



Chapter 2



Obstacles to Women's Participation in Parliament

Women around the world at every socio-political level find themselves under-represented in parliament and far removed from decision-making levels. As mentioned in chapter 1, in 2005, women hold barely 16 percent of parliamentary seats around the world. The factors that hamper or facilitate women's political participation vary with level of socio-economic development, geography, culture, and the type of political system. Women themselves are not a homogeneous group; there are major differences between them, based on class, race, ethnicity, cultural background and education. The exclusion of women from decision-making bodies limits the possibilities for entrenching the principles of democracy in a society, hindering economic development and discouraging the attainment of gender equality. If men monopolize the political process, passing laws which affect society at large, the decision-making process does not always balance the interests of the male and female populations. As noted in the Millennium Development Goals, women's equal participation with men in power and decision making is part of their fundamental right to participate in political life, and at the core of gender equality and women's empowerment.¹ Women have to be active participants in determining development agendas.

Women who want to enter politics find that the political, public, cultural and social environment is often unfriendly or even hostile to them. Even a quick glance at the current composition of political decision makers in any region provides evidence that women still face numerous obstacles in articulating and shaping their own interests. What are the obstacles women face in entering parliament? How can women better cope with these hindrances? In this chapter we take the first step towards increasing women's parliamentary representation and effectiveness by identifying the common problems that women face. We categorize the problems into three areas: political,

socio-economic, and ideological and psychological (or socio-cultural). In the chapters that follow, we identify some of the strategies to overcome these obstacles and analyse what women can do once they enter parliament.

1. Political Obstacles

Men dominate the political arena; men formulate the rules of the political game; and men define the standards for evaluation. The existence of this male-dominated model results in women either rejecting politics altogether or rejecting male-style politics.

At the beginning of the 21st century, over 95 percent of all countries in the world have granted women the two most fundamental democratic rights: the right to vote and the right to stand for election. New Zealand was the first country to give women the right to vote, in 1893; and Finland was the first to adopt both fundamental democratic rights in 1906. There are still a few countries that deny women both

the right to vote and the right to stand for elections.²

In theory, the right to stand for election, to become a candidate and to get elected is based on the right to vote. The reality is, however, that women's right to vote remains restricted, principally because the candidates are mostly male. This is true not only for partial and developing democracies, but for established democracies as well. The low level of women's representation in some European parliaments should be considered a violation of women's fundamental democratic right and, as such, a violation of their basic human rights. This unequal rate of representation in legislative bodies signifies that women's representation, rather than being a consequence of democratization, is more a reflection of a status quo.

In most countries de jure difficulties exist, either by virtue of laws being enacted and not followed or by virtue of laws not even existing in the first place. To achieve gender balance in political life, it is necessary to ensure that commitment to equality is reflected in laws and national policies. 'The rising force of women organized at all levels of society throughout the world has given greater impetus to the 30 percent target for women in political positions originally promoted in 1995. Introducing quotas for electoral seats is considered an important strategy.'³ Indeed, positive action is a necessary tool to maintain at least 30 percent of women at all levels of decision making.

The Argentinean law on quotas, for example, requires all parties to nominate women to 30 percent of electable positions on their lists of candidates. Such a law can effectively facilitate the election of women to legislative bodies. When such laws are rescinded there is evidence that women's representation is affected. A case in point is Bangladesh where, following the expiry of the quota law in April 2001, the number of women members of parliament (MPs) dropped from 10 to 2 percent in the October 2001 election. On the contrary, in Rwanda, the 2003 elections demonstrated a significant increase in the number of women elected to the National Assembly.

