

# Parliamentary Development



## PARLIAMENTS: THE GENDER DIMENSION

With notable exceptions, including Rwanda and the Nordic countries, women are conspicuously absent from parliaments around the world. Though progress has been made since the 1990s, women still represent only 16 per cent of parliamentary seats worldwide. As of 2004, only 17 countries had achieved the interim goal set in the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action<sup>1</sup> of having women hold at least 30 percent of national legislative seats.

As elected governing bodies, parliaments play a critical role in channelling public participation in policy making, allocating resources through national budgets, developing poverty reduction strategies, mediating diverse societal views, overseeing government action and fostering transparency. Parliaments provide multiple avenues for promoting gender equality in terms of capacities, rights, access to opportunities and resources, and freedom from violence. In addition, 'the presence of women in power serves as an indicator of a society's fairness and has the potential to trigger more fundamental changes in gender relations and beliefs about appropriate gender roles'.<sup>2</sup> It is not surprising, then, that the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments is one of four indicators for Millennium Development Goal 3: to promote gender equality and empower women.



Having a meaningful number of women in parliament can have a positive impact on the political process. According to the UN Millennium Project Task Force on Education and Gender Equality, women parliamentarians bring new perspectives and legislative priorities to the political debate. They are more likely than men to introduce bills related to women's rights and to support laws that benefit women, children and families. The likelihood that women will champion such measures increases once they reach a critical mass and are able to form alliances. In addition, studies have shown a positive correlation between women's participation in public life and a reduction in corruption. Public opinion polls reveal the widely held view that having women in power improves government and that women are better able to address a wide range of policy issues.<sup>3</sup>

Gains in parliament are rarely achieved without advocacy, lobbying, the forging of alliances and, in many cases, the use of quotas. The experience of the 17 countries that have crossed the 30 percent threshold shows that gender quotas and reservations are the most effective policy tools for increasing women's share of parliamentary seats. In Morocco, for instance, an unprecedented number of women were elected to parliament in 2002 after years of work by the women's movement and support from national and international partners. Their

efforts underscored the importance of working across party lines, preparing a strategy grounded in national and international experience, creating alliances and pushing for the use of quotas. Getting women into political office in sufficient numbers – with the ultimate goal of a 50-50 gender balance – is a crucial first step. But equally critical is the effectiveness of women once in office. Enhancing the quality of women's contributions once elected is another priority area for support.

## WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

In addition to the UNDP parliamentary development site (<http://www.undp.org/governance/parldev.htm>), the website of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (<http://www.ipu.org/iss-e/women.htm>) is a valuable resource, containing information on and links to other resources concerning the gender dimension of parliamentary development.

1 For details on representation, go to the Inter-Parliamentary Union site at [www.ipu.org](http://www.ipu.org)

2 From the UN Millennium Project Task Force on Education and Gender Equality final report at <http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/reports/reports2.htm#02>

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## UNDP IN ACTION: RWANDA

Rwanda has the world's highest proportion of women legislators: 48.8 percent of seats in the National Assembly. Of a total of 80 Assembly seats, 24 were reserved for women under the new Constitution. But in the October 2003 election, women also won 15 non-reserved seats, yielding a total of 39 seats held in the lower house and 6 out of 20 seats in the Senate, the upper house. Women also hold 9 out of 28 ministerial posts – among the most in the world.

Ten years ago, extremists in government from the country's largest ethnic group, the Hutus, sought to eliminate the country's Tutsi minority. In the span of 100 days, almost one million people – for the most part Tutsis, but also moderate Hutus opposed to the plan – were slaughtered. The aftermath was particularly difficult for women. Rape victims learned that they were HIV-positive several years later, only after they started developing the symptoms of AIDS. And many women whose husbands died or fled in 1994 found themselves at the head of households. Today, women and girls make up 54 percent of Rwanda's 8 million people and 60 percent of the country's workforce.

Women say that Rwanda's recent history is the main reason they have risen to such political prominence. Their painful experiences as well as the precarious circumstances in which so many Rwandan women found themselves at the end of the genocide spurred them to campaign for new laws on succession of property – to allow women to inherit land from their husbands or fathers – and to stiffen the penalties for child rapists.

"If we have such a high percentage of seats today, it's not because of chance," said Constance Mukayuhi Rwaka, a member of Parliament. "After 1994, Rwanda was in quite a peculiar situation," she says. "Women had really been mobilized across the country." Ms. Rwaka recalls that, after the genocide, women throughout the country joined forces, either informally or through associations, to help out those who were widowed or orphaned during the killing.

The strong showing for women candidates at the polls was also due to a Dutch-funded UNDP initiative to train women in decision-making positions, strengthen women's civil society organizations and establish government units to look after women's concerns. Much of the aid was focused on helping women become more politically aware and to sensitizing society as a whole to the advantages of involving women fully in decision-making.

"Had it not been for the genocide," said Ms. Gahondogo, a teacher elected in October to fill one of the seats reserved for women, "Rwandan women would never have dared ask for succession [inheritance] rights."

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