Conclusion

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In 1965, women constituted 8.1 percent of the members of Parliament. In 2002 this number had increased to 14.5 percent in the lower houses of parliament. Nearly four decades have passed in the interim, and this slight progress indicates that the ideal of parity for women in parliament remains a long way off.

In South East Asia, the representation of women has increased from 10.2 percent in 1990, to 12.7 percent two decades later. The increase in the numbers of women in parliament is not spread evenly across the region. There has been some significant progress, notably in Philippines where the total for women's representation in parliament is 17 percent, yet in most cases the numbers of women in parliament has stagnated, or indeed even declined. There are many obstacles to overcome before gender equality in decision-making positions can be achieved. Moreover, for those women who have made a life in politics, the fundamental challenge they face is how to use the power they hold effectively.

This handbook provides an overview of some of the achievements that have been made in increasing women's access to parliament. It has also highlighted the key challenges that continue to confront women seeking election to decision-making bodies, notably parliament. The six chapters in this new volume are supported by specific case studies from countries in South and South East Asia, from Scandinavia, Africa and the Middle East, which deal with different dimensions of the political process. They identify the many obstacles that hinder women's access to parliament, and highlight some successful strategies women have used to enter and affect change in the legislative process.

Identifying the obstacles

Many obstacles have been identified that impede women's political participation, including political, economic and socio-cultural barriers. In particular, these include the prevalence of the "masculine model of politics", a patriarchal culture, the absence of well-developed education and training programmes to support women candidates, and a lack of coordination with public organizations, including women's groups and organizations. The dual burden of balancing domestic tasks with professional obligations and lack of control over financial resources also impact women's political participation.

Although the role and functioning of political parties is being questioned in many countries today, they remain central to representative democracies, promoting essential competition on ideological and policy alternatives. By maintaining firm control over the nomination of candidates, political parties play a determining role in women's access to parliament and decision-making positions within political institutions. The stage at which the party secretaries choose the candidates for election is perhaps the most crucial for determining whether women will enter parliament. So long as political parties remain institutions dominated by men, without clear and transparent rules for the recruitment of candidates, women's access to decision-making positions will remain restricted. Although some parties are taking measures to address the low number of women in decision-making bodies by adopting affirmative action strategies, the rate of progress remains slow. Political parties need to be more proactive in training and promoting women candidates to contest elections, and by providing sufficient financial resources for women.

Electoral rules can also affect the chances and opportunity for women to compete in elections. Countries that have adopted proportional representation systems (PR) tend to field more women candidates than countries with a majoritarian electoral system. Chapter 3 has demonstrated that in PR systems, political parties are encouraged to appeal to a wide constituency by including candidates from different social groups, including women. However, the structure of the lists for legislative candidates greatly affects women's representation. Women have greater chances of being elected if they are placed high on party lists. By contrast, in majoritarian systems, political parties field candidates who have, in their view, a realistic chance of winning, and in most instances, political parties identify men as their preferred candidates.

Breaking Down Barriers

Women in several countries have lobbied political parties to adopt quota rules for internal party elections and for popular elections. Quotas are an effective mechanism for bringing about change within the parliamentary system, if they are properly enforced and applied by political parties. In other instances, reserved seats have been used in some countries to redress the under-representation of women.

Pakistan provides an interesting example of the use of quotas at the local level. Quotas for women are not new to Pakistan, where they are popularly known as "reservations". The lively debate about the type and percentage of quotas at the national level is still ongoing. In South Africa, a political party quota has been adopted by majority African National Congress party to ensure that 30 percent of all candidates forwarded for election at the national and local level are women. This measure has served to dramatically increase the number of women in decision-making bodies.

The adoption of these affirmative action measures has opened doors for socially disadvantaged and marginalized groups that otherwise had limited access to decision-making bodies. However, it must be stressed that the quota system is not enough, because its implementation varies significantly from country to country. The effect of quotas to a large extent depends upon the adherence of political parties and to the firmness of the enforcement mechanisms. If the number of women nominated is small and dependent on the total number of "places" provided for them on party tickets, their numbers will continue to lag behind men.

Women's movements and organizations that support women's political participation can play an important role. Women's movements were shown to have played an important role in South Africa's democratization process and in Norway's successful struggle for gender equality. Women's organizations can provide women politicians with a support base in the form of training and in developing skills, in building confidence and in developing a knowledge base that will enable them to create gender sensitive legislation. Women's organizations may also provide advisory and financial support during campaigns, and increase the visibility and legitimacy of candidates by stressing gender issues and improving gender awareness. These initiatives can be further supported by international organizations such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), which can play an important role in collecting data, forming women's caucuses, building networks and enhancing the work of women parliamentarians. The IPU also stresses the need for partnership between women and men as an important strategy to accomplish change and impact on political structures and mechanisms.

Women leaders committed to achieving gender equality have adopted some successful strategies by establishing women's caucuses in many countries, and have thereby increased the network of women's organizations, encouraging them to stand for elections and to be active in the political arena. Increased gender awareness and commitment by women's organizations has created pressure groups that influence established political institutions. Women's organizations also serve as resource groups for women candidates and parliamentarians. There is a lively debate occurring these days about the need to increase women's political representation as soon as possible through affirmative action and quotas, and this polemic is very much supported by these organizations.

