



Section 3 Women in politics and public life



WOMEN QUEUE WITH
THEIR VOTING SLIPS
ON ELECTION DAY.
JAVA, INDONESIA



The capacities of states to deliver on policy promises—to do with gender equality or anything else—are fundamentally shaped by politics, as are the outcomes of economic and governance reforms. As this has become increasingly evident, development analysts’ interest in political dynamics has grown; but the full dimensions of how political processes affect gender equality and ongoing efforts to achieve it are not yet well studied or understood.

This section explores the interactions between the wider political sphere and efforts to promote women’s rights and interests in public policy. In particular it examines the assumption that a greater presence of women in decision-making public bodies leads to more attention to gender concerns by the institutions of government, and more expenditure on meeting women’s needs.

The first chapter, “Women in public office: A rising tide”, looks at the encouraging trend which finds more women than ever before in elected national assemblies, and examines the related mechanisms and impacts. In the second chapter, “Women mobilizing to reshape democracy”, the impact of women’s movements around the world on public decision making is explored, together with questions surrounding women’s other political identities, especially as members of faith or ethnic groups. The current reform agenda for “good governance” in national and local-level public institutions has crucial implications for women and for gender equality, but has it been designed with a proper degree of gender sensitivity? The third and fourth chapters—“Gender and ‘good governance’” and “Decentralization and gender equality”—consider the impacts on women of a range of public-sector reforms designed to improve public accountability and to enhance popular participation in decision making.





Chapter 9

Women in public office: A rising tide

One resolution in the Beijing Platform for Action to have enjoyed marked progress is that calling for women's greater access to public office. Even if governments have been uneven in their responses and there is still far to go, nonetheless the entry of more women to representative office is an achievement that deserves celebration as a contribution to deepening democracy around the world.

Although the average proportion of women in national assemblies has only increased from 9 per cent in 1995 to almost 16 per cent in 2004, a level far short of the Beijing call for equality, 16 countries have managed to put 30 per cent or more women into their national legislatures (table 9.1). In 2003, Rwanda achieved a world record with a parliament in which almost half of members (MPs) were women, a higher proportion than in the highest-ranking OECD country. In the same year Finland achieved the simultaneous tenure of a woman head of state (president) and head of government (prime minister)—another “first” for elected women in political life. However, such achievements remain exceptional. In the absence of measures such as affirmative action to boost numbers of female candidates, the level of women in politics worldwide remains low, increasing at the painfully slow pace of only 0.5 per cent a year.

As we saw in chapter 1 (figure 1.3), every region in the world except for Eastern Europe and Central Asia has seen a slow increase in the numbers of women in office. In the ex-socialist states in these two regions, women's share of seats in national legislatures plummeted by 50 per cent after 1989 when previous communist party quotas for women were dropped; but

during the late 1990s there was some recovery. This experience is a salutary indication of how easily efforts to increase women's participation in politics can be reversed.

The number of women to be found in formal politics is not the best indicator either of the intensity of women's political participation, or of its effectiveness in orienting policy making towards gender concerns. Nor is it necessarily a reflection of the level of civil society activism on women's issues. In the pre-1989 state socialist countries, the large numbers of women in formal politics bore no relation to the strength of women's movements; women's independent civil society activity was actually suppressed under these regimes.¹ A contrasting experience is found in India and the United States; these countries have the largest women's movements in the world in terms of number, variety of organizations and membership size, yet the presence of women in national office is among the lowest in the world.²

The numbers of women active in women's organizations, or even the numbers of active women's organizations in a country, might be a far better indicator of women's political participation than the level of formal female representation in elected bodies. But consistent cross-national data on the numbers and strength of women's associations and movements is not available. Women's political participation has to be understood more broadly than such figures would imply even if they were available: many women voice their interests and views through participation in a wide variety of political and civic associations.

Table 9.1 Countries achieving a "critical mass" (30 per cent and over) of women in national assemblies, April 2004

Country	Electoral system	Existence of Quotas ⁽²⁾	% Women in NA 2004
Rwanda	Plurality: first past the post	YES Type 1: Constitution establishes quota for women. Type 2: 24 seats out of 80 are reserved for women in the National Assembly. Type 3: 20% district councilors are reserved for women.	48.8
Sweden	Proportional representation: list system	YES Type 4: 50% quota for women in the Swedish Social Democratic Labour Party, the Left Party and the Green Party of Sweden.	45.3
Denmark	Proportional representation: list system	NO Used to have Type 4. Quotas were abandoned around 1996.	38.0
Finland	Proportional representation: list system	NO N/A	37.5
Netherlands	Proportional representation: list system	YES Type 4: Labour Party has 50% quota for women; Green Left has a quota for women also (% not confirmed).	36.7
Norway	Proportional representation: list system	YES Type 4: 40% quota for women in the Socialist Left Party, the Norwegian Labour Party, the Centre Party, and the Christian People's Party.	36.4
Cuba	Majority: two-round system	NO N/A	36.0
Spain	Proportional representation: list system	YES Type 4: Spanish Socialist Workers' Party has 40% quota for either sex.	36.0
Belgium	Proportional representation: list system	YES Type 2: One third minimum quota for either sex; two top positions on party list cannot be held by members of the same sex Type 4: 50% quota for women in Flemish Socialist Party and French Socialist Party.	35.3
Costa Rica	Proportional representation: list system	YES Type 2: 40% quota for women in all public elections. Type 4: 40% quota for women in the National Liberation Party and the Christian-Social Unity Party; 50% in the Citizen Action Party.	35.1
Argentina	Proportional representation: list system	YES Type 1: Constitution establishes quota for women. Type 2: 30% of party's lists must include women in winnable positions. Type 3: The capital and provincial laws include quotas. Type 4: Most parties adopted a 30% quota for women.	34.0
Austria	Proportional representation: list system	YES Type 4: The Green Alternative has 50% quota for women; the Austrian People's party has 33.3% and the Social Democratic Party of Austria has 40%.	33.9
Germany	Proportional representation: mixed-member system	YES Type 4: The Party of Democratic Socialism and the Greens have 50% quota for women; the Christian Democratic Union has 33.3% and the Social Democratic Party of Germany has 40%.	32.2
Iceland	Proportional representation: list system	YES Type 4: The People's Alliance and the Social Democratic Party have 40% quota for women.	30.2
Mozambique	Proportional representation: list system	YES Type 4: The Front for the Liberation of Mozambique has a 30% quota for women.	30.0
South Africa ⁽¹⁾	Proportional representation: list system	YES Type 4: The African National Congress has a 30% quota for women. 50% quota for women on party lists at local level.	30.0

Notes: The rest of countries in the world have percentages of women in national parliaments below 30%.

(1) As of December 2003 (information as of April 2004 was not available).

(2) The following types of quotas are considered:

Type 1 = Constitutional quota for national parliament

Type 2 = Election law quota or regulation for national parliament

Type 3 = Constitutional or legislative quota for subnational government

Type 4 = Political party quota for electoral candidates.

Sources: IDEA 2002; IDEA and Stockholm University 2004; IPU 2004.

TOWARDS A “CRITICAL MASS”

In spite of the risks of reading too much into the growth in numbers of women in representative politics, their presence, numbers and visibility are important. Women’s wider participation in formal electoral competition brings core issues of political structure to the fore. Reforms to electoral systems may be designed to progress towards equal gender representation; male-dominated political parties may be challenged; and the presence of more, and more visible, women among senior policy makers may improve responsiveness in both policy and practice to women’s needs.

This idea is expressed in the notion that a “critical mass” of women can change the culture, practice and outcomes of politics. The metaphor of the critical mass was first used in the 1980s to explain the impact that the presence of large numbers of women in local and national government bodies in Scandinavian countries had managed to make on policy making and spending priorities; the proportion regarded as necessary for this critical mass is around 30 per cent.³ The outcome of “critical mass” in Norway, for instance, was that measures were passed to increase subsidized childcare services, extend parental leave, introduce options for flexible working hours and improve pension rights for unpaid care work.⁴ In South Africa, important new legislation on rape, domestic violence and abortion rights was introduced as a result of its promotion by women office holders: they constituted 25 per cent of the total in the 1994 government.⁵

Though effective as a mobilizing slogan, the notion of critical mass implies an automatic, even irreversible, causal sequence between increased numbers of women in politics and better policy outcomes for women. But many obstacles lie between women’s greater access to politics—a challenging enough project on its own—and their capacity to influence decision making in any direction, let alone to bring about gender equity. These obstacles include entrenched male bias in political parties, and as importantly in the formal institutions of government; from the fiscal policy and budgetary systems whereby spending priorities are set, to the mechanisms for law

enforcement, justice and public accountability. It will require more than a rise in the numbers of women in politics to remove such obstacles as these.