Among all national parliaments, Rwanda is now closest to reaching equal numbers of men and women: 48.8 percent of seats are held by women, surpassing even the proportion in the Nordic countries. This is largely because of a constitutional quota which reserves 24 of the 80 seats in the lower house for women. Women in the Rwandan upper house are also guaranteed 30 percent of the seats.⁴

Research indicates that political structures can play a significant role in women's recruitment to parliament. The system of elections based on proportional representation (PR), for example, has resulted in three to four times more women being elected in countries with similar political cultures, for example, Germany and Australia. Generalizations such as this are valid so long as there are cultural similarities, that is similar levels of social and economic development, between countries. In Russia, this generalization is not applicable because of the different and evolving political culture—specifically, the weakly developed party system, the existence of many parties and blocs (until 2003), the lack of confidence many women have to contend with, and the tendency of political parties to marginalize women's interests. A voter's political literacy (the capacity to make coherent choices and decisions when voting, which is clearly not only dependent on level of formal education) plays a significant role, as does the political will to improve the situation.

Among the political obstacles that women face, the following feature prominently:

- the prevalence of the 'masculine model' of political life and of elected government bodies;
- lack of party support, for example, limited financial support for women candidates, limited access to political networks, and the more stringent standards and qualifications applied to women;
- lack of sustained contact and cooperation with other public organizations such as trade (labour) unions and women's groups;
- lack of access to well-developed education and training systems for women's leadership in general, and for orienting young women towards political life; and
- the nature of the electoral system, which may or may not be favourable to women candidates.

1.1. The Masculine Model of Politics

Men largely dominate the political arena; largely formulate the rules of the political game; and often define the standards for evaluation.

Furthermore, political life is organized according to male norms and values, and in some cases even male lifestyles. For instance, politics is often based on the idea of 'winners and losers', competition and confrontation,

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rather than on systematic collaboration and consensus, especially across party lines. It may often result in women either rejecting politics altogether or rejecting male-style politics. Thus, when women do participate in politics, they tend to do so in small numbers.

‘The most interesting aspect of the Swedish Parliament is not that we have 45 per cent representation of women, but that a majority of women and men bring relevant social experience to the business of parliament. This is what makes the difference. Men bring with them experience of real life issues, of raising children, of running a home. They have broad perspectives and greater understanding. And women are allowed to be what we are, and to act according to our own unique personality. Neither men nor women have to conform to a traditional role. Women do not have to behave like men to have power; men do not have to behave like women to be allowed to care for their children. When this pattern becomes the norm then we will see real change.’

Birgitta Dahl, former Speaker of Parliament, Sweden

Differences between men and women also appear with respect to the content and priorities of decision making, which are determined by the interests, backgrounds and working patterns of both sexes. Women tend to give priority to societal concerns, such as social security, national health care and children’s issues.

The male-dominated working pattern is further reflected in the parliamentary work schedule, which is often characterized by lack of supportive structures for working mothers in general, and for women MPs in particular. In addition to their party and constituency work, and serving on different committees, women parliamentarians are called upon to network within their parties, at multi-party levels and with women outside parliament. Furthermore, they have to play the socially prescribed nurturing roles of mother, wife, sister and grandmother. Currently, most

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parliamentary programmes and sitting times are not adjusted to take into consideration this dual burden that women carry. Many women MPs struggle to balance family life with the demands of work that often involve late hours, much travelling and few facilities.

1.2. Lack of Party Support

Women play important roles in campaigning and mobilizing support for their parties, yet they rarely occupy decision-making positions in these structures. In fact, fewer than 11 percent of party leaders worldwide are women.

Although political parties possess resources for conducting election campaigns, women rarely benefit from these resources. For example, many parties do not provide sufficient financial support for women candidates. Research indicates that a large pool of women candidates, combined with sufficient financial resources, can significantly increase the number of women elected. This is discussed further in chapter 3.

The selection and nomination process within political parties is also biased against women in that 'male characteristics' are emphasized and often become the criteria in selecting candidates. An 'old boys' club' can inhibit and prevent women from integrating themselves into their party's work. This in turn impacts on the perception of women as viable candidates on the part of those who provide money for election campaigns. In addition, women are often not placed in winnable positions on party lists. Women's participation is therefore better realized when there are quotas with a placement mandate. In Sweden, for instance, most political parties use 'zipper' lists where women's and men's names alternate on the party lists, resulting in 45.3 percent women in parliament.

