**The Gender of Democracy Matters**

**An interactive dialogue organised by the Office of the Permanent Observer for International IDEA to the United Nations**

**Background Note**

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**Gender and the current democracy building landscape**

In 2009 we celebrate many anniversaries of democratization. About thirty years ago, the "third wave" of democratic reforms and processes changed the political landscape of Latin America, putting an end to an era marked by authoritarian regimes and widespread violation of human rights. Twenty years ago, the end of authoritarian regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, through democratic transitions whose trajectories raised big hopes of a new international order that could have freed up enormous resources from the peace dividend for development and social justice. Fifteen years ago, the end of the apartheid regime in South Africa led to the first elections in a new era of democracy. Ten years ago, calls for democratic reforms changed the course of a country like Indonesia.

At the same time as we celebrate, with good reasons, the achievements of three decades of democratization, there are also concerns about the possible backlash of democracy in many regions of the world. Some of the most conventional concerns are about the arbitrary, and wrong, association between bilateral democracy promotion agendas and security agendas. Other concerns focus on the linkages, or perhaps the de-linkages, between different and sometimes contradictory policy agendas driven by different geo-political interests, like those on trade, on one hand, and democracy and development, on the other.

Today we will address another type of more fundamental concern: gender equality. Gender discrimination and exclusion from political decision making and public spaces is as old as the democracy building discourse itself, and still it is a critically important dimension of democracy. It is so important as to define the quality and the very democratic nature of the political systems that call themselves a "democracy". Such importance is recognized in the development discourse, as witnessed by the inclusion of a specific indicator on the number of women elected to national parliaments within the Millennium Development Goal #3 on gender equality and the empowerment of women.

Gender equality is a key issue and a priority for International IDEA and for all international institutions actively engaged in the field of democracy building. It is at the core of the fundamental values and principles of any democracy. But in many cases, in so-called established democracies as well as new or restored democracies, there is a gap between rhetoric and reality.

For this reason, the international community, and the United Nations in particular, may play a crucial role for creating an enabling environment to turn rhetorical commitments on gender equality into new, transformative and truly inclusive realities of democratic change, reforms and power.

Gender equality should be, and sometimes is, reflected in the normative frameworks and institutional architecture of the political institutions of any democracy. It should shape the democratic practices by means of which active citizens – both women and men – beyond the façade of formal institutional settings, have voice in public spaces and hold public institutions and the executives accountable for delivering public goods to all the citizens of a country, without excluding anybody on that basis of gender, race, ethnicity, age and class.

Evidently ten, fifteen, twenty or even thirty years of democratization have not been enough to decisively reverse trends of social exclusion and marginalization that are deeply rooted in social and political institutions in many countries and regions of the world. Let's examine some conditions that may contribute to speeding up progress, change and transformation in this area.

**Behind numbers: reforming electoral and party systems**

Although controversial, electoral gender quotas are in use in almost half of the countries in the world today. Data on gender political representation in parliaments have shown an improvement over the last decades. According to the IPU, in 2008 women hold on average 18.3 per cent

of the seats across all chambers of parliament, a represents a 60% increase in the number of women parliamentarians compared to the 11.3% registered in 1995[1]. However, the rate of change it too slow, and at the current pace, the goal of gender-balanced political institutions will be achieved in many decades. Special measures like gender quotas, both in legislatures and within parties, will continue to play an important role in this respect, as shown by the experience of the most successful countries, like Rwanda, where the lower house elected a majority of women members (56.3%). Electoral and party systems, and their interplay, have a significant influence on women's political representation and their rate of election[2].