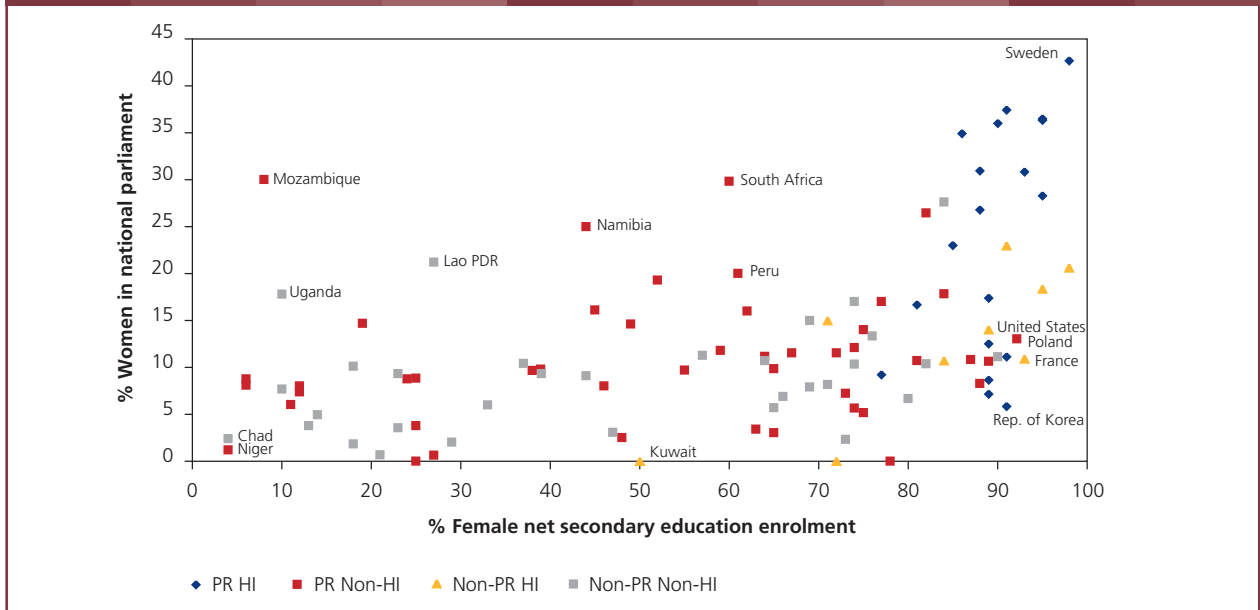
WHY ARE WOMEN ABSENT?

A common-sense explanation for the low numbers of women in politics is that their resource endowments for public life—their education, spare time, employment, income and connections—are lower than those of men. However, as figures 9.1 to 9.3 show, it is difficult to establish a hard and fast correspondence between the levels of women’s education or economic activity and their political participation. Countries and regions with similar levels of female net secondary and tertiary enrolment have very different levels of women’s representation in formal politics. And the relationship between women’s economic activity rate and numbers of women in office is as uneven. The evidence does not suggest that women’s participation in formal politics simply increases in step with advances in their educational or employment status in comparison with those of men.

Evidence for this is confirmed in a study of 23 middle and low-income countries in Asia. The findings show little significant difference in the levels of women in formal politics regardless of whether there is near-universal education, as in the Republic of Korea, quite extensive female educational participation (as in Sri Lanka), or extremely low female literacy (as in Pakistan and Nepal).⁶ This implies that there are other gender-specific influences at work to discourage female political participation, which may well include selection and treatment biases in political institutions.

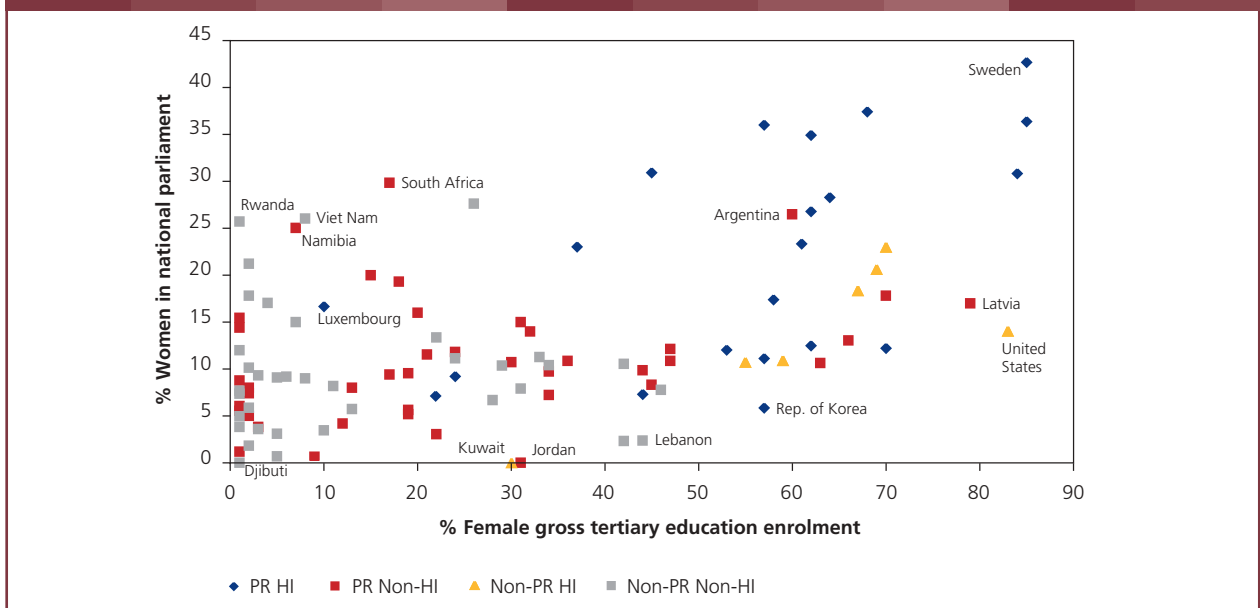
National income influences women’s access to formal politics, as shown in figure 9.4. Women in higher-income countries will tend to benefit from higher human capital, as well as from the fact that democratic institutions and accountability are better entrenched than in developing or transitional countries, and systems are more open. But averages such as these disguise considerable variation. For example, the world’s wealthiest country, the United States, suffers from persistently low levels

Figure 9.1 Women in national parliaments and female net secondary education enrolment, 2001



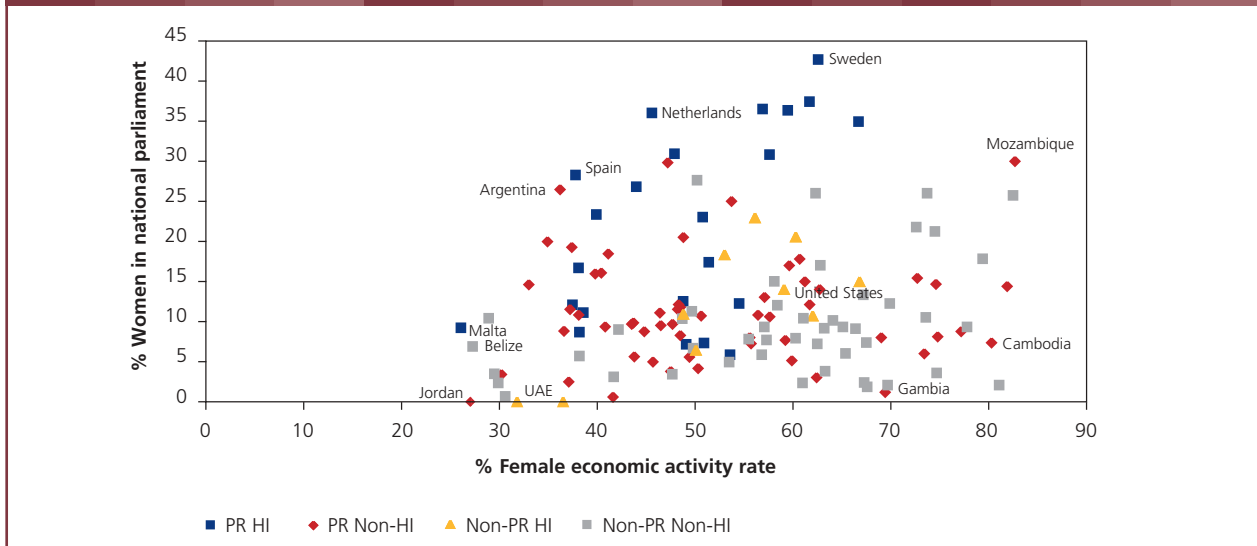
Notes: PR = Countries with a proportional or semi-proportional electoral system; HI = High-income countries
 Sources: UN Statistical Division 2004; UNDP 2003.