Table 2: Women Presidents or Speakers of Parliament

1945–97	As of 28 February 2005
<p>In 52 years of world parliamentary history, only 42 of the 186 countries with a legislative institution have, at one time or another in recent history, selected a woman to preside over parliament or a house of parliament: this has occurred 78 times in all. The countries concerned are 18 European countries, 19 countries of the Americas, 3 African countries, 1 Asian country and 1 country in the Pacific region.</p> <p>24 of the 42 countries concerned had a bicameral parliament, and the presidency was entrusted to a woman a little more often in the upper house than in the lower house.</p>	<p>Only 22 women preside over one of the houses of the existing parliaments, 70 of which are bicameral. This means 8.6% of the total of 255 posts of presiding officers of parliament or of one of its houses.</p> <p>The countries concerned are: Antigua and Barbuda (House of Representatives and Senate); Bahamas (Senate); Belgium (Senate); Belize (House of Representatives); Colombia (Cámara de Representantes); Dominica (House of Assembly); Estonia (Riigikogu); Georgia (Sakartvelos Parlamenti); Greece (Vouli Ton Ellinon); Grenada (Senate); Hungary (Országgyűlés); Jamaica (Senate); Japan (Sangiin); Latvia (Saeima); Lesotho (National Assembly); Moldova (Parlamentul); the Netherlands (Eerste Kamer de Staten-Generaal); San Marino (Consiglio grande e generale); South Africa (National Assembly and National Council of Provinces); Trinidad and Tobago (Senate); Uruguay (Cámara de Representantes).</p>

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), 2005. 'Women Speakers of National Parliaments: History and the Present. Situation as of 28 February 2005', available at <<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/speakers.htm>>.

‘It is very difficult for a woman to make up her mind to enter politics. Once she makes up her own mind, then she has to prepare her husband, and her children, and her family. Once she has overcome all these obstacles and applies for the ticket, then the male aspirants against whom she is applying make up all sorts of stories about her. And after all this, when her name goes to the party bosses, they do not select her name because they fear losing that seat.’

Sushma Swaraj, MP, India

1.3. Cooperation with Women’s Organizations

During the last decade women’s parliamentary representation in long-standing democracies has increased. One of the critical reasons for this rise is the impact of women’s organizations both inside and outside political parties. Women’s organizations were well aware of the effect of single-member electoral districts on women’s candidacies. They worked with political and government institutions to secure electoral changes to facilitate women’s nomination and election. This strategy resulted in increasing women’s representation within legislative bodies.

‘As women parliamentarians, we need to share our experiences. This in itself will inspire women. We will not feel that we are alone in this game, and other women will not feel isolated from the process. At every opportunity, at every forum, each and every time we must share information, ideas, and knowledge. We must make sure that women are the most informed people within society.’

Margaret Dongo, former MP, Zimbabwe

However, in new democracies there is less contact and cooperation between women politicians and women’s organizations or other broad interest organizations such as trade and labour unions. This is due either to lack of awareness of the potential benefits of this networking function or to lack of resources to invest in such contacts.

Although governments might declare their commitment to democratic forms of change, it is nevertheless unrealistic to expect governments alone to secure women’s rightful place in all spheres of society. Civil society in general, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and women’s groups, must play a role in advancing women’s representation. Faith-based women’s organizations and unique outreach networks are also critical allies.

Women also must think carefully about their own goals, strategies and tactics. It is important to help women already in parliament to deliver on their promises and to equip them with the necessary skills and strategies to ensure that issues raised by women are taken into account in the debate and the decision making that take place in parliament. In order to empower women and enable them to participate in

politics, it is necessary to extend the scope of women's participation at the grass-roots level and in local elected bodies. This also constitutes an important step towards confidence-building and facilitates the sharing of experiences.

The main mission of the women's movement is to inculcate the right type of confidence and assertiveness among them. It needs leaders who can express proper ideological messages and inspire confidence. New ways of thinking and acting, educational activities, research about women's status, and means of communication among women's organizations are needed. The challenge for women is to build a society according to a paradigm that reflects their values, strengths and aspirations, and thereby reinforce their interest and participation in political processes.

1.4. Electoral Systems

The type of electoral system in a country plays an important role in women's political representation. (This issue is discussed in detail in chapter 3.)

