



Canadian International
Development Agency

Agence canadienne de
développement international

Electoral support & equality between women and men

Canadian International Development Agency
200 Promenade du Portage
Gatineau, Quebec
K1A 0G4
Tel: (819) 997-5006
Toll free: 1-800-230-6349
Fax: (819) 953-6088
(For the hearing and speech impaired only (TDD/TTY): (819) 953-5023
Toll free for the hearing and speech impaired only: 1-800-331-5018)
E-mail: info@acdi-cida.gc.ca

Canada 

Do women and men have equal access to the political process?

Unequal participation by women and men in electoral politics is evident in the predominance of men among parliamentarians, cabinet ministers, and heads of government.

In most countries (although not all) women and men have equal rights to vote and to stand for electoral office. Why, then, are they so few among elected representatives? According to a recent handbook, *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers* (see overleaf), the main obstacles stem from political structures, processes and parties:

- lack of political party support for female candidates, particularly limited financial support and limited access to political networks;
- lack of coordination and networks of women MPs and women's groups with other public organisations such as trade unions, possibly due to lack of awareness of the potential benefits or lack of financial resources for such links;
- male-oriented norms and structures that mitigate against women's public participation, including parliamentary schedules that are difficult to reconcile with parental and family responsibilities;
- insufficient mobilisation of media support;
- lack of leadership-oriented training and education for women;
- electoral systems that are not conducive to women's political participation, such as "first past the post" rather than proportional representation systems.

Other obstacles to women's participation include: inadequate financial resources, illiteracy and limited access to education, the double burden of family and work responsibilities, ideologies or cultural patterns opposing women's participation in public life, and unsupportive attitudes on the part of the media. Women may face difficulties securing the support of other women. It is not always just men who are unconvinced of women's right to participate.

Equal rights to vote that exist in law can also be denied in practice. For example, in some countries, women's ability to exercise the vote may be restricted by hostility among male community

leaders and officials to women's participation. Women may face cultural constraints to public contact between women and men or other limits on their mobility. As well there may be practical constraints that limit women's ability to vote – for example, women may not have the time required to stand in line on election day or participate in campaign discussions.

Between elections: influences on the electoral process

There are some direct measures that can be taken to counter barriers in the political process. These can include, for example, reviewing the design of the electoral system in light of the objective of equal opportunities for women and men, or providing training for women candidates in media strategies. (See overleaf - "potential roles for development cooperation.")

However, many of the barriers to equal participation in the political process reflect more general limits on women's opportunities. An assessment of where action is required to achieve progress in women's participation in the political process and a better gender balance among decision-makers should also consider:

- Sub-national electoral processes: Do these encourage participation by women? Are equal participation objectives being considered in decentralisation initiatives?
- Media: Do journalists and media organisations treat women candidates seriously? Do they provide balanced coverage of equality issues?
- Education system: Do the curriculum, teaching materials and teachers promote understanding by both girls and boys of their rights and responsibilities as citizens?
- Public education on human rights and civic responsibilities: Do initiatives highlight women's equal right (and responsibility) to participate? Do they encourage women as well as men to be active in public life?
- Leadership of non-governmental organisations: Do such organisations nurture and support women leaders?

Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers

This is the title of a handbook prepared by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) through collaboration between their Gender Working Group and international experts and women parliamentarians. The handbook is available on the Internet:

<<http://www.int-idea.se/women/parl/toc.htm>>

The handbook provides strategies and ideas as well as references to further information. It is a useful source on a range of issues about women's involvement in the political process. It includes chapters on:

- Obstacles to women's participation in parliaments;
- the legislative recruitment process and electoral systems and how they affect women's participation;
- the use of quotas to increase women's participation;
- strategies to increase women's decision-making power once in parliament;
- the work of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) with women parliamentarians;
- concluding summary about the needs of women parliamentarians and the strategies adopted to make inroads in Parliament.

The handbook also includes six case studies to illustrate the issues discussed:

- Norway, Costa Rica, India and South Africa, where significant advances have been made;
- Egypt, as the Arab country with the longest history of democracy and the most women parliamentarians;
- Russia, as a country in the midst of a democratic transition, but one in which women lost some rights.

Potential roles for development cooperation

In technical assistance directly related to the reform of electoral systems and the management of elections, development cooperation can help focus attention on gender equality related to:

- design of electoral systems: analysis of the implications for women's representation of different options in electoral systems (including the number of seats, the size of electoral districts, the number of members per district, whether proportional representation is adopted, etc.);
- voter registration: supporting approaches to registration and training of officials to ensure that women get on list on an equal basis with men;
- voter education: ensuring that education reaches women as well as men, and promotes respect in the community for women's equal right to participate;
- access to the polls: promoting approaches that reduce risks to voting that could reduce women's participation (e.g., separate lines or polling booths for women).

Support can also be provided for initiatives by NGOs that focus on women's political participation, such as:

- analyses of electoral processes and regulations for their gender equality implications;
- establishment of networks among women's groups and between women's groups and other NGOs in support of women's political participation and women candidates;
- skills and leadership training for women in preparation for standing as candidates;
- advocacy of women's equal participation among the public, political parties and parliamentarians.

Gender balance in parliaments

	% women
Nordic countries.....	36.7%
Americas.....	15.2%
Asia.....	13.3%
Europe (except Nordic)*.....	12.3%
Sub-Saharan Africa.....	11.6%
Pacific.....	11.8%
Arab States.....	3.3%

* OSCE member countries

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) website at :

<<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>>

See also IPU's PARLINE database for detailed results of parliamentary elections by country (accessible from the same website).

The IPU, which is an international association of elected representatives, has developed a *Plan of Action to correct the present imbalance in the participation of men and women in public life*. This is available on the IPU website, along with other

UNIFEM initiatives

A major theme of UNIFEM (United Nations Development Fund for Women) is Governance and Leadership. UNIFEM has undertaken a number of initiatives to support women's political participation and leadership, including:

- training in campaign and media strategies for women parliamentarians and candidates for office (Zambia, Ghana, Kenya, Senegal, Botswana and Nigeria);
- support for NGO campaigns for legal reforms and for women voter education and registration (six countries in southern Africa);
- a TV documentary film on the election of two women candidates in Yemen's first democratic election in 1993 (intended to build momentum for women's entry into politics in Yemen and other Arab states);
- initiatives to encourage more women candidates, more gender-sensitive political platforms, and support for newly elected women (Cambodia and the Dominican Republic).

For further information on UNIFEM strategies and initiatives, see:

information. See: <<http://www.ipu.org/iss-e/women.htm>>

<<http://www.unifem.undp.org>>