Figure 9.2 Women in national parliaments and female gross tertiary education enrolment, 2001



Notes: PR = Countries with a proportional or semi-proportional electoral system; HI = High-income countries
 Sources: UN Statistical Division 2004; UNDP 2003.

Figure 9.3 Women in national parliaments and female economic activity rate, 2001



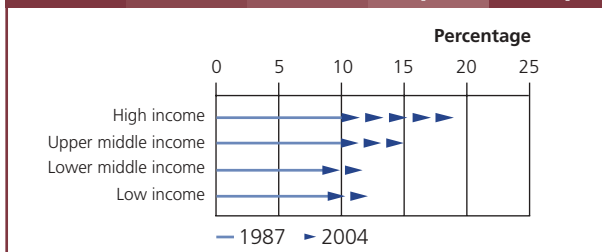
Notes: PR = Countries with a proportional or semi-proportional electoral system; HI = High-income countries
Sources: UN Statistical Division 2004; UNDP 2003.

of female political representation; meanwhile some of the world's poorest countries, such as Rwanda and Mozambique, have high levels of women in politics.

Differences of culture plays an important role in determining levels of women's participation, as is demonstrated by data from the Indian states of Kerala and Rajasthan. Kerala has a matrilineal tradition, which endows women with more autonomy and mobility than in other parts of India, and they marry much

later than in other states. By contrast, communities in Rajasthan tend to be aggressively patriarchal and continue such traditional practices as child marriage. Female literacy rates in these two states are at the opposite ends of the spectrum: 86 per cent in Kerala in contrast with 20 per cent in Rajasthan, dropping to 12 per cent in rural areas. However, women's cultural and educational advantage in Kerala has not propelled them into politics in greater numbers than in Rajasthan. In neither state has the proportion of women in state legislative assemblies reached even 10 per cent, peaking at 9 per cent in Kerala in 1993–7, and 8 per cent in Rajasthan in 1985–90.⁷

Figure 9.4 Women's presence in national parliaments: change in averages by level of income, (1987–2004)



Source: Calculated from IPU 2004; UN Statistical Division 2004; UN 2003.

ELECTORAL SYSTEMS AND WOMEN'S ENTRY

Kerala and Rajasthan may be culturally divergent, but they do share a common electoral system. The evidence shows that electoral systems—the way in which citizens' votes are assigned to seats in representative bodies—are the best predictor of the numbers of women in politics.⁸ Regression analysis using both

Box 9.1 Gender implications of variations in electoral systems

Electoral systems vary chiefly in the electoral formula used for translating votes into seats in a representative assembly, in the ballot structure and in *district magnitude*.

There are two broad types of electoral systems: plurality/majority systems and proportional representation (PR).

Plurality/majority systems tend to use single-member districts, where voters chose a preferred candidate, and the candidate to secure more votes than anyone else wins. Some systems try to establish a majority preference through, for example, run-offs between the highest-polling candidates. But the most common formula, found in at least 70 countries, is the Westminster single-member, simple-plurality system.

In *PR systems*, voters select their preferred party, and seats in the relevant assembly body are assigned in proportion to the percentage of votes won by the party. Constituencies with PR systems tend to be multi-member, with more than one representative elected. The ballot structure in PR systems presents voters with a list of candidates; this may be an “open” list, enabling voters to select preferred candidates, or a “closed” list. In the latter case the party sends candidates to office in proportion to the percentage of votes won; for instance, with 40 per cent of the vote, the top 40 per cent of its listed candidates are successful.

Semi-proportional systems may combine PR lists and plurality/majority systems, for instance by giving voters a chance to select both a party (which will assign candidates based on the percentage of votes it gains) and an individual candidate for a given district. Alternatively they use the plurality principle but have multi-member districts.

regional and global data consistently produces the same results. Out of a total of 174 countries for which statistics were available in 2003, those with electoral systems based on proportional representation (PR) returned assemblies with an average of 16 per cent women politicians, while those without proportional systems (plurality/majority systems or semi-proportional systems—see box 9.1) returned assemblies with 11 per cent women politicians. The contrast is most striking in certain regions: in sub-Saharan Africa, countries with PR systems have legislatures in which women constitute on average 12 per cent of representatives, in contrast with 5 per cent in other systems.

The experience with PR illustrates the way in which variations in institutional rules can have gender-specific impacts, intended or otherwise. PR systems are designed to encourage the representation of diverse interests, and have proved more open to women’s participation than are plurality/majority systems. In the latter, the one shot at office, all or nothing character of the electoral contest provides an incentive for parties to front the safest candidate, usually a representative of “the common man”. In multi-member PR systems where a particular party is strong and can expect to see a number of its candidates elected, more women candidates tend to be fronted.

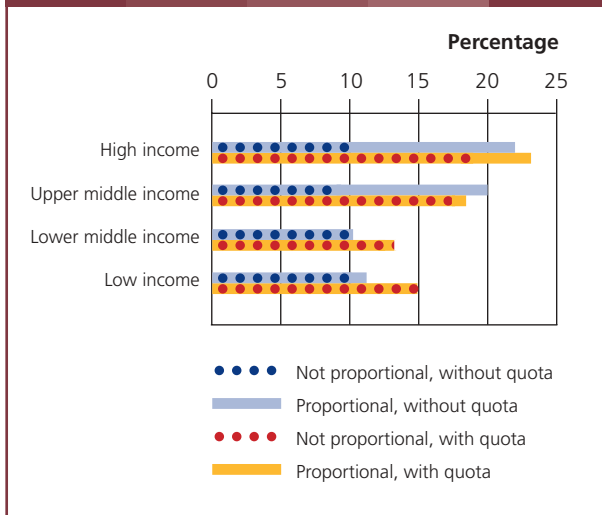
However, even under PR systems there is still considerable variation in the proportions of women elected to assemblies. Some countries with PR persistently return tiny proportions of women to their legislatures; examples are Israel and Greece. Just as inconsistently, a few countries with single-member, simple-plurality systems return substantial proportions of women: New Zealand and Canada, for example. Thus the choice of electoral system cannot alone provide sufficient explanation for different country experiences. This confirms that a number of variables influence women’s electoral prospects, including the political culture and the nature of political parties.

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION: BOOSTING THE NUMBERS

Women quotas

During the last ten years, there has been considerable experimentation with the use of affirmative action or all-women quotas in order to meet the goal of gender parity in representative politics. Quotas on party electoral lists are the most common

Figure 9.5 Women in national parliaments, averages by level of income, electoral system and existence of quotas, 2004



Sources: Calculated from IPU 2004; UN Statistical Division 2004; UN 2003; IDEA 2002; IDEA and Stockholm University 2004.

means of promoting women’s political participation; today they are in use in over 80 countries. As shown in figure 9.5, they enhance the positive impact of PR systems on women’s electoral chances, and help return more women to office in non-PR systems too.

Quotas may be adopted by parties following pressure from women members, or they may be a requirement mandated by law. In single-member, simple-plurality systems the application of quotas can be difficult where local party branches are closely involved in selecting their candidate: they may resist pressure to exclude men. Some parties in these systems have tried to encourage those members responsible for candidate selection to choose women, setting internal “targets” rather than strict quotas.