'We have several explanations for the high presence of women in the Nordic parliaments. One is the proportional electoral system. In Finland, there is a proportional list but the individual choice of the voters also comes into play. Another explanation is to be found in ideological debates in the country. In this area in Scandinavia, politics is, so to speak, in the lead. The business world is falling behind, and the academic world lags behind as well. We have not enough women university professors, and women are also poorly represented in the trade unions.'

Bjorn von Sydow, Speaker of the Swedish Riksdag

2. Socio-Economic Obstacles

Socio-economic conditions play a significant role in the recruitment of women to legislatures in both long-standing and new democracies. The social and economic status of women in society has a direct influence on their participation in political institutions and elected bodies. For example, researchers point to the correlation between women's legislative recruitment and the proportion of women working outside the home, as well as the percentage of women college graduates. According to some researchers, socio-economic conditions take second place to electoral systems in women's legislative recruitment within established democracies.

The economic crisis in the so-called 'developing democracies' has intensified the risk of poverty for women. Poverty, like unemployment, is increasingly being feminized.

Box 1. The Effect of Development and Culture on Women's Representation

One of the most important characteristics of society that correlate with women's representation levels is a country's state of development. Development leads to a weakening of traditional values, decreased fertility rates, increased urbanization, greater education and labour force participation for women, and attitudinal changes in perceptions regarding the appropriate role for women—all factors that increase women's political resources and reduce existing barriers to political activity.

One characteristic of development that has proved particularly important for women's representation in Western countries is higher rates of women's participation in the labour force. Moving out of the house and into the workforce appears to have a consciousness-raising effect on women. Greater development increases the number of women who are likely to have formal positions and experience, for example in labour unions or professional organizations.

Culture is related to development, and as development increases women's standing in society relative to men becomes more equal. On the other hand, two countries could be quite similar in terms of development, but women may have come substantially further in terms of equality in one country than in the other.

While culture consistently has been believed to be important, it has been difficult to test directly for an effect. As a possible proxy for culture, in some recent research I developed a measure using a cluster of variables, specifically the ratio of women's literacy to men's literacy, the ratio of women's labour force participation to men's labour force participation, and the ratio of university-educated women to university-educated men.* The assumption was that when women approach men in levels of literacy, workforce participation, and university education—and thus become men's equals in the social spheres—they are more likely to be seen as men's equals in the political sphere, and therefore their representation will increase. This hypothesis holds, as the cultural measures described correlate very strongly with women's representation.

It is important to note that, while research tracking women's representation in established democracies has been quite successful at identifying causes for variations, attempts to model women's representation in developing countries have been much less successful. Factors driving variations in representation in the developed world are clearly understood, but we have a much poorer understanding of representation in developing countries. In the latter, none of the variables deemed significant among established democracies, nor several other plausible variables, are found to have a consistent effect.**

These findings indicate that there is a minimum level of development (including women's labour force participation) that is needed to create the foundation for other variables, such as electoral systems, to have an effect. Without that basis, the factors that assist women in gaining representation in more developed countries simply have no effect. It appears that in most less developed countries the forces aligned against female political activity are so great as to permit only minimal representation. As development increases, however, cultural changes start to occur. In addition, more women start to acquire the resources needed to become politically powerful—such as education, experience in the salaried labour force, and training in the professions that dominate politics. This leads to the formation of a critical mass. When the number of women with the necessary resources becomes substantial, they then start to become an effective interest group demanding greater representation and influence in decision making. Development is a crucial part of this process.

Richard E. Matland

* Matland, Richard E., 1998a. 'Women's Representation in National Legislatures: Developed and Developing Countries'. *Legislative Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 23, no. 1, pp. 109–25.

** — 1998b. 'The Two Faces of Representation'. Paper presented at the European Consortium for Political Research workshops in Warwick, UK, 23–28 March.

In addition to lack of adequate financial resources, the socio-economic obstacles impacting on women's participation in parliament are:

- illiteracy and limited access to education and choice of professions; and
- the dual burden of domestic tasks and professional obligations.

