



The Gender of Democracy Matters

**An interactive dialogue organised by the Office of the Permanent
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Democracy can be described in many ways. But today no one can speak about democracy without addressing the issue of gender equality. Gender discrimination and exclusion from political decision making and public spaces is a fundamental concern to democracy building. This is important as to define the democratic nature of the political systems that call themselves a “democracy”. This is also recognized by the inclusion of a specific indicator on the number of women elected to national parliaments as stipulated in Millennium Development Goal # 3.

For International IDEA gender equality is a key issue and a priority and has been so already when IDEA was established in 1995. It is at the core of the fundamental values and principles of any democracy. But almost everywhere there is a gap between rhetoric and reality. It is therefore high time for states as well as the international community, and the United Nations in particular, to create 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 reflected in the normative frameworks and institutional architecture of the political institutions of any democracy.

Evidently decades 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.

Data on gender political representation in parliaments from IPU tell us that in 2008 women held on average 18.3 per cent of the seats across all chambers of parliament. A low figure, and unfortunately the

change is also slow. Special measures like gender quotas, both in legislatures and within parties, are needed¹.

Although controversial, quotas are a necessary short-term strategy for women to access the male dominated decision making sphere. Findings show that **African countries** with quotas have fared well in terms of parliamentary/legislative seats held by women compared to countries without quotas. In addition to the well known case of Rwanda, with 56.35 women in the lower house, other notable examples in Africa include Angola 37.3%, 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 as the situation varies considerably between and even within countries.

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.

¹ 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

We know quite well what quotas can do. If properly designed, and implemented, for example, quotas must be supplemented with rules concerning rank order as well as – in the case of legislated quotas – effective legal sanctions², 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 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 men³. 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.

² 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>.

³ See <http://www.idea.int/americas/peru/index.cfm>.

Beside the elected women themselves, political parties play a crucial role for gender balance in political decision making. They control 'the secret garden of nominations'. Obviously, change in this area requires both commitment from the top and pressure from below. 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.

The political parties must also support and create improved conditions for elected women. Two examples: The political culture of aggressive confrontational style of political competition is disliked by most women. The political parties must change their habits of under-investment in women's campaigns"⁴.

Let me conclude by considering the issue of accountability in a gender equality perspective. As highlighted in the UNIFEM report⁵ 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.

⁴ 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.

⁵ UNIFEM, *Who Answers to Women? Gender and Accountability*, New York, 2008.

It will never be enough to state that gender equality is an important issue for sustainable democracy. Its importance must be demonstrated through strengthening accountability on gender, the allocation of resources, raising gender equality issues in democracy building instruments and mandates that do not primarily focus on gender, but where gender is relevant. 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.

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. And we are happy to do this in close partnership with the United Nations and other members of the democracy building community.