Quotas are a necessary short-term strategy for women to access the male dominated decision making sphere. Findings show that **African countries** with quotas (legislated or constitutional quotas [Rwanda]) and voluntary party quotas) have fared well in terms of parliamentary/legislative seats held by women compared to countries without quotas. In addition to the case of Rwanda, other notable examples in Africa include Angola 37.3%,

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[1] "For the first time, 15 per cent of parliamentary chambers (39 out of 264) in 32 countries have reached 30 per cent or more women members. Forty per cent of these chambers are in Europe, one third in Africa and 23 per cent in Latin America. At the other end of the spectrum, however, one quarter of all parliamentary chambers have less than 10 per cent women members." See *Women in Parliament in 2008: The Year in Perspective* at http://www.ipu.org/english/perdcls.htm#wmn-year

[2] Proportional representation systems provide more opportunities for women's election than majority systems (an average of 6% more seats go to women in proportional representation systems. According to the IPU, "the use of special measures or quotas is also an important factor. In 2008, countries that used special measures elected 24 per cent of women members to parliament on average, as opposed to 18 per cent for countries that did not. This trend is confirmed by examining the 39 chambers that have exceeded 30 per cent representation of women: 27 of them have implemented quotas, while six of them are appointed bodies." For an analysis of the interplay between electoral systems and special measures like quotas, see the joint IDEA-Stockholm University website at www.quotaproject.org and *Designing for Equality: Best-fit, medium-fit and non-favourable combinations of electoral systems and gender quotas,* International IDEA, Stockholm 2007.

Burundi 30.5%, Mozambique 36%, Uganda 30.7%, Namibia 30%, South Africa 32%, Tanzania 40%.

In **Latin America** there has in recent years been an increase in both the number and percentage of women in politics – embodied by the rise to power of two female presidents, Michelle Bachelet in Chile and Cristina Fernández in Argentina. Their election has, in turn, generated a renewed debate on the state of women in politics today in the region. The reality, not surprisingly, is that the progress of women in assuming elected office in Latin America varies considerably between and even within countries, nationally and sub-nationally. The average proportion of women in Congress (lower house or unicameral) is 21.5%, second only to the Nordic countries (with a regional average of 41%). However, while in Argentina one of every three members of Congress is female, in Brazil the figure is one in 12; and this happens mainly because of the difference in the electoral system. As argued by Kristen Sample[3], head of IDEA's programme in the Andean region, "both countries have list systems with gender-quotas, but they are only effective in Argentina where parties run 'closed' lists and are required to alternate men and women in 'electable' positions higher up the list. Brazil, on the other hand, allows parties to present a number of candidates equivalent to as much as 150% of the number of seats being contested and there is no sanction for con-compliance with the quota". In addition, candidate-centred

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[3] Kristin Sample, "No hay mujeres: Latin America women and gender equality", http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/idea/no-hay-mujeres-latin-america-women-and-gender-equality, March 2009.

'open' list-systems make success more dependent on access to campaign funding, an area in which women face greater disadvantages.

Also, since quotas may apply to the legislature and local councils, but not to mayors and other executive positions, women are conspicuous by their absence at the local level. In most of the Latin America countries (11), no more than 10% of mayors are women.

In Europe, five countries have introduced legislated gender quotas, and in more than half of the countries some of the political parties have adopted voluntary party quotas for their electoral lists. Though quotas have led to remarkably rapid increases in women's representation in some cases, they have also led to disappointment in other cases. The main conclusion is that, in order to be effective, a quota system must be compatible with the electoral system in place and that quota rules – for example, of 30% or 40% women on electoral lists – must be supplemented with rules concerning rank order as well as – in the case of legislated quotas – effective legal sanctions[4].

We know quite well what quotas can do. If properly designed, and implemented, they can dramatically increase the number of women legislators. In Ecuador, the percentage of elected women jumped from 3% to 17% in just election-cycle after the adoption of quotas.

What quotas cannot do is also clear. They are only one among many measures for increasing women's political representation. They cannot guarantee more women presidents, governors or mayors, as they cannot be

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[4]   Drude Dahlerup and Lenita Freidenvall, *Electoral Gender Quota Systems and Their Implementation in Europe*, Report to the European Parliament by the WIP, Women in Politics Research Centre, Department of Political Science, Stockholm University, in cooperation with International IDEA, September 2008, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/activities/committees/studies/download.do?file=22091 .

applied to single member posts. They cannot keep women in politics; and we all know that getting there is not everything. Re-election and increased responsibility are critical elements of the consolidation of a political career, and this is an area of weakness for many women. IDEA data on Peru, for example, show that only 16% of women-elected authorities sought re-election in 2006, compared with 34% of men[5]. And quotas cannot make women effective politicians – actually, the same way election of men has never been, and will never be, guarantee of effective leadership… Their inclusion is important in principle as well as through ensuring the representation of women's interests and perspectives, and particularly if women are willing to work jointly together across party lines to mobilise through women caucuses or other networks; but it is ultimately up to individual women to maximize their impact on political processes.

