



Afghanistan Swears in New Parliamentarians.
Photo courtesy of UN Photos: Eric Kanalstein.

■ FACT SHEET

LEADERSHIP AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

“Something which we think is impossible now is not impossible in another decade”. - Constance Baker Motley (First Black Woman in the U.S. to become a Federal Judge)

Why is Women’s Political Participation Important?

Women’s political participation takes many forms. Women vote, run for office, lead civil society groups, shape peace talks and contribute to public discourse through the media. Around the world, a growing number of women are engaged in all of these activities, but at levels much lower than those of men. Since democracy depends on women and men’s full participation, by definition, women’s limited political voice impedes the quality of governance. It also hinders women’s realisation of their human rights and opportunities for development.

Studies have shown that a higher number of women in parliament generally contribute to stronger attention to women’s issues. Women’s political participation is a fundamental prerequisite for gender equality and genuine democracy therefore facilitating women’s direct engagement in public decision-making is a means of ensuring better accountability to women.

Political accountability to women begins with increasing the number of women in decision-making positions, but it cannot stop there. What is required are gender-sensitive governance reforms that will make all elected officials more effective at promoting gender equality in public policy and ensuring its implementation.

There has been significant progress in recent years: more and more women are seeking to transform politics itself, and women’s groups are focusing on efforts to increase women’s representation on the ballot to reinvigorate political accountability. Today, there are more women in government than ever before. The proportion of women parliamentarians at national levels has increased by 8% from 1998 to 2008, reaching the current global average of 19.1%. This increase is compared to an increase of just 1% in the two decades after 1975.

However, around the world, gender equality in democratic governance continues to be extremely limited. Women are outnumbered 4 to 1 in legislatures around the world.

Women’s Access to Political Participation

In democracies, political parties are the main route to political participation and the representation of particular interest groups. Around the world, however, political parties have been slow to respond to women’s interest in political participation.

According to the UK-based Fawcett Society, political parties often fail to adequately respond to the significant barriers encountered by women standing for parliament, which they have summed up as the “four Cs”: confidence, culture, childcare and cash. “Confidence” problems stem in part from women’s relatively late entry to party politics and consequent limited apprenticeship. “Culture” barriers stem from the aggressive confrontational style of political competition. “Childcare” refers to the competing demands on the time of women candidates due to their domestic responsibilities. And “Cash” refers to the relative under-investment in women’s campaigns by political parties.



First Day of Voting in Southern Sudan Referendum. Photo courtesy of UN Photos: Tim McKulka.

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Women's access to political parties is therefore often circumscribed by gender role expectations. This is especially true with respect to leadership positions, affecting women's ability to influence or shape party platforms.

Women in Parliament

The proportion of seats held by women in parliament continues to rise slowly, averaging 18.4% across all chambers of parliament as of January 2009 and compared to the current average of 19.1%. Women hold 30% or more of single or lower chamber seats in 24 countries and 30% or more of upper chamber seats in 15 countries.

The following numbers represent regional averages of women parliamentarians in both lower and upper houses:

- Sub-Saharan Africa – 19.2%
- Asia – 18.3%
- The Pacific – 12.7%
- Americas(North and South) – 22.7%
- Arab States – 10.5%

The use of temporary special measures or quotas has proven quite effective in getting more women into politics. During 2008, women held an average of 24% of parliamentary seats in countries that used such measures, versus 18% in countries that did not. In addition to quotas, other mechanisms that support women running for election include leadership training and campaign funding.

UN Women's Role in Democratic Governance

One of the pillars of UN Women's work is women's political participation. Around the world, in times of peace and especially of war, women's participation continues to be extremely limited. As a result, laws, policies and government institutions fall short, failing to reflect the needs of all citizens most notably progress on women's rights.

UN Women emphasises women's political participation through four main areas:

Using CEDAW to frame new laws:

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) offers comprehensive global standards on women's rights. UN Women programs equip women with the skills to translate CEDAW, now ratified by the majority of the world's governments, into legal guarantees of gender equality.

Building partnerships for

participation: UN Women draws together women's organisations, governments, the UN system and the private sector, to bring more women into government, train women leaders, and boost women's skills to actively participate in elections as candidates and voters.

Bringing equality into reconstruction:

As conflicts draw to a close, the process of building a new government begins. UN Women works to advance gender equality by supporting new legislation, backing women's leadership and equal representation, and widening the space for women's participation at peace tables.

Pursuing gender justice: Gender justice requires every dimension of justice to incorporate gender perspectives. It rests upon the full participation of women in shaping legal institutions that promote their rights, equality and inclusion. UN Women supports women's efforts to change discriminatory laws, address violations of human rights and war crimes, and eliminate the injustices stemming from political, economic and social inequalities.

Supporting Women's Political Participation

UN Women is a co-sponsor of the global knowledge network iKNOW Politics, which is the International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics. It is an extensive online workspace and advocacy platform where everyone from elected officials to students can access resources, use tools, participate in forums and get expert advice on women in political life.

UN Women has several global flagship programs intended to support women's engagement in public decision-making. Making Politics Work with Women is a global program that supports efforts to increase women's leverage as voters, through tools such as women's manifestos or nationally agreed agendas, enabling them to articulate their concerns to political parties during elections. The program also supports policy watch groups that build women's capacity to track the performance of politicians in order to hold them to account for meeting campaign promises.

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UN Women assists women's groups in the planning and implementation of approximately 10% of UNDEF projects.

Working with the UN Democracy Fund

Gender, political participation and leadership are about supporting a gender focus in good governance reforms, with a view to delivering higher-quality and better-targeted public services for women. A range of innovative approaches to promote women's engagement in democratic politics are found in UN Women-executed projects funded by the United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF) in 10 countries.

UN Women brings the experience in gender and governance from the work of UNIFEM into its collaboration on women's political participation with the UN Democracy Fund (UNDEF). Since its inception in 2005, UNDEF has distributed annual grants to more than 100 countries, including women's organisations. Funds go towards democratic governance projects that strengthen the voice of civil society, promote human rights and encourage the participation of all groups in democratic processes.

UN Women assists women's groups in the planning and implementation of approximately 10% of UNDEF projects. While grants across the board contribute to realising broad gender equality goals, UN Women puts deliberate emphasis on ensuring that women have an equal voice in governance and public decision-making.

UN Women and UNDEF Grants are helping women assert their leadership in elections, fight corruption, broaden peace talks and insert gender perspectives into media, among other aims. Many projects coincide with political reform processes, where powerful opportunities can arise to advance women's participation by improving laws, institutions, and public perceptions and knowledge.

Core strategies of this partnership involve developing the capacities of women to compete in politics and bring gender into public policy-making. Support for building women's networks forge vital links for achieving common goals between organisations. Finally, communication and advocacy efforts raise awareness of the importance of women in governance, and press to remove visible and invisible barriers that hinder women's political participation.

Useful Links and References

www.unwomen.org.au

www.genderequalityonline.org.au

UNIFEM (now part of UN Women) (2010), Gender Justice: Key to achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

UNIFEM (now part of UN Women) (2010), Who Answers to Women? Gender & Accountability: Progress of the World's Women 2008/2009.

UNDP (2009), Millennium Development Goals Report, Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat.

UNIFEM and UNDEF (2009), Democracy With Women, For Women.