Quotas alone have not guaranteed better female representation: party commitment is also needed. Quota provisions are evaded when women candidates are demoted to the bottom of a closed list, where they are unlikely to be assigned seats in parliament unless the party’s winning majority is overwhelming. Parties at local level will typically avoid applying quota provisions if there are no penalties for failing to implement them (see box 9.2). As a result, quotas in some countries have not

produced as significant an increase in elected women as had been hoped. For example, Brazil, Venezuela and Panama all have an official quota of 30 per cent women in the national assembly, but during their elections returned respectively 9 per cent, 10 per cent and 10 per cent.

Quotas are most effective where there are large electoral districts, and requirements that women are spaced evenly on lists: a “zipped” list, known as a “zebra” list in southern Africa, contains alternating women and men. Where there are also penalties for non-compliance, such as withholding of government campaign subsidies, co-operation is better assured. These conditions hold in Argentina, Bolivia, Uruguay and Costa Rica; Argentina has a 30 per cent quota and placed women in 31 per cent of seats at the last national election; with an electoral quota of 40 per cent, Costa Rica placed women in 35 per cent of assembly seats. In both these countries the legal mandate for the system requires that women are placed in winnable positions.

Reserved seats and constituencies

In single-member, simple-plurality systems, measures to reserve seats for women have been preferred over quotas of women candidates. These systems of reservation vary according to whether the seats are filled by a direct or indirect election process. For several decades, Tanzania, Pakistan and Bangladesh have filled seats for women in parliament by assigning seats for parties’ own female nominees in proportion to the seats they have won. These reserved seats have simply been a way of further boosting government majorities, and have undermined the perceived legitimacy of the women who fill them.

Another example of seats filled by an indirect process comes from Uganda, where there is a special category of seat reserved for the “woman representative” of every district in the country. The majority of the women in parliament occupy such seats, and their selection is by district-level electoral colleges composed of local-government representatives, almost all of whom were men until very recently.

Box 9.2 Legal challenges to quota law violations in Argentina

In 1991, Argentina passed a quota law mandating that at least 30 per cent of electoral candidates must be women. During the 1993 elections for the Chamber of Deputies, party leaders in every political party and in every province failed to apply the law. Because the electoral judges at the time did not consider the quota law as a “public law”, only the wronged candidates were eligible to challenge the lists. Highly organized women’s groups, with the support of the state-sponsored *Consejo Nacional de la Mujer*, moved quickly to assist women from across the political spectrum in all 24 electoral districts to file legal challenges. These lawsuits produced rulings by the national electoral chamber and the Supreme Court certifying that the quota law was a public law and had to be enforced. A constitutional amendment granting women “equal opportunity ... for access to elective and political party office ... by positive action” was also approved. Today, women legislators hold more than one-third of the seats in both chambers of the Argentinean Congress, and party lists that do not comply with the 30 per cent minimum quota laws are rejected.

Source: Bouvier 2004.

An alternative affirmative method is the reservation of a percentage of territorial constituencies for all-female competition; this enables women to compete for the popular vote rather than lobby for nomination by a party elite. Under a 1992 constitutional amendment, one-third of India’s local government seats are reserved for women, and these constituencies rotate in each electoral round, enabling—or obliging—a new set of constituents to choose a woman representative each time.

Impacts of affirmative measures

The design and application of quota and reservation systems influence the perceived legitimacy of the women politicians who fill them. They may also affect the relationships between women politicians and women’s movements and organizations, and the politicians’ desire or ability to promote gender-equity goals in the political arena.

As with any affirmative action system, the beneficiaries may be stigmatized. A candidate may be regarded as token and without representative credibility, especially if she has no geographical constituency. Where party executives determine which women to include on a list or place in reserved seats, aspiring candidates will be primarily accountable to the party leadership rather than to a potential gender-equity constituency. In

Uganda, selection for reserved assembly seats by a district-level electoral college has been known to prevent aspirants from advancing a feminist agenda or confessing links to the women’s movement—this could be tantamount to electoral suicide if the electoral college is socially conservative.

Among affirmative-action measures, the voluntary adoption of party quotas for female candidates has probably been the most effective at normalizing women’s engagement in politics. The struggle to establish these quotas has sometimes helped to strengthen a party’s commitment to gender equity, and to forge connections between women politicians and women’s organizations in the wider society. Where parties have followed others’ examples—as has happened among conservative parties in continental Europe attempting to match leftist parties’ success in fronting women candidates—an “inter-party contagion”⁹ on the issue of women’s representation can ensue, informing wider debates on gender-equity issues. Quotas work very well in closed-list systems, but there are democratic deficits in these systems. Closed-list systems tend to detach representatives from their constituents, making them accountable less to voters than to party bosses. This problem is exacerbated in highly centralized parties, which, as it happens, also tend to be the most effective at promoting women’s participation: party command structures can overcome resistance to affirmative action and to gender equity itself.

Clearly therefore, entrenched cultural obstacles to women in political leadership are difficult to reduce with affirmative action measures alone. Without supportive action from national women's movements, affirmative measures may end up by populating representative fora with women elites who differ little in social background or political approaches from their male colleagues.

THE MYTH OF VOTER HOSTILITY

An enduring obstacle to the effective promotion of women candidates for office is that parties perceive women to be unelectable. However, there appears to be less resistance among voters to female candidates than there is among party bureaucracies. A Vox Populis opinion poll carried out in Brazil in January 2000 showed that women were considered by voters to be more honest, trustworthy, competent and capable than male candidates; 84 per cent of the electorate claimed they would vote for a woman as mayor, 80 per cent for a woman as state governor, and 72 per cent for a woman president.¹⁰

This favourable attitude was echoed throughout the Latin American region. Fifty-seven per cent of respondents to a 2001 Gallup poll in five major regional cities believed that more women in politics would lead to better government; 69 per cent believed their country would elect a woman president in the next 20 years.¹¹ Prior to the 1988 local elections in Belgium, the law was changed to make it mandatory for candidates' first names to be printed on the ballots so that voters could more easily identify their gender. The result was an astonishing 26 per cent increase in the number of women elected.¹²

In India, figures show that although the number of women elected to the Lok Sabha (the lower house of parliament) has always been lamentably small, this owes much more to the reluctance of parties to field women candidates than to the reluctance of voters to elect women representatives. Since 1957, female candidates have enjoyed a consistently higher success rate than male candidates; on average a woman is twice as likely to be elected as a man.¹³ Voter attitudes elsewhere, however, remain ambivalent or opposed to women exercising equal power

with men. A 2001 survey of the Zimbabwean electorate found that 29 per cent of respondents were in favour of equal representation, and only 25 per cent were in favour of having more women politicians.¹⁴ Eastern European voters have also been slow to accept women in public leadership positions and are still more likely than West Europeans to agree that "men make better political leaders than women do".¹⁵

WOMEN'S PRESENCE AND PERFORMANCE IN PUBLIC OFFICE

In the past 10 years, political systems have made significant changes to enable higher levels of female participation. Although this has not taken place without considerable campaigning effort by women's movements and organizations, the speed with which some of these changes have occurred suggests that public institutions can be highly responsive to social engineering. Experimentation with electoral systems and affirmative action has demonstrated that institutional design can have a profound impact on women's prospects of bringing weight to bear in decision-making councils. But easing women's access to office is just the beginning of the struggle to bring gender equity to state policy making. Their effectiveness in generating support for women's concerns, in ensuring new policies are translated into new patterns of service delivery, and in setting new standards against which the actions of bureaucrats and officials can be judged, depends upon several factors. These include:

- the ideological climate and its openness to gender concerns
- the institutional leadership positions to which women are elected or appointed once in office
- the standing committees for debating legislation or reviewing government policy to which women legislators are assigned
- the responsiveness of political parties to gender-equity concerns
- the relationship between politicians and women's movements
- the capacity of public institutions to implement policies or to regulate private providers so that they respect national gender-equity goals

- the existence of an effective institutional base for promoting gender equity in government planning within the bureaucracy; gendered “national machinery” can consist of a Women’s Ministry, an equal opportunities bureau, or an office on the status of women
- the gender-sensitivity of public accountability systems.