'The two most overwhelming obstacles for women in entering parliament are lack of constituents and lack of financial resources. Women move from their father's home to their husband's home . . . They are like refugees. They have no base from which to develop contacts with the people or to build knowledge and experience about the issues. Furthermore, they have no money of their own; the money belongs to their fathers, their husbands or their in-laws. Given the rising cost of running an effective campaign, this poses another serious hurdle for women in the developing world.'

Razia Faiz, former MP, Bangladesh

2.1. The Feminization of Poverty and Unemployment

In 2004, the overall share of women in total paid employment was above 40 percent worldwide.

‘One of the most striking phenomena of recent times has been the increasing proportion of women in the labor force . . . In 2003, out of the 2.8 billion people that had work, 1.1 billion were women . . . However, improved equality in terms of quantity of male and female workers has yet to result in real socioeconomic empowerment for women, an equitable distribution of household responsibilities, equal pay for work of equal value, and gender balance across all occupations. In short, true equality in the world of work is still out of reach.’⁵

Despite the increase in women’s employment rates, many of the economic gains made by women in industrially developed countries since the 1960s are in danger of being eroded, which seems to be in part a result of the restructuring of both the global and the domestic economies.

At the same time, in the majority of countries women’s unpaid labour activity amounts to twice that of men, and the economic value of women’s unpaid labour is estimated to be around one-third of the world’s economic production (or 13 trillion USD).⁶ In all countries a significant gap exists between the status of women and that of men. Surveys carried out in the late 1990s reveal increasing gender discrimination in salaries, recruitment, promotion and dismissal, as well as growing professional segregation and the feminization of poverty. According to United Nations statistics, 1.8 billion persons in the world live in poverty and 70 percent of them are women. The gender gap in earning is registered all over the world: a woman’s average wage is equal to 75 percent of a man’s average wage (not including an agricultural worker’s salary). The economic crisis in countries with so-called ‘developing democracies’ has intensified the risk of poverty for women, which, like unemployment, is likely to be increasingly feminized.

Women are major contributors to national economies through both their paid and their unpaid labour. As far as the latter is concerned, rural women’s input and their role as a significant electorate should not be underestimated. Although the importance of women’s biological and social roles is clear, their input in all spheres of life often goes unrecognized. Eradicating poverty will have a positive impact on women’s increased participation in the democratic process. The economic empowerment of women, along with education and access to information, will take women from the constraints of the household to full participation in politics and political elections.

2.2. The Dual Burden

In most countries women carry a disproportionate share of domestic work. Their participation in politics is further constrained by poverty and lack of education and access to information. It must be recognized that it is difficult for women to participate in political life when their major concern is survival and they have no choice but to spend much of their time trying to meet the basic needs of families. This is accentuated by the increase in the number of female-headed households (which stands at 25 percent worldwide), particularly in developing countries, where this is partly a result of ongoing conflicts.

In addition to that, however, some women may have full-time jobs as wives and mothers as well as other full-time careers (e.g. as teachers, lawyers or doctors). Becoming an MP in these conditions might then be considered a third full-time job.

‘Women believe that entering parliament means choosing between a private life or a public life. This is not the case. Instead, women should view their life as a continuum. They should decide what they want to achieve in life and prioritise these goals in chronological order. There is a certain right time to achieve each of these goals, whether it is becoming a wife, mother, professional or a parliamentarian. Life is long and women can achieve many things.’

Anna Ballebo, former MP, Spain

2.3. Education and Training

‘It’s very difficult for women to talk, to argue, to press for their concerns. How can we encourage women to talk and to express themselves? Maybe the woman in the hut has a lot to say, but we have to encourage her to talk—not about politics, but about her problems, her life, issues that concern her. The answer is education. Education has led many women in my society to join political parties or participate in political activities. Education is the most important channel for encouraging women to speak out.’

Rawya Shawa, Member of the former Palestinian Legislative Council

Literacy rates in developed countries are about 99 percent, as opposed to 84 percent in less-developed countries. There is no consistent correlation between literacy rates and women’s political representation, but many candidacy nomination procedures require a minimum level of literacy. This prevents women from registering as candidates for elections. In addition to basic education, many women lack the political training required to participate effectively in the political arena. An expansion of the pool of women who are qualified for recruitment to political careers is therefore needed.

