to parliament have been discussed in this handbook. Although some limited progress has been made in terms of women's representation in parliaments in francophone countries in recent years, women continue to be elected in lower numbers than men. Discussed in this volume are political, socio-economic and socio-cultural obstacles that women may face entering parliament. These include a prevalence of the "masculine model of politics"; a lack of cooperation with public organizations, including women's groups; and the absence of well-developed education and training systems to encourage women's leadership. Poverty and unemployment, or the dual burdens of balancing domestic tasks with professional obligations, continue to impact on women's political participation.

A "masculine model of politics"; a lack of co-operation with public organizations including women's groups, and the absence of well-developed education and training systems are some of the obstacles to women's political participation.

As in a number of countries in the region, in Burkina Faso many factors continue to work against the inclusion of women in politics. These factors include traditional stereotypes about the place of women, and the conception that the

public sphere is an arena mainly for men. This is entrenched by the sexual division of labour, which in many instances confines women to domestic and maternal tasks. In the Arab world, the prevalence of male-dominated political frameworks, a relatively low level of gender awareness and inadequate networking strategies with women's organizations continue to constitute obstacles for women entering public life.

Although the role and functioning of political parties is questioned in many countries, they remain central to representative democracies, promoting essential competition on ideological and policy alternatives. They are the main vehicles by which citizens elect or dismiss governments, maintaining firm control over the nomination of candidates for elected office. Importantly, political parties are a key variable in the advancement of gender equality in decision-making. As political parties are the gatekeepers to elected office, they hold the key to the political advancement of women. The stage at which party gatekeepers choose the candidates is perhaps the most crucial for getting women into parliament. So long as political parties remain highly gendered institutions, women's access to leadership positions will be impeded. Although some parties are taking measures to address the low number of women in their ranks, the rate of progress remains slow. Political parties also need to provide sufficient financial resources for women candidates.

Electoral rules weigh on women's chances of election. Countries that use proportional representation electoral systems tend to elect women in larger numbers than countries with majoritarian electoral systems. Chapter 3 showed that in PR systems, political parties are encouraged to "balance their party tickets" to include candidates from different social groups, including women, in order to attract voters. Where women are placed on political party lists, and whether the lists are open or closed, also has an important effect on the representation of women. By contrast, in majoritarian systems political parties field candidates who have a realistic chance of winning, but in many instances, political parties identify men as their top candidates.

While the list PR system affords the opportunity to promote women candidates through the use of lists, this is only possible if political parties actively promote the candidacies of women. In many francophone countries, the low number of women candidates, and the placement of women candidates in low positions on party lists, continues to impede women's chances of election.

Breaking Down Barriers

With regard to the increasing political participation of women, there is an increasing awareness and optimism about the use of quotas and affirmative action strategies. In many countries, important advances have been made where women have lobbied political parties to adopt quotas rules for internal elections or in the form of reserved seats. A notable example is France, where the adoption of the parity law requires the equal access of women and men to all elected positions. Affirmative action mechanisms such as quotas have the potential to significantly increase the number of women elected to legislatures, and thereby support the achievement of a critical mass of women.

However, it must be remembered that the quota system is not enough, as the comparative case study on quotas in this volume demonstrates significant country variations in their composition and implementation. The effect of quotas depends upon political parties' adherence to them, the nature of the enforcement mechanisms and the general culture of the organizations to which they apply. If women are not nominated for election in large numbers, and placed in "electable" positions on political party tickets, their numbers will continue to lag behind those of men. South Africa is a good example where the adoption of informal party quotas by the country's ruling party, and the placement of women in "electable" positions on party lists, has resulted in an increase in the number of women in parliament. On the other hand, in Senegal some political parties have expressed their commitment to political party quotas for women, but they have not been applied in a systematic way. Strict enforcement mechanisms are required to ensure their proper implementation. In India, the adoption and implementation of reserved seats for women in local village councils has been successful. However, the debate still continues about the adoption of reserved seats or quotas at the national level.

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An important factor which can help increase the number of women seeking election is the nature of the women's movement and organizations that focus on, and support, women's political participation. Important advances have been made where there is coordination and organization between women MPs and their political parties, as well as between

MPs and interest groups outside parliament. Women's organizations can provide women politicians with a support base, support their candidacies and help build confidence. Women's organizations may also provide necessary support and resources to launch a successful campaign, and increase visibility and legitimacy. These initiatives can be further supported by international organizations such as the IPU, which can play an important role in caucusing, networking and enhancing the work of women parliamentarians. The IPU also stresses the need for partnership between women and men as an important factor to accomplish change and impact on politics.

Making an Impact

Moving beyond the questions of numbers necessitated an examination of what women can do once they are in parliament and how they can make a difference. Women's presence in Parliament can make a difference in redefining political priorities and setting the agenda. Women need to learn the rules of the parliamentary system, and to use them to promote women's interests and influence on decision-making processes. To support women's endeavours to change the rules or discourse of parliament, training and orientation exercises may be needed to enable women to distinguish between women's issues and women's perspectives, and to network with the media and women's organizations.