The changing ideological climate

The multiple and expanding roles played by women in political life depend to an extent on ideologies, especially on the association of specific political parties with feminist or anti-feminist views. Parties of the left have been more strongly associated than those on the right with the redistributive and social justice issues of concern to women’s movements. They have also traditionally been more responsive to women’s issues and more willing to support women candidates for office. This has been the case, for example, in Latin America, where left-of-centre parties have promoted ideas of gender equality and supported women’s citizenship rights. Revolutionary groups such as the *Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional* in Nicaragua, the *Farabundo Marti* or National Liberation Front in El Salvador, or Guatemala’s *Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca* have been particularly forceful on women’s behalf.¹⁶

Historically, however, parties of the left have only shown more alacrity in fielding women candidates or addressing gender-specific concerns following concerted mobilization by women members. Labour-based parties drawing membership and resources from trade unions have often given rhetorical support to gender equity but been reluctant to promote women to leadership positions; women have made this complaint about the ruling *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT or Workers’ Party) in Brazil. In Eastern European countries, ex-communist parties and socialist parties have only been marginally more effective than right-wing parties at putting up women candidates; some of the new, still small, conservative parties in countries such as Poland have prominent and numerous female candidates.¹⁷

“Left–right” ideological distinctions have recently become less meaningful given the global spread of neoliberal economic

policies, and the simultaneous politicization of cultural and ethnic identities. In industrialized countries, political parties have typically campaigned on macroeconomic policies reflecting the interests of their principal class constituencies. Parties on the left have appealed to the working class, emphasized employment over inflation, promoted the taxation of capital, and fostered socially inclusive public services; parties on the right have associated themselves with corporate and landowning interests and pursued policies of the opposite stamp. But in developing and transitional economies, people’s interests may be secured less by supporting a class position than by exploiting family connections, or through networks and identities determined by ethnicity, region, religion and race. Thus political parties may be formed around the interests of particular ethnic, religious, or in India, caste groups. Old-style leftist parties, with their inclusionist and secular traditions, have had to respond to this phenomenon; at the same time they have had to deal with the discrediting of state socialism accompanying the dissolution of the Soviet bloc, and the onslaught on organized labour represented by liberalization and adjustment.

Links between parties and women’s movements

In these circumstances, parties of the left have set out to build alliances with social and popular movements, including women’s movements. Those seeking to appeal to women voters are most common in contexts where women’s movements have been strong and played a critical role in democratization; the most prominent examples are in Latin America and southern Africa. But these are not the only types of parties seeking to draw upon the vote-generating capacity of organized women. In South Asia this has been a notable trend amongst chauvinist Hindu, fundamentalist Islamic, and regional caste or ethnicity-based parties. Those representing lower castes, such as the Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh, have seen women not only as key bearers of caste or cultural identity, but as critical sources of electoral support. In regional parties such as the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh, appeals have been made

directly to women voters through populist gestures, such as the distribution of fuel-gas canisters, or the rapid extension of women's self-help and micro-credit programmes at election time. Hand-outs to women have taken precedence over efforts to increase their numbers in leadership positions or revise party policy in women's favour. This factor may account for women's sudden and marked desertion of the TDP in the 2004 state elections.

The influence of women with a feminist agenda within parties and government administrations depends upon the sustained pressure they can bring to bear on the leadership. Party support for key legislation may be withdrawn at the last minute if more pressing priorities intervene. In South Africa's African National Congress (ANC), where feminists have a significant presence both in the leadership of the parliamentary party and among the grassroots membership, the party's commitment to gender equality can never be taken for granted. ANC women leaders had this lesson pressed home when, in 1998, the financial allocation for their Domestic Violence Bill was sidelined by the ANC in favour of a new arms deal.¹⁸

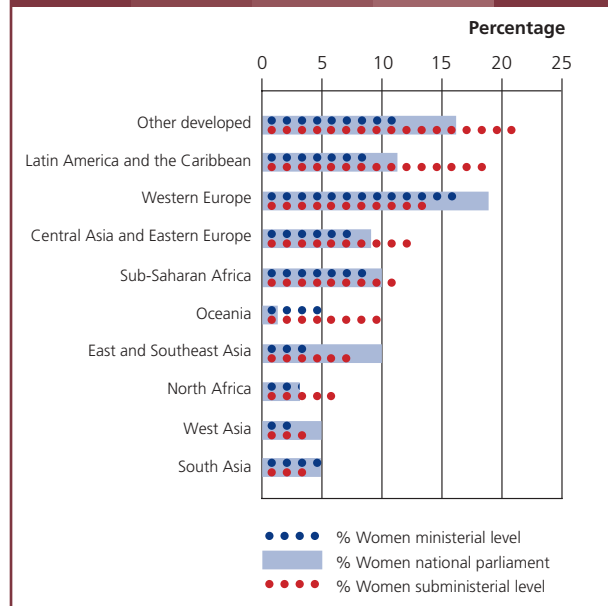
WOMEN'S EXPANDING AND CHANGING POLITICAL ROLES

Women in leadership positions

As numbers of women legislators begin to increase, their participation in decision-making processes is constrained by their limited access to leadership positions. Figure 9.6 shows that women tend to be assigned to ministerial and subministerial executive positions roughly in proportion to their share of seats in parliament. This means that they constitute a minority of executive decision makers.

Women rarely become heads of state or government. More women are to be found as deputy heads, or as presiding officers of parliament (for instance speakers) of lower and upper houses—especially the latter, as these have less direct power than lower houses. Beyond this, the types of ministerial and subministerial assignments women legislators hold tend to be clearly gender-typed. Powerful ministries such as foreign affairs,

Figure 9.6 Women in ministerial and subministerial positions, and national parliaments, regional averages, 1998



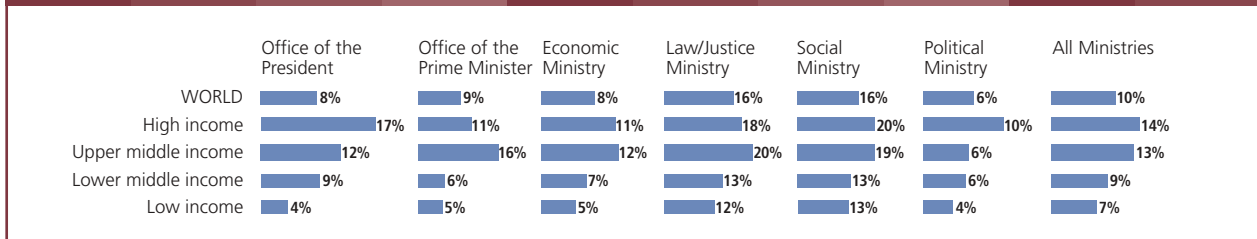
Sources: Calculated from UN Statistical Division 2004; UN 2000a.

defence, home affairs, finance, trade and industry are still primarily the preserve of men, while women are found in ministries of environment, social affairs, health, education, family affairs, gender or women's affairs, and culture. Ministries of justice and labour are being assigned to more women than in the past (figure 9.7).

Caucusing and working in committees

Women parliamentarians in a number of countries have taken steps to raise the profile of gender issues in legislative debates. Some have formed women's caucuses to work across party lines and co-ordinate their work in legislative committees. Legislative decision-making processes are typically mediated by systems of standing committees. The gender composition of these committees clearly reflects the importance attached to their decisions. Women have struggled to be assigned to the most powerful committees: appointments, appropriations, ways and means, and finance or public accounts. But instead they tend to be assigned

Figure 9.7 Ministerial areas assigned to women in the world, by level of income, 1998



Sources: Calculated from UN 2000a.

to committees dealing with health and welfare, youth, environment, culture, transport and consumer affairs, all of which are perceived as having jurisdiction over policy areas of direct interest to women.

Women legislators have sometimes sought to work against this pattern by creating standing committees on women’s rights or on equal opportunities. One of the most successful of these is the South African Parliament’s Joint Standing Committee on the Improvement of the Quality of Life and the Status of Women, initially set up to review the government’s performance in relation to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). This body was later permanently incorporated into the parliamentary committee system, and is charged with assessing the gender impacts of new legislation. It also works on institutional changes in parliament itself, challenging sitting hours inimical to family life and the lack of childcare facilities, thereby contributing to women MPs’ increased effectiveness.