The media also plays a vital role in creating and promoting increased gender awareness, to educate and mobilise the public and to increase the awareness and need for equality between the sexes. The media should not generate and reproduce gender stereotypes through their reporting. It is important to project women as serious and responsible politicians concerned with the whole political process and not the so-called "soft" issues.

Making an Impact

It is important to highlight that women's increased political participation not only refers to increased numbers in parliament, but also must be judged by their increased effectiveness and impact, as seen in how women influence changes in institutional rules, norms and practices and increased rights for other women to redress gender disparities and improve the quality of women's lives.

Women's presence in parliament can make a difference in redefining political priorities and setting the political agenda. However, to be effective they must adopt a strategic approach. Women need be encouraged to learn the rules and procedures of the parliamentary system, to use them effectively to promote women's interests and generally influence decision-making. To support women's endeavors to change the rules and discourse of parliament, training and orientation program may be needed. Women parliamentarians may consider developing networks and relationships with the media and women's organizations.

By learning the rules of the game, women are using this knowledge to promote women's issues and concerns, thereby paving the way for a new generation of women to enter the legislative process.

Through the adoption of this kind of strategy, women can act to change legislative rules and procedures. These strategies could include establishing a national machinery to facilitate dialogue with the women's caucus and monitor implementation of gender sensitive policies and legislation. It is also important to consider how to raise awareness, conduct research, conduct training for women, target the media and strengthen the women's caucuses and networks to involve women parliamentarians, civil society organizations and other groups, so as to increase women's political participation.

Lessons Learned

There are many lessons to be drawn from the experiences of women in South East Asia and around the world. Although participation and percentages of women in parliament have shown some increases, it is very clear that there are pronounced variations across the region. The struggle for gender equality is an ongoing campaign, and there is a long road ahead to the achievement of a critical mass of women in parliament.

The Malaysian example demonstrates how women seized the opportunity created by the economic crisis to play active roles within the reform movement in 1998. The crisis overturned conditions and opened a door for women to become involved in politics. This positive development has generated not only a higher visibility for women in parliament, but also increased the numbers of women in important decision-making positions. However, despite some positive changes, it is apparent that gender disparities are still an issue that needs to be fought against, and that gender awareness still needs to be raised.

In Indonesia and India, the representation of women in parliament has recently declined. In Indonesia, the number of women decreased from 13 percent in 1987, to 8.8 percent in 1999. In India the number of women in parliament has decreased by 1 percent (from 9.8 percent to 8.8 percent) between 1991 and 1999. This decline is attributed to a number of factors, from changes inside the political parties to changes in the political and parliamentary structures. Women's dual burden of meeting the demands of the household and fulfilling public responsibilities is another inhibiting factor. Other important factors include:

- Patriarchal structures and attitudes that permeate political life;
- Lack of party support;
- Limited social and financial support for women candidates;
- Limited access to political networks;
- Lack of contact and cooperation with other public organizations such as business groups, civil society organizations and women's organizations and parliamentarians;
- The absence of a well-developed education and training system to promote women's leadership in general and for orienting women towards political life in particular, and
- The nature of the electoral system, which may or may not be favorable to women candidates, and inconsistency about the existence of affirmative action strategies to increase the presence of women in parliament or in other institutions of this type.

A further lesson is the role played by NGOs and other organisations that provide support to parliamentarians. These groups can provide training for candidates as well as voters, and help to create useful networks for women both inside and outside parliament. Civil society organisations are also an important means for helping parliamentarians remain in contact with their constituencies, keeping them focused on the crucial issues, and increasing their effectiveness in the political arena.

In this context, it is apparent that the job of advancing the women's agenda is still predominantly in the hands of women be they parliamentarians or members of civil society. Therefore, the participation and involvement of men in achieving the full inclusion of women in political life is one form of cooperation that very much needs to be developed. Establishing a strategic partnership with men is an important alliance to develop.

The Road Ahead

This handbook culls the reflections and experiences of women politicians, civil society activists and scholars committed to improving the strength and impact of women's political participation. It provides ideas for women and men to adopt their own strategic campaigns to increase and improve women's political representation and participation.

In South East Asia, the use of affirmative action strategies is being increasingly advocated as an effective means to achieve a critical mass of women in politics. This volume has raised several issues regarding the methodology of adopting quotas and their practical application. Quotas hold the potential - but are by no means a guarantee - to increase the

numbers of women parliamentarians. Further work remains to be done on their suitability and practical application in South East Asia.

A further area requiring attention is the development and implementation of policies that target economic and social inequalities, the allocation of resources to achieve gender equality and the design and establishment of institutional machinery. Although some progress has been made on the legislative agenda, there is still a way to go to make inroads into parliament to ensure that transformation takes place that benefits all citizens. Support for women candidates within the regional context of South and South East Asia is particularly important in order to address the lack of self-confidence among some women (including women in parliament), and to address the patriarchal structure of politics.

The strategic objectives stated in the Beijing Platform for Action remain the basis for concerted effort toward achieving equal opportunities and access to political power for women. The Economic and Social Council of the United Nations has set a goal of achieving 30 per cent representation of women in decision-making positions. The struggle to achieve gender quality is subject to increased scrutiny and pressure by many parties. Without the effective participation of women in political institutions and decision-making bodies, the objective of building democratic states will not be achieved and the quality of democracy itself within these states will be threatened.