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Introduction

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«Women's equal participation in decision making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken into account.»

Beijing Platform for Action, 1995

The equal participation of women and men in public affairs is one of the fundamental tenets of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979, and in force since 1981. Today, more than 20 years after the signing of the Convention, with 165 ratifications by states, and at the dawn of the new millennium, women in all parts of the world continue to be largely marginalized and underrepresented in politics.

In 1995, the Beijing Platform for Action identified "inequality between men and women in the sharing of power and decision-making at all levels"¹ and "insufficient mechanisms at all levels to promote the advancement of women", as two areas of critical concern where action was crucial for the advancement of women. In 2002, despite the gains on the legal front in both international and domestic law, and years of activism and mobilization, women's participation in politics on an equal footing with men is still a challenge to democracy.

Today, the linking of democracy with gender equality is a generally accepted principle. An essential tenet of any democratic framework is the principle of human rights, including the political rights of both men and women. The development of any political agenda that does not include the perspectives, views and experiences of those who will be affected is no longer credible. Yet in spite of efforts over the centuries by prominent women – and some men – the recognition and exercise of women's political, economic and social rights, is by no means equal between women and men.² Women constitute half of the world's population, comprise 50 per cent of the labour force, yet make up one billion human beings living in poverty. Decision-making and priority setting continue to be largely in the hands of men.

W*omen want to influence the decisions that affect their lives and the lives of their families, the political economy and the destiny of their communities and nations, as well as the structure of international relations. Political participation and representation is essential for the achievement of these ends.*³

Globally, women constitute 14.3 per cent of parliamentarians. Most regions, on average, have percentages similar to the global average, with the exception of the Nordic countries, where women have secured, on average, nearly 40 per cent representation in the legislative bodies. At the other end of the spectrum are the Arab countries, where a mere 4.6 per cent of legislators are women.⁴ Latin America is no exception to the global trend. With an average of 15 per cent representation of women in the lower chambers of legislative bodies, the region reflects the fact that women's inclusion and full participation in the public sphere constitutes one of the most important challenges in terms of participatory democracy and equitable development.

In this context, there is much work ahead: there is a need for firm government actions, commitment by the political parties, and social transformation in the perceptions that have dominated our constructions of societal relations. There is a need to leave behind the traditional norms and perceptions of the position and role of women and men in society. The quality of women's participation in politics will also be valued when there is a shift in traditional perceptions of power

and by dispelling notions that public life is largely reserved for men. A key challenge for Latin America is the continued consolidation of democracy that includes and supports the participation and mobilization of women from different societal statuses and origins. We hope that this handbook contributes effectively in confronting this challenge, by providing shared experiences, strategies and opportunities for international and regional solidarity.

Aim of the Handbook

Given International IDEA's mandate to contribute to the ongoing debate on how to advance gender and democracy issues in general, and responding to the need of how to promote women's equality and representation in particular, the *Women in Parliament: Beyond numbers* handbook was produced as part of the work programme in 1998. The aim of the handbook is to present in an accessible manner the ways in which women can impact on political processes through their participation, and to identify the specific needs of women parliamentarians and the areas in which they require further assistance and information.

The handbook builds on the many analyses that have been conducted with regard to increasing the participation and political representation of women. Yet it also seeks to move beyond the question of numbers by examining strategies that may enhance the impact of women politicians. A variety of insights and methods are presented from different political, social, economic and cultural contexts. Consistent with International IDEA's approach, the handbook does not prescribe the best way of achieving change, but is rather a tool that presents a range of strategies and options for reform and action.

Regional Versions

Since its release in English in 1998, there has been an overwhelming interest and demand for the *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers* handbook from those advocating for change around the world. Responding to the request for the translation of the handbook into different languages, International IDEA has embarked upon a series of regional versions, commencing with this, the Spanish version for Latin America. The structure and comparative content of the original handbook has been mostly retained, including updates and revisions to the text that have been required since it was first published in 1998. As a means of providing further practical examples and information from the region for which it is intended, this handbook features the addition of a regional overview chapter on women in power in Latin America, and national case studies illustrating the situation of women legislators in different parts of the region.

In particular, the experience of women members of national legislatures is brought to the fore in this version through their contribution as authors of country case studies. The handbook is targeted to a wide range of actors working to promote the participation and representation of women in political structures. This includes foremost women members of parliament, or those campaigning for elected office. Also targeted are members of civil society including activists, academics, researchers, journalists and other stakeholders working to advance women in politics.