A number of strategies may be considered to change the rules. These may include the establishment of a national machinery to monitor implementation of policy and to give support to women's caucuses, implementing a quota within parliamentary committees in which there is an under-representation of women, and expanding legislation to include emerging issues of interest to women. Further strategies that may help women make impact in politics include general awareness raising; research and training for women, targeting the media and constant caucusing and networking between MPs, organizations and interest groups working to enhance the political participation of women.

For example, in South Africa institutional changes to the workings of parliament since 1994, such as the development of a women's budget initiative and the creation of national machinery (including the Office on the Status of Women and the Commission on Gender Equality) have ensured that the interests of women are taken into account in the development and implementation of government policies. In Norway, the political participation of women rests on a widely shared credo that gender constitutes an important political category that should be fully represented in politics.

Lessons Learned

The most obvious lesson learned is that women are not yet close to reaching a critical mass in parliament. Although some progress has been made, the variations across continents are pronounced. In Africa, at one end of the spectrum are countries like Mozambique and South Africa where the adoption of informal quota systems by the ruling political parties has served to dramatically increase the participation of women in Parliament up to 30 per cent. Within francophone Africa, the Seychelles and Senegal are close to reaching a critical mass of women with 23 per cent and 19 per cent respectively. However, the majority of countries in Francophone Africa have less than 10 per cent representation of women.

In South Africa, the implementation of a political party quota by the ruling party has served to dramatically increase the participation of women in parliament to a critical mass of 30 per cent.

In Francophone Africa, high levels of poverty and social exclusion not only threaten the consolidation of democracy in many countries, but also directly affect the position of women and the opportunities for improvement of their status. The processes of transition to democracy and consolidation in the region have not automatically translated into more women in power, nor is gender equality included in the political agenda of all countries.

In order for women to campaign effectively with men, political and economic resources are required. At the stage of being elected onto a party ticket, a certain amount of resources are needed for canvassing and to build name recognition. In an increasingly personalistic style of electioneering, access to adequate campaign funding is needed for women to campaign on an equal basis with men.

Therefore, greater social mobilization around the issue of gender equality needs to be generated. Civic and voter education by NGOs, civil society campaigns, grass-roots engagement and advocacy and networks of women parliamentarians are critical in the process of consolidating women's power and in helping them use it effectively. The

monitoring of implementation of international commitments as well as strategies to put in place the institutional machinery required for advancement of women should be part of any concerted effort to improve women's access to power.

Likewise, expansion of the pool of women candidates is required. All too often, many of the women who have entered and remain in politics have been part of an elite class that needs to be expanded across cultural, social, political and economic divides. In francophone Africa, training, political skills, securing access to media and resources are key in supporting women as candidates, getting them elected and helping them reform the political agenda.

With regard to the media, it is vital to create and encourage an awareness about the issue of gender equality, and to highlight the issues of concern for women and men. The media has an important role to play to enhance the image of women MPs and to educate and mobilize the electorate. Further research is required on the attention and coverage the media gives to women's participation in politics in the region.

Within the ranks of parliament, some positive progress has been made. In South Africa, the rise in the number of women has coincided with the adoption of laws on a number of social issues of special relevance to women, such as laws on equal rights and opportunities regarding labour, maternity laws and healthcare. However, challenges remain in terms of transforming the rules governing the functioning of parliament, forming intra- and inter-party alliances of women, and changing the attitudes of male parliamentarians. The establishment of institutional gender machinery has had a positive effect in many countries, and is an important means to support political reform. However, in some countries further work remains to be done support the effective functioning and funding of these institutions.

In this context it is apparent that advancing the women's agenda is still predominantly in the hands of women, including women MPs and members of civil society. Therefore, the participation and involvement of men in achieving the full inclusion of women in political life is necessary. Translating the power of numbers into the power of reform, in partnership with men, is required.

The Road Ahead

The diverse contributions in this volume raise many areas where further investigation is indeed required. For example, it is apparent that the different ways in which women can affect political processes, and their achievements in this regard, remain an area that requires further research. Today, questioning of what women bring to politics and their achievements in this regard, is sometimes prevalent. Furthermore, how women ensure an impact on the political process beyond their formal representation in parliament remains an area for further investigation.

It is also evident that there are important experiences regarding the use of quotas from which we can learn. Today, many proponents see quotas as an important measure to quickly, and effectively, increase the representation of women. Yet the experiences in this volume highlight that quotas hold the potential but by no means guarantee the effective increase in women legislators. Important to consider are enforcement and placement mandates of quotas, otherwise all too often they are ignored by political parties.

Equally significant and requiring attention are the development and implementation of policies that target economic and social inequalities, the allocation of resources to achieve gender equality, the design and establishment of the institutional machinery for implementation of policies, and monitoring mechanisms for compliance with commitments both at the national and international level. Although some progress has been made with regard to affecting the legislative agendas in francophone Africa, there is still a way to go to effectively make 'inroads' in parliament to ensure that social transformation takes place that benefits all citizens.

The strategic objectives stated in the Beijing Platform for Action provide the basis for concerted efforts toward achieving equal opportunities and access to power for women. Included in the concrete goals established by the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations is the achievement of a 30 per cent representation of women at all decision-making levels. Equality is a democratic value that societies must hold and nurture. The need for public policies to achieve gender equality continue to require strong attention and action. It is now time to translate legal equality into de facto equality. Without the participation of women in social and economic development, the challenge of building inclusive democracies will continue to be an elusive one.