Although parliamentary committees on women’s rights may not have automatic rights of review over fresh legislation, they can be influential in politicizing government business of relevance to women. There are, however, drawbacks to legislative committees on women’s affairs, which can become ghettos for women legislators and women’s issues. In the Philippines, both houses of Congress have committees on women’s welfare; this means that labour measures affecting women are discussed there, not in the committee on labour. Similarly, women legislators are concentrated in “their”

committees, not in other more powerful ones such as those on foreign affairs or public accounts.¹⁹

THE MOBILIZATION OF WOMEN IN AND BY POLITICAL PARTIES

Political parties are the main gatekeepers to women’s selection for office. They are also important arenas for debating policies, and are therefore key institutions through which to promote gender-equality concerns. Women’s movements need to be aware of “the conditions under which political parties serve as institutional carrying agents for advancing women’s interests and improving women’s status”.²⁰ But political parties have not been notable promoters of women’s interests. Rarely have they anywhere assigned priority to gender issues or promoted women as candidates for office without prompting or obligation. Even though women are often key “foot-soldiers” in campaigning and fundraising, parties the world over appear hostile to women’s decision-making participation, especially at top leadership levels. From the scant available data, it appears that few parties anywhere have women in party leadership and management positions in proportion to their grassroots membership.

Parties with clear rules and hierarchies, transparent selection procedures, a distinct and self-standing organizational structure, and strong discipline are thought best able to support women’s participation.²¹ But without internal democracy—and

commitment—even well-institutionalized parties can be hostile to women’s participation. In the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, women’s share of seats has never been high, peaking at 10 per cent in 1973 in the Maoist era, when seats were occupied by wives of prominent leaders. Since the 1980s, women’s presence in the Central Committee has declined continuously, with only five women elected among the 198 seats contested in the 2002 elections.²² In Eastern Europe, former communist parties likewise had few women on their central committees.

Parties in developing countries are often weakly institutionalized. Resources, seats and positions are determined by patronage, without reference to systems of transparency or internal accountability. Such parties often have highly personalized leadership systems based on family dynasties, and decision making is not open to internal challenge. One of the few routes open to women in such systems is to exploit their kinship connections to prominent male politicians to secure leadership positions. Where a woman has gained position within a party via such a route, there is less chance that she will seek connections with organized feminism or other expressions of women’s concerns in civil society, or challenge the masculine party hierarchy by supporting gender causes. In the Philippines, a gendered familial political duty has almost become institutionalized. Male politicians’ wives routinely step in to hold their husband’s seat for the family while husbands take a legally required break to comply with regulations limiting consecutive terms in office.²³

Women’s party wings

Parties have sometimes created “women’s wings” to help mobilize women voters and recruit women members. These, however, have often been captured by the spouses of male leaders and have not proven fertile arenas for the development of female party leadership or for promoting party policy on gender equity.²⁴

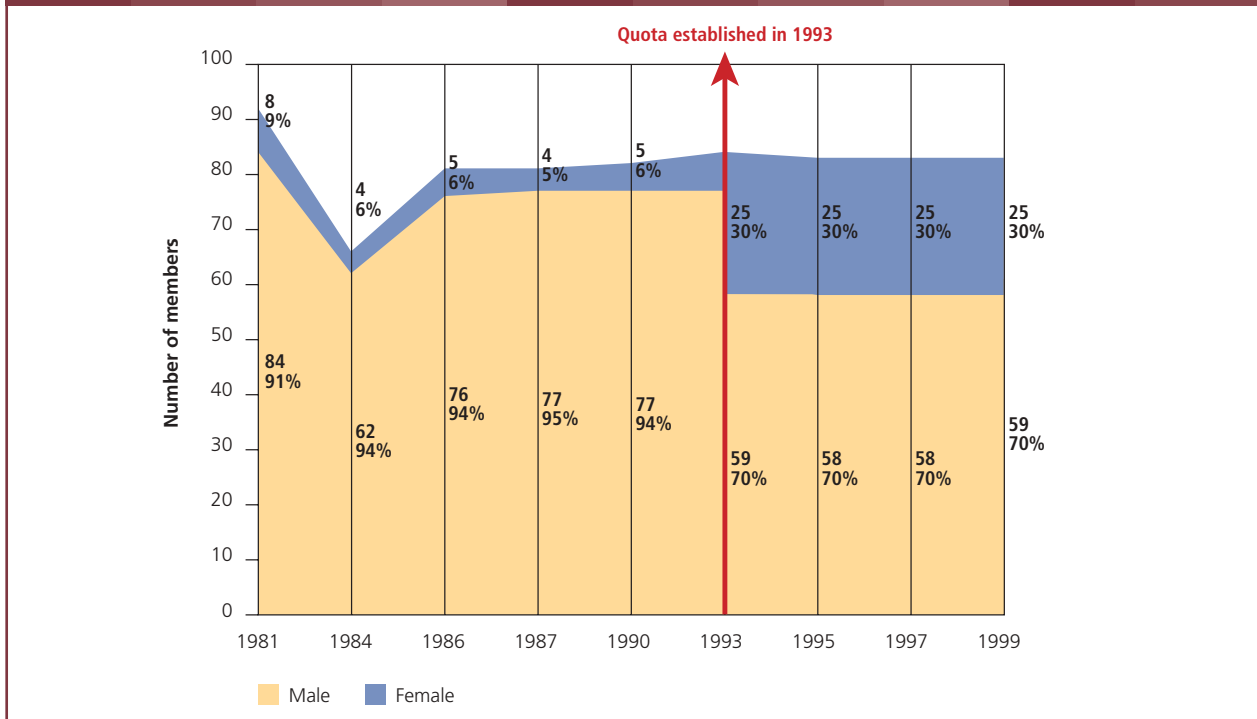
In sub-Saharan Africa, even the ANC’s Women’s League, the largest and most militant women’s wing of any party in the region, had difficulty in challenging the male party leadership

over women’s representation on the National Executive Committee and quotas for women on party lists. Eventual success relied upon the actions of ANC women activists working outside the Women’s League in concert with feminist civil society organizations. In West and East African countries, women’s wings in dominant parties have sought to control and contain the wider women’s movement, harnessing women’s energies to support the president. Nana Konadu Agyeman Rawlings’ 31st December Women’s Movement in Ghana was a notorious example, but similar efforts by political spouses to monopolize international resources for women’s development and to limit women’s independent associational activity has made women wary of engagement with the state.²⁵

Elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, the discrediting of one-party “big man” politics has led to challenges to female support structures for male party hierarchies. In Botswana women in the rank and file of the main political parties have exposed the conflict of interests that prevent spouses of male politicians from advancing women’s interests, and are bringing new leadership and revamped structures to women’s party wings. A feminist civil society organization, *Emang Basadi*, has held regular conferences inviting women’s wings of parties to report on their progress in meeting quotas on party lists and in inserting women into the party leadership.²⁶

Quotas for women in party leadership positions have been one means of breaking down party resistance to women at top levels, but they have been harder to introduce than quotas for women on party lists. In southern Africa, only the ANC has a quota for women in its National Executive Committee, and this was agreed at a later date than the hard-fought battle to ensure that 30 per cent of the party’s lists were female. In Brazil four parties have internal quotas, and these are the only ones to have more than 10 per cent of women in their decision-making offices. Where there is marked resistance to women’s participation, quotas become ceilings, not entry points. The *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT; Workers’ Party) introduced its quota in 1993, and since then the proportion of women in the leadership has remained exactly the same at just under 30 per cent (figure 9.8), not even reflecting the 40 per cent proportion of the party’s membership that is female.

Figure 9.8 National Board of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) by sex of members, Brazil (1981–1999)



Source: Sacchet 2004.