This can be done by giving women access, from an early stage, to work patterns that are conducive to political leadership, such as special training in community-based or neighbourhood organizations.

Common understanding of the concerns of women, gendered political awareness-raising, lobbying skills and networking are important for the process of training women for political careers. To that end, women's leadership programmes play a special role since they provide the opportunity for links to be made with wider groups of women and diverse politicians; and they are very often the only occasions when women can be prepared for a political career in parliament and encouraged to aspire to such a career. Special attention should be given also to the involvement of young women and the importance of collaborating with men.

3. Ideological and Psychological Hindrances

The ideological and psychological hindrances for women in entering parliament include the following:

- gender ideology, cultural patterns, and predetermined social roles assigned to women and men;
- women's lack of the confidence to stand for election;
- women's perception of politics as a 'dirty' game; and
- the way in which women are portrayed in the mass media.

3.1. Traditional Roles

'Women have tried to enter politics trying to look like men. This will not work. We have to bring our differences, our emotions, our way of seeing things, even our tears to the process.'

Anna Tibaijuka, Professor, Tanzania

In many countries, traditions continue to emphasize women's primary roles as mothers and housewives and to restrict them to those roles. A traditional strong, patriarchal value system favours sexually segregated roles, and 'traditional cultural values' militate against the advancement, progress and participation of women in any political process. Societies all over the world are dominated by an ideology of 'a woman's place'. According to this ideology, women should only play the role of 'working mother', which is generally low-paid and apolitical. In addition, in some countries, men even tell women how to vote.

This is the environment, in which a certain collective image of women in traditional, apolitical roles continues to dominate, which many women face. The image of a woman leader requires that she be asexual in her speech and manners, someone who can be identified as a woman only through non-sexual characteristics.

Often it is supposed to be unacceptable or even shameful in the mass consciousness for women to be open about their feminine nature. In fact, the more authoritative and 'manly' a woman is, the more she corresponds to the undeclared male rules of the game. That is why some women politicians in general have to overcome the difficulty of feeling uncomfortable in the political field, as though they are somewhere where they do not belong, behaving in ways that are not natural to them.

Often women internalize many of these ideas and end up frustrated when they cannot match this almost impossible image. This sense of frustration is inextricably tied to a woman's sense of having to be apologetic either for her own womanhood or for betraying her sense of womanhood. Until they reconcile (or make the choice between) certain collective images, dominant stereotypes, and their own feminine nature, their lives will be difficult and it will be hard for them to accommodate these clashing expectations. A woman should be prepared for the fact that when she becomes a politician she does not cease to be a woman. It is this womanhood which should be placed first, since it contains different creative potentials and intellectual strength. The ability to make decisions and implement them is not a gender-specific trait, but a common human one; in other words, it is as natural for a woman to hold power as for a man to hold power.

When a woman becomes a politician she does not cease to be a woman. It is this womanhood which should be placed first, since it contains different creative potentials and intellectual strength.

3.2. Lack of Confidence

Lack of confidence is one of the main reasons for women's under-representation in formal political institutions, whether parliaments, ministries or political parties. With confidence and determination women can reach the highest levels in the political process. That is why women should believe in themselves and should do away with the widespread perception that men have to be their leaders. Women are equal to and have the same potential as men, but only they can fight for their rights. Women are very good campaigners, organizers and support-mobilizers, but fear sometimes prevents women from contesting elections and from participating in political life.

3.3. The Perception of Politics as 'Dirty'

In some countries, women perceive politics as a 'dirty' game. This has jarred their confidence in their ability to participate in political processes. In fact, such a perception is prevalent worldwide. Unfortunately, this perception reflects the reality in many countries. Although the reasons for this differ, there are some common trends.

The basis of passive corruption can be explained by an exchange between the advantages and benefits of the public market (e.g. legislation, budget bills) and of the economic market (e.g. funds, votes, employment), which seek financial gains by

escaping competition and by fostering monopolistic conditions. In addition to this, a significant increase in the cost of election campaigning has become obvious, and this in turn increases the temptation to use any source of money that becomes available.