Outline and Focus of the Handbook

The handbook retains its focus of examining firstly how to increase the numbers of women in parliament, and secondly and importantly, presenting examples and experiences of how women can affect political processes working through parliamentary structures. Yet beyond just focusing on changes and effects of what are often viewed as "women's issues", it also examines change processes in the broader context of policy and legislation relating to political, social and economic issues. The themes of identifying the key obstacles that affect the entry of women to parliament and strategies that may be used to overcome them are addressed. Furthermore, mechanisms that help women affect the political processes in parliaments, are also examined. With these themes in mind, the handbook focuses on the following key areas.

Women in Power in Latin America: Chapter 1 presents an overview of women's political participation in Latin America. This overview analyses the main obstacles that limit Latin American women's access to political power, presents affirmative action strategies that have been adopted in the region to overcome these obstacles, and examines the impact that the presence and participation of women in the legislature has had on public policy design and implementation.

Obstacles to the Participation of Women in Parliament: All too often, women who want to enter politics find that the political, public, cultural and social environment is not conducive to their participation. Chapter 2 identifies the problems that affect women's political participation in the legislature, categorized into political, socio-economic and

psychological factors.

Legislative Recruitment and Electoral Systems: How political parties recruit their candidates, together with the nature of the electoral system, greatly affects the political representation of women. Chapter 3 examines the process of recruitment of candidates by political parties for election which is perhaps the most crucial stage for getting women into office. Together with this, the chapter also examines how electoral systems can affect women's political representation.

Applying Quotas: Today, quotas are one of the most effective means of ensuring women direct access to political power. Chapter 4 explores the concept of the quota system, and how it has come to play a critical role in increasing women's representation. It provides the various arguments for and against the use of quotas, and provides comparative examples of their implementation in countries around the world.

Making a Difference in Parliament: Despite their limited numbers in most regions in the world, women parliamentarians can be effective in parliament, and their actions can have a political impact. Chapter 5 shifts the focus from increasing the numbers of women, to how women can strengthen their decision-making power in the legislature, providing examples of how to act on these issues.

International experiences (IPU): There are many important experiences to be shared from International organizations working in the field of women in politics. One such organization is the Inter-Parliamentary Union, which has taken the lead in compiling comparative information on women in politics. Chapter 6 examines the work of the IPU on women's political participation and the formation of gender alliances, and presents some of the IPU's recommendations in this regard.

Case studies: Ten country case studies are presented in this handbook, six from Latin America and four from other parts of the world. The case studies from the Arab countries (Chapter 2), India (Chapter 4), Norway and South Africa (Chapter 5) reflect the diverse social, political and cultural conditions of each country, and recent advances in terms of women's participation in politics. The case studies are intended to support the arguments presented in the chapters.

The case studies from Latin America – Argentina, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, and a comparative case study on quotas – illustrate the obstacles women encounter en route to political power and provide examples of strategies for overcoming them. The case study on Ecuador (Chapter 1) examines women's political participation, with an emphasis on the challenges of integrating indigenous women into the country's political life. The study on Guatemala (Chapter 2) analyses the structural causes and norms that keep women from participating in politics, and in particular in the legislature. The case studies on Argentina and Costa Rica (Chapter 3) present the different legal and social mechanisms that have been established to increase the number of women elected, and examines the role political parties have played in ensuring women's political participation. Chapter 4 presents a comparative regional study, which examines the use of quotas in Latin America as an expression of the processes of democratization in the region, analysing the success stories and identifying challenges to their effective implementation. Finally, the case study on Colombia (Chapter 5) examines the general context and obstacles to women's effective participation in Congress, suggests various strategies to change the current political status of women, and presents lessons learned regarding women's impact in Congress.

This handbook is an attempt to bring together information that will be useful for researchers, politicians and activists working to advance gender equality in decision-making bodies. It covers a great many perspectives and issues, in addition to proposing strategies, all with the objective of transcending mere facts and figures on women's political representation. Through this handbook, International IDEA hopes to contribute to the debate on equitable representation in the different legislative bodies, an issue which must be addressed in Latin America and elsewhere in order to consolidate genuine democracy with the rule of law in which both men and women affected by political decisions are involved in the decision-making process.

Endnotes

¹ United Nations, *Declaration and Platform of Action*. 1995. Beijing. Paragraph 44.

² UNDP. 1995. "Gender and Development". In *Human Development Report*. New York: UNDP.

³ UNDP. 2000. *Women's Political Participation and Good Governance: 21st Century Challenges*. Available on the internet at <http://magnet.undp.org>.

⁴ Inter-Parliamentary Union. February 2002. *Women in National Parliaments*. Available on the internet at <http://www.ipu.org>.