In some developing-country contexts, political parties are introducing a greater degree of internal democracy to give their branch-level membership a role in selecting candidates and internal party decision makers. For instance, in Mexico, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) was known in power for its centralized domination and lack of transparency in selection processes. In 2001, it responded to electoral defeat by introducing primaries—direct elections by members—enabling the party rank and file to elect about half the candidates. Other parties in Mexico have since followed suit.²⁷ In Brazil, the PT introduced similar direct elections for candidates in 2001. In Puerto Rico, the use of primaries by political parties for their nominating processes during the 1990s resulted in a greater number of women being selected by the rank and file than had previously been selected by the party leaders, particularly in the two parties that account for the majority of seats.²⁸ When

primaries were introduced by the ruling party in Botswana in 1999 there was a dramatic upsurge in female candidates: 10 times more women competed for party nominations than the cumulative number for all past elections and parties combined. Opposition parties followed suit, resulting in a marked increase of numbers of women nominated to run for seats around the country.

The creation of women’s parties

Women’s frustration with the male bias of conventional political parties has occasionally led to the creation of women’s parties. In fact these are not a new phenomenon, having provided a means for women to engage in politics in some Nordic countries since the early years of the 20th century. In Iceland for example, women’s parties have been putting women into office

since the Women's List won 22 per cent of the votes for the Reykjavik city council in 1908.²⁹ Women's parties have existed in the Philippines since the 1950s, and six women's parties contested the 1998 national assembly elections. Two women's parties contested the 1994 South African elections.

Revisions to electoral systems that enable non-government organizations to run for office, as in Armenia or the Philippines, can be helpful in giving certain social groups opportunities to gain electoral support when conventional parties will not embrace their interests. In the Philippines, the 1995 Party-List System Act reserved 20 per cent of seats in the House of Representatives for such groups. They campaign at a national, not local constituency level, appealing to cross-cutting interests all over the country, and are therefore able to appeal to a cross-national interest in gender issues.

Tough campaigning

Where political campaigns are regularly marred by crime or violence, women candidates may stand down because they are unwilling to engage in violence or seek strong-arm support from criminal networks. Much of the local "muscle" mobilized to intimidate opponents during elections is young and male, sometimes organized through party "youth wings". The example of Winnie Mandela's Soweto "football club" in South Africa shows that some women do access these kinds of support groups, but fewer women than men engage in this kind of politics.

The impact of corruption and violence on women's participation in politics is evident in Zimbabwe. Political repression and a general climate of insecurity have made it extremely dangerous to engage in opposition. Since the early 1990s women's participation in national and local elections has plummeted. In 1997, the Southern African Development Community agreed a target for women's representation in public office in all member countries. The Zimbabwean Women in Parliament Support Unit thereupon wrote to all political parties, reminding them of the need to increase women's participation at all decision-making levels. Few parties responded, but a spokesperson for the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), the main opposition

party, explained that given the current political violence and intimidation faced by MDC candidates, his party was not encouraging women to stand: "Everyone knows the kind of political atmosphere we are operating in. Unless there is a change that allows candidates to campaign freely, without fear of harassment and intimidation, we will continue to see less women being nominated as candidates for local councils."³⁰

Another serious problem is the generation of campaign finance. Open lists in PR systems and single-member constituencies are thought to exacerbate the problems women face in mobilizing funds. The focus on individual candidates creates incentives for personal campaigning and direct appeals to voters. This in turn encourages patronage practices, in which politicians seek alliances with powerful individuals who can mobilize their "clients" or dependents as "banks" of votes, in exchange for state resources.³¹ Candidates also seek funding from their parties; however there is an impression among women candidates that parties spend more of their resources on financing the campaigns of "safe" male candidates.³² Most of the countries that have achieved a "critical mass" of women in elected bodies have some form of government subsidy for political campaigns.

Reducing gender voting gaps

Political parties need to attract women's votes. This ought theoretically to promote better representation of women's interests on party policy platforms and better electoral accountability to women. But parties only respond to the need to attract women in this way if there is a discernible "gender gap" in voting behaviour.³³ Gendered voting gaps have only emerged recently in many Western democracies, after many decades in which there was either little difference in women and men's votes, or else a slight female preference for conservative candidates. This began to change in the 1980s in countries such as the United States, Canada and Australia, where women's support shifted to liberal or left-of-centre parties.³⁴ In many developing countries, awareness of the gender voting gap is a relatively recent phenomenon. Votes may not be tabulated according to gender, and awareness is usually contingent on whether feminist organizations have

Box 9.3 Chile: A case of votes rather than convictions

In 1995, the government of President Eduardo Frei Ruiz-Tagle in Chile introduced a progressive Plan for Equal Opportunities for Chilean Women. The plan was notable for its feminist language and the inclusion of goals such as expanded reproductive rights and the recognition of non-traditional partnerships: controversial measures in a conservative Catholic society. The plan also signalled a relaxation of controls on the ambitions of the national women's bureau, the *Servicio Nacional de la Mujer*, and an expansion of its budget.

The mystery of why President Frei's *Concertacion* party should have suddenly taken this feminist turn is explained by the long-standing existence of a marked gender gap in Chilean voting. In every presidential election since 1952, there has been a gap between votes cast by men and votes cast by women, ranging from 14 per cent in 1964 to 3 per cent in 1993. Women's voting clout has increased as they have reached and surpassed parity in voter turnout, constituting a majority (52 per cent) in the 1989 presidential elections.³⁵

Therefore the plan's introduction seems to have been a bid to cultivate support amongst the country's female electorate, rather than a response to pressure from women's groups or an initiative of female legislators.³⁶ In Chile, women do not tend to vote more conservatively than men, and have only been truly decisive in one election (1958); but they are still seen as a crucial group of swing voters, and particularly decisive in relation to presidential choices. With the Beijing Women's Conference looming in 1995, the government needed to display feminist credentials to the women voters.

Source: Baldez 1997.

made efforts to measure and publicize a voting gap as a means of gaining political leverage. There are cases where the existence of a large gender voting gap has had a significant effect on policy choice (see box 9.3).

ASSESSING WOMEN'S POLITICAL EFFECTIVENESS

Do women politicians represent women's interests and gender-equity issues effectively? Like male politicians, women address the issues of concern to their constituents and their parties, and for those representing traditional social groups or conservative parties, gender equality may not be on their agenda. Given the way in which party selection systems may eliminate outspoken feminists as an electoral liability, it is not surprising to find women politicians who do not advocate these concerns. Their links with activist women's organizations may be weak or nonexistent. In Namibia, for instance, very few women MPs had been active in women's organizations before joining Parliament.³⁷ Where family-based hierarchies, identity politics,

and the prejudices of male-dominated selection systems put a lid on the numbers of women in leadership positions, women with an autonomous base in civil society will tend to be weeded out. Where those dynamics prevail, the arrival at the "critical mass" proportion of 30 per cent women's participation will not necessarily make a feminist difference to politics and policy making.

Women legislators are divided on a great number of issues, including those connected to their party, class, ethnic group or religious affiliations, and their legislative impact in the area of gender equality can therefore be uneven. In the Philippines, women's participation in Congress has more than doubled between 1987 and 2001 to 18 per cent of members; but this jump has failed to translate into the tabling and approving of a greater number of bills addressing women's concerns.³⁸ On the contrary, deep divisions between women legislators on emotive issues such as abortion rights have served to stall advances in reproductive health legislation. Late in 2003, women opponents of a reproductive rights bill in the House Health Committee loudly recited rosaries to disrupt discussions about the bill. The Catholic Church mobilized opponents of the bill

and condemned its supporters in public. The consequence was a dramatic decline in the number of female or male legislators willing to support it.