Corruption can have many faces. Bribery and extortion in the public sector, as well as the procurement of goods and services, are key manifestations of it. Although new democracies need time to establish themselves and to develop roots, corruption has spread further in countries where the process of political and economic transformation is taking shape in the absence of civil society, and where new institutions are emerging. However, in many places where the changes in the political and economic system have already taken place, the market economy has become enmeshed in the 'law of the jungle', the mafia and corruption.

Moreover, hypocrisy is an increasingly common feature in countries with established centralist and authoritarian regimes. There are 'rules of survival' in an economy of persistent scarcity which stand in stark contrast to the ideas officially proclaimed by the state. In poor countries the financing of political parties and the survival of an independent press remain major unresolved problems for the development of democratic functions.

In some countries, corruption and organized crime scare women and provoke their fears of losing members of their families, all of which militates against their political involvement or their standing for elected bodies.

The high cost of bribery and extortion for a society has been recognized. Many governments and business leaders have expressed their desire to curb and eliminate corruption. But this is not an easy task; corruption is rooted in the system

by some parties who continue to pay bribes. Corruption inevitably results in the creation of favourable conditions and opportunities for the existence of the most negative manifestation of organized crime. These factors combine to scare women and provoke their fears of losing members of their families, all of which militate against their political involvement or their standing for elected bodies.

Although the perception of corruption may not always be a fair reflection of the actual state of affairs, it is itself having an impact on women's attitude towards a political career. Is it a coincidence that countries where corruption occurs on only a small or a moderate scale seem to have a higher rate of women's representation in elected bodies? For example, Norway, Finland, Sweden, Denmark and New Zealand are perceived as the least corrupt, and in these countries women MPs make up between 30 percent and 45.4 percent of the total number of MPs, that is, between five and ten times more than in countries where corruption scores higher.

Women who have made the decision to stand for election should take all these circumstances into consideration and be ready to resist the corruption 'disease'. Corruption requires secrecy, whereas democracy breeds increased transparency resulting from political pluralism, freedom of the press, and the rule of law. By ensuring the real participation of the people and the establishment of efficient countervailing measures, democracy can contribute to curbing corruption.

Market forces cannot replace the rule of law. Economic liberalization should contribute to reducing the phenomenon of corruption, although this will not occur automatically. A regulated market economy will reduce the opportunities for corruption. Hence, it remains important to have the political commitment and the will to eliminate corruption by prioritizing this on the political agenda. Women can contribute a great deal to this process.

3.4. The Role of the Mass Media

The mass media deserve to be called the fourth branch of power because of their influence on public opinion and public consciousness. The media in any society have at least two roles: as a chronicler of current events; and as an informer of public opinion, thereby fostering different points of view. Often, the mass media tend to minimize coverage of events and organizations of interest to women. The media do not adequately inform the public about the rights and roles of women in society; nor do they usually engage in measures to promote or improve women's position. Most of the world's media have yet to deal with the fact that women, as a rule, are the first to be affected by political, social and economic changes and reforms taking place in a country—for example, they are among the first to lose their jobs. The fact that women are largely alienated from the political decision-making process is also ignored by the media.

The mass media tend to minimize coverage of events and organizations of interest to women.

The media can be used to cultivate gender biases and promote a stereotype about 'a woman's place', helping conservative governments and societies to put the blame on women for the failure in family policy, and to reinforce the idea that women are responsible for social problems, such as divorce and the growth of minor crime, getting worse. Another widespread trend in the mainstream media is to depict women as beautiful objects: women are identified and objectified according to their sex, and are made to internalize certain notions of beauty and attractiveness which relate more to a woman's physical capacities than to her mental faculties. Such an approach encourages the long-standing patriarchal stereotype of the 'weaker sex', where women are sexual objects and 'second-class' citizens.

Admittedly, the mass media also tell stories about women politicians and about businesswomen and their successes, but this kind of coverage is rare and infrequent. The presentation of topics such as fashion competitions, film stars, art and the secrets of eternal youth is more typical. Not surprisingly, such views hardly promote women's sense of self-worth and self-respect or encourage them to take on positions of public responsibility.