**Beyond numbers: shifting the balance of power**

The fact that electoral engineering and quotas can only do so much means that change also depends on a series of long-term strategies that involve other institutions and civil society, in particular governments, political parties, and the media. Let me focus on the role of political parties, as they act as the main gatekeepers for gender balance in political decision-making.

Political parties play a crucial role in building, or denying, the conditions for a growth in the numbers and strength of women candidates, because they control 'the secret garden of nominations'. Obviously, change in this area requires both commitment from the top and pressure from below.

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[5]    See http://www.idea.int/americas/peru/index.cfm .

Women party members need to mobilise and organise for change from within, through alliances that may include fellow party-members, women from other parties and feminist civil society groups. At an interactive panel during the last session of the Commission on the Status of Women, Anne-Marie Goetz remarked that "political parties fail adequately to respond to significant barriers to women standing for parliament" which the UK-based Fawcett Society identified as the four C's: "confidence, culture, childcare and cash. 'Confidence' problems refer in part to women's relative late entry to politics – unlike many men they may not have had an extended apprenticeship in party politics. 'Culture' denotes the aggressive confrontational style of political competition, 'childcare' denotes the failure to find practical support for women's domestic work, and 'cash' reflects upon political party under-investment in women's campaigns"[6].

Let me conclude by considering the issue of accountability in a gender equality perspective. As highlighted in the UNIFEM report[7] on the "Progress of the World's Women 2008/2009", a politics of accountability requires much more than increasing and amplifying women's voice amongst policy-makers. It requires governance reforms that equip public institutions with the incentives, skills, information and procedures to respond to women's needs.

This does diminish the role and importance, for example, of quotas, which are important means of breaking through voter resistance and other constraints on women's access to office. But it stresses the need to pursue at

6    Anne-Marie Goetz, "Written statement", Interactive Expert Panel on "Equal Participation of Women and Men in Decision-Making Processes at All Levels" organized within the fifty-third session of the Commission on the Status of Women, New York, 7 March 2009.
7    UNIFEM, *Who Answers to Women? Gender and Accountability,* New York, 2008.

the same time the objectives of increasing women's representation and improving public institutions' responsiveness to women's needs. In other words, increasing the number of women in elected and appointed public office can enhance accountability but must be accompanied by efforts to build state capacity to respond to women's needs. As noted by Goetz, "good governance from a gender perspective requires more than women in politics. It requires fundamental incentive changes to orient public action and policy to support gender equality"[8].

Policy-makers and practitioners alike are beginning to recognize that representation means more than elected politics. This means that "more women must have seats at the Cabinet table, more women must be appointed to senior decision-making positions, and more women's voices must be heard and included when major political reform or transformation is undertaken"[9]. In each country the methods may be different. Nevertheless, we have learnt from the many courageous, creative and active men and women who truly believe that democracy can only be achieved when all citizens are represented in all political structures that effect their lives. International IDEA will stand committed to inform the debate on women's participation and empowerment, by examining policy options, collecting evidence of best practice, providing models for reform and encouraging the reformers, in close partnership with the United Nations.

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[8] Anne-Marie Goetz, "Governing Women or Enabling Women to Govern: Gender and the Good Governance Agenda", in A.M. Goetz (ed), *Governing Women: Women's Political Effectiveness in Contexts of Democratization and Governance Reform*, UNRISD, Geneva, 2008.

[9] Julie Ballington, "Ten Years of Progress: Enhancing Women's Political Participation", in *Ten Years of Supporting Democracy Worldwide*, International IDEA, Stockholm 2005.