Uneven progress

The assumption that a heightened presence of women in politics may eventually work in favour of greater gender equality in public decision making appears, to date, to be borne out by the experience of some industrialized countries. Case studies of the legislative programmes of women in office suggest this finding, although no systematic cross-national comparative data is yet available. Even when women's divergent party interests are taken into account, they do their best to introduce bills and pass legislation dealing with the expansion of women's citizenship rights. In the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia, this has been the subject of research for at least two decades. Studies of participation in legislative debates, and bills introduced by politicians, shows unambiguously that although women and men share the same top policy concerns (in Canada for instance, economy, social policy and jobs³⁹), woman legislators are more likely than men to introduce bills that address issues related to women's rights, family or children.⁴⁰

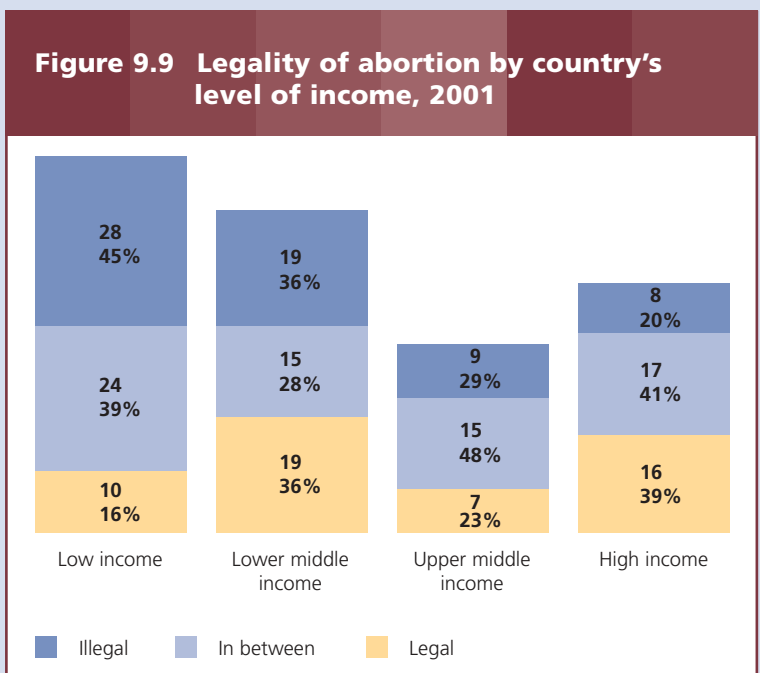
It is difficult to say what impact increased numbers of women in developing country governments have had on policy making. One reason is that, with the exception of socialist states, too few women have been in office for long enough to have had a discernible impact on policy making. Another limitation on the capacity of women legislators to influence policy making is the rather limited scope for policy innovation in states highly dependent on support from international financial institutions. Although the extent to which liberalization limits the range of policy options facing governments is often exaggerated, there is no question that straitened economic circumstances and aid dependence limit resources available for progressive gender-related policies, and tend to sideline social concerns in favour of promoting national economic growth and improving the investment environment.

Hard as it is to measure women's impact on policy making in different regions and in widely different circumstances, it is important to assess the validity of expectations that women in office will help advance gender equality. In time, relationships may become apparent between numbers of women in office and advances in women's status, such as lower maternal mortality rates, higher levels of female education, less gender-based violence, and more even distribution of asset ownership and wealth between women and men. Although causal connections between women's presence in office and such outcomes cannot yet be made, there is currently one arena in which a strong association between numbers of women in office and policy change is measurable: abortion rights (see box 9.4). The statistical association between women politicians and abortion rights, though much stronger than any other variable examined, does not indicate causality: it may be that socially progressive parties introduced abortion rights and this contributed to an environment in which it was easier for women to gain political office. Nevertheless, the association is striking.

In a different area—violence against women—one study finds, in contrast, only a weak and nonlinear relationship between proportions of women in the legislature and responsive policy outcomes.⁴² The study concluded that focusing on the numbers or percentage of women in legislative bodies might well be the wrong lens through which to determine the ways in which women legislators influence public policy.⁴³ Although individual feminists or groups of women legislators are not unimportant as political actors in advancing women's rights, the study found that the presence of a strong, autonomous women's movement explained more about government responses to violence against women than the presence of women in the legislature.

Box 9.4 Women in politics: What difference does it make? An empirical assessment of the case of abortion laws

Currently, only about 28 per cent of countries have legal access to abortion on request (see figure 9.9). Although this situation has improved in the last 15 years, around 34 per cent of countries still consider abortion illegal under any circumstances.



Note: "Legal" includes only countries where abortion on request is allowed. "Illegal" includes only countries where abortion is not permitted under any grounds, though an exception is usually made when the woman's life is at risk. Such an exception does not exist in Malta, Chile and El Salvador. "In between" includes countries where abortion is neither "legal" nor "illegal" (abortion may be legal under certain circumstances such as when the woman's physical or mental health is at risk, amongst others).

Source: Calculated from UN 2000a.

What are the conditions under which some countries grant the right to abortion on request, while others refuse? To answer this question, an empirical logistic model was estimated using key variables such as the country's level of income, the extent of women's political and economic participation, female education, political regime and state religion. Countries were classified in three categories according to their abortion laws:⁴¹

- Abortion is legal on request ("legal").
- Abortion is legal under certain circumstances ("in between").
- Abortion is illegal in any circumstances (except when the woman's life is at risk ("illegal").

The results of the model are striking. Women's participation in the economy and in politics are the main variables explaining why abortion laws are granted in countries worldwide. A 1 per cent increase in either of these variables will increase (in a similar proportion) the chances of making abortion legal on request, and will reduce (in a slightly smaller proportion) the chances of having rigid laws that make abortion "illegal".

Variables such as the level of female literacy, national income and whether the country is Roman Catholic also play an interesting role. The probability of a country legalizing abortion on request is reduced if the country is low-income and increased if it is classified as "nation in transit" or "not free".* Female literacy is only an important factor when there is a transition from a situation where abortion is never legal to one where it is granted under limited conditions. The probability of a country moving from a situation of no abortion under any circumstances to some limited abortion rights is reduced if the country is Roman Catholic and low or middle-low income.

It is important to add a world of caution. The empirical analysis shown here does not prove causality, but only reflects statistical relationships of the variables affecting the rigidity or flexibility of abortion laws.

Note: (*) Classifications used by Freedom House [www.freedomhouse.org]. Countries are "not free" according to a score obtained using a survey that measures political rights and civil liberties. "Nations in transit" is the term used for post-communist countries.

Source: Cueva 2004.

Notes

- 1 Molyneux 1994; Jie 2004.
- 2 Kenworthy and Malami 1999:254–5.
- 3 Dahlerup 1986; Beckwith 2002.
- 4 WEDO 2001.
- 5 Meintjes 2003.
- 6 Jayaweera 1997:421.
- 7 Narayan et al. 1999:2.
- 8 Matland 1999; Reynolds 1999; Yoon 2001.
- 9 Matland and Studlar, 1996.
- 10 CFEMEA 2000:2.
- 11 Inter-American Dialogue 2001.
- 12 Darcy et al. 1994:150.
- 13 Narayan et al. 1999.
- 14 Women in Parliament Support Unit 2001:4.
- 15 Wilcox et al. 2003, cited in Fodor 2004a:15.
- 16 Luciak 2001.
- 17 Fodor 2004a:21.
- 18 Selolwane 2004:72.
- 19 Sobritchea 2004:5.
- 20 Beckwith 2000:439.
- 21 Norris and Lovenduski 1993; Walyen 2000.
- 22 Jie 2004.
- 23 Sobritchea 2004:7.
- 24 Tsikata 2001.
- 25 Sow 2004; Tripp 2000; Tamale 1999.
- 26 Selolwane 1997, 1999.
- 27 Baldez 2004.
- 28 del Alba Acevedo 2000:19.
- 29 Bjarnhé_insdottir 1905.
- 30 Sunshine for Women 2004.
- 31 Nicolau and Schmitt 1995:144.
- 32 Sacchet 2004:13; Goetz 2003:134.
- 33 Mueller 1988:31.
- 34 Hayes and McAllister 1997:6.
- 35 Hayes and McAllister 1997:1.
- 36 Baldez 1997.
- 37 Bauer 2004:17.
- 38 Sobritchea 2004:7, citing Naz 2002:27.
- 39 Tremblay 1998:450.
- 40 Thomas 1991; Dodson and Carroll 1991; Kathlene 1994; McAllister and Studlar 1992; Vega and Firestone 1995; Norris 1996.
- 41 Usually, abortion laws are classified into seven categories: (i) legal on request, (ii) legal only for social and economic reasons, (iii) allowed on the grounds of foetal impairment, (iv) allowed in cases of rape or incest, (v) permitted to preserve the woman's mental health, (vi) permitted to protect the women's physical health, and (vii) illegal (with an exception in most countries when the woman's life is at risk).
- 42 Weldon 2002:chapter 4.
- 43 Weldon 2002:14.