If there is a lack of proper coverage of women's issues and the activities of women MPs, this contributes to a lack of public awareness about them which in turn translates into a lack of constituency for women MPs. The mass media still need to recognize the equal value and dignity of men and women.

The role of the mass media in an election process cannot be emphasized enough, and we do not yet have adequate global and comparative research. Practically speaking, if there is lack of proper coverage of women's issues and the activities of women MPs, this contributes to a lack of public awareness about them, which in turn translates into a lack of constituency for women MPs. The mass media still need to recognize the equal value and dignity of men and women.

4. Summary

The 20th century saw women gain access to political, economic and social rights. All these achievements are leading to important changes in women's lives but, while women have partly succeeded in combating discrimination based on gender, disparities still remain in many fields. At the beginning of the 21st century, women continue to face both old and new challenges, particularly intra- and interstate conflicts and terrorism. The persisting challenges include:

- balancing work and family obligations;
- segregation into lower-paid jobs;
- inequality of pay between men and women;
- the feminization of poverty;
- increases in violence against women; and
- exclusion from post-conflict peace negotiations and rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts.

Despite the removal of legal barriers to women's political participation in many countries, governments remain largely male-dominated. Various factors influence women's *access to decision-making bodies*, including:

- lack of party support, including financial and other resources to fund women's campaigns and boost their political, social and economic credibility;
- the type of electoral system as well as the type of quota provisions and the degree to which they are enforced;
- the tailoring of many of these institutions according to male standards and political attitudes;
- the lack of coordination with and support from women's organizations and other NGOs;
- women's low self-esteem and self-confidence, endorsed by certain cultural patterns which do not facilitate women's access to political careers; and
- the lack of media attention to women's contributions and potential, which also results in the lack of a constituency for women.

Obstacles vary according to the political situation in each country. Yet regardless of

the political context, in all countries women need to be able to compete on a level playing field with men. Among the *indicators of success of women's* participation in politics are the following:

- the introduction of political, institutional and financial guarantees that promote women's candidacies to ensure the equal participation of female nominees in electoral campaigns;
- designing legislative regulations for implementing effective quota mechanisms;
- the creation of educational programmes and centres designed to prepare women for political careers; and
- the development of and support for schools (or centres) for the training of women for participation in electoral campaigns.

Excluding women from positions of power and from elected bodies impoverishes the development of democratic principles in public life and inhibits the economic development of a society. Men, who do not necessarily support women's political participation, dominate the majority of governing institutions. Thus it remains imperative to emphasize that women must lead the process to organize and mobilize their networks, learn to communicate their interests with their male counterparts and different organizations, and push for mechanisms to enhance their representation.

Positive action measures should be taken to assure representation that reflects the full diversity of societies, with the target of the 'gender-balanced' legislative body. To that end, the following two chapters look at two of the most significant mechanisms which have been used to overcome many of the obstacles to women's legislative representation: namely, electoral systems and quotas.

Notes

- ¹ 'Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women', Millennium Development Goals, available at <http://www.developmentgoals.org/Gender_Equality.htm>.
- ² Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), 2004. 'Women in Parliaments 2003'. Release No. 183, 1 March, available at <<http://www.ipu.org/press-e/gen183.htm>>.
- ³ Tinker, Irene, 2004. 'Many Paths to Power: Women in Contemporary Asia', in Christine Hünefeldt, Jennifer Troutner and Peter Smith (eds). *Promises of Empowerment: Women in Asia and Latin America*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.
- ⁴ IPU 2004, op. cit. See also the case study in this Handbook.
- ⁵ Emphasis added. See International Labour Organization (ILO), 2004. 'Global Employment Trends for Women 2004', p. 1, available at <<http://kilm.ilo.org/GET2004/DOWNLOAD/trendsw.pdf>>.
- ⁶ United Nations Population Fund (UNPF), 2000. 'Lives Together, Worlds Apart: The State of World Population 2000'. New York: UNPF.

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