

Electoral Assistance



ELECTIONS: THE GENDER DIMENSION

Elections are a watershed in a country's transition to democracy, and broad-based participation is rightly perceived as crucial to a truly representative government. Yet the electoral process itself, even in well-functioning, 'mature' democracies, often creates serious barriers to the participation of women, both as candidates and, to a lesser extent, as voters. This is one reason why women hold just 16 percent of parliamentary seats worldwide.

A host of factors conspire to keep women from running for political office. In many societies, cultural norms restrict women's ability to participate in public life. As a result, women have few opportunities to learn and exercise leadership skills. Women's domestic and care-giving responsibilities often leave them little time to campaign and raise funds. Moreover, the power of incumbency is strong the world over, and female challengers generally face additional obstacles in unseating (mostly male) incumbents.

Political parties serve as 'gate-keepers' to elective office and control the recruitment process in most political systems. In general, they have created serious obstacles to women's political

participation. The role of women as voters has also traditionally been limited. Campaigns and party platforms that fail to address women's concerns often fail to motivate women as voters. Illiteracy, more common among women than men, has impeded women's participation. Cultural norms and strictures can also make it difficult to register women to vote. However, this is starting to change.

Recent examples of voter turnout, in Afghanistan, Morocco and Yemen, for example, demonstrate that ways can be found to increase women's engagement in the electoral process. In Yemen, UNDP has supported voter education efforts that are linked to religious instruction in order to counter unsupported claims that religion bans women from politics. In Afghanistan, UNDP and its partners hired female election workers to register women and to staff polling stations to address cultural prohibitions against the mixing of the sexes. They allowed fully veiled women to use a thumbprint on their voter ID cards rather than a photograph and

supported civic education programmes directed to both men and women on the importance of women's participation. Post-crisis and other transitional situations can present unique opportunities to 're-write the rules' of the political game and create new avenues for women to enter political life.



GETTING WOMEN ON THE BALLOT

AND TO THE POLLS

Women seldom make significant gains in the electoral process without pressure and support from women's organizations, advocacy, lobbying, training of women candidates, alliance-building and external financial assistance. Within this arena, there are many areas for possible UNDP support.

Promoting the use of quotas, which are increasingly being used to guarantee women's participation, is another area where UNDP can lend assistance. Electoral quotas take many forms: they can be mandated in the constitution or by the legislature, or voluntarily adopted by political parties. They can require that a number of seats in the legislature be reserved for women, that parties propose a minimum number of women candidates, or that parties place women in 'winnable' slots, high on their lists of candidates. Quotas generally aim to ensure that women hold a minimum proportion of seats, usually 20-40 percent. At the global level, more than half the countries that held elections in 2003 used some form of affirmative action to increase women's representation. The experience of the 17 countries that, in 2004, crossed the 30 percent threshold of women parliamentarians set by the Beijing Platform for Action shows that gender quotas and reservations are the most effective policy tools for increasing women's representation. Critics argue that quotas are, by definition, unfair, that they discriminate against men, and that they imply that women do not have skills necessary to win elections without special help. But such critics fail to recognize that, even when legal frameworks create a 'level-playing field' on paper, cultural norms and socio-economic realities stack the odds against women.

UNDP can promote the involvement of women as informed and empowered voters by supporting civic and voter education campaigns that target women, by responding to cultural factors that can inhibit women's participation (as in Afghanistan), and encouraging political parties to include issues important to women on their platforms.

UNDP IN ACTION: MOROCCO

In September 2002, 35 women were elected to Morocco's parliament, up from just two in the outgoing legislature. This success was due in part to the country's women's movement, which, with the support of UNIFEM, had for three years been advocating affirmative action and preparing alternative approaches for the government when it revised its electoral code in early 2002.

The Association Democratique de Femmes, along with NGO partners, mobilized women across party lines. They undertook a comparative study of affirmative action measures used in elections in different countries and held a series of workshops to draw up alternatives. They submitted their proposals in a memorandum to the Prime Minister, calling for the introduction of several affirmative action measures in the electoral code, such as quotas, proportional representation, financial incentives, and the establishment of a National Equality Observatory.

The memorandum also called upon political parties, trade unions and professional organizations to adopt the quota system in their executive bodies, encourage male members to contribute to domestic chores, integrate women's needs into their platforms, establish day care centres, reserve a portion of their budgets for women candidates as well as provide training for them. A campaign promoting women's political participation was carried out in the media. Efforts were also devoted to convincing supporters of equal rights for women that affirmative action is not undemocratic and does not imply that women are inferior to men. 'Campaigning schools', public speaking classes, and voter education programmes targeting women voters rounded out the efforts.

In the end, the government adopted several of the proposals. More importantly, the political parties agreed to a national list with 30 slots reserved for women, guaranteeing that women would make up at least 10 percent of the parliament.

Source: Zineb Touimi-Benjelloun, UNIFEM Gender Adviser for Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria

WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

In addition to the UNDP electoral assistance site (<http://www.undp.org/governance/electoral.htm>), the website of International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), at <http://www.idea.int/gender/index.cfm>, is a valuable resource, containing information and links to other resources on gender and elections. It also includes a database with information on the various types of quotas in existence today, detailing the percentages of women in parliament and targets in over 90 countries (<http://www.quotaproject.org/>).