

The role of Women in Decision-making

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes the right of every person to take part in the government of his or her country. Equal access of men and women to power, decision-making and leadership at all levels is a necessary precondition for the proper functioning of democracy.

Since the Beijing Platform for Action was adopted in 1995, the global average for women's participation in national politics has gradually increased from 11.3 per cent to almost 17 per cent in 2006. Nineteen countries, half of them in developing countries, have met the 30 per cent target set in Beijing. In Rwanda, women make up 49 per cent of seats in both houses of parliament, the highest in the world. At the local level too, women are making gains: in India, for example, over 1 million women hold seats in village councils, or Panchayats, helping to shape decisions that can directly affect the lives of women, especially poor women.

Important progress has also been made on the executive level, in both developing and developed countries. Worldwide there are 11 women elected Heads of State or Government, 23 Foreign Ministers and 12 Defense Ministers as well as 20 Ministers of Finance and 10 Ministers of Economic Planning and Development. In 2006, two countries, Chile and Spain, women reached parity with men in Cabinet-level positions. Not only are these women valuable role models, they can also be powerful agents of change at the national and global level. However, for the most part, such women are still the exception rather than the rule, and more needs to be done to overcome the major obstacles that inhibit women's participation and representation in decision making.

1. Increasing the Numbers: improving Representation

Many countries have now had considerable experience with quotas or other forms of affirmative action to achieve the Beijing target, including reserving a percentage of seats for women or establishing quotas for women on party electoral lists. Such measures are now in place in over 80 countries. However, it is not always the case that such measures select the best candidates, or that more women in public office will lead to a better representation of women's interests and concerns.

It is important to distinguish the goal of enhancing social diversity in decision-making with that of changing legislative agendas to make them more responsive to the needs of women and other underrepresented constituencies.

Bringing about substantive political change requires building more effective grassroots constituencies focused on women's issues that can mold public opinion; influence legislative agendas; political parties, civil society groups, and the media.

2. Accountability from a gender perspective

Too often, policy reforms to promote women's rights result in little change in the delivery of public services due to poor implementation and ineffective monitoring, and accountability systems. Governments have a range of possible internal and external accountability systems to assess public sector performance from a gender equality perspective. Strengthening the effectiveness and transparency of these systems, and ensuring that all public services adopt and promote gender equality can help to address systemic gender biases.

Gender responsive budgeting measures have helped to build women's awareness about accountability and have enabled more responsive governance. In addition, transparent information about government spending, for instance to local schools or clinics, have empowered women at the village level to raise concerns about the quality of policy implementation. In some instances, women have organised public hearings to demand greater accountability from local officials for poor provision of basic services.

3. Women and decision-making in the private sector

Women are now entering high-level decision making positions in the private sector. Among Fortune 500 companies in 2006, 10 were run by women. Women leaders have an enormous potential to influence the way we all live and work, by promoting fairer management practices, a better balance between work and family life and reducing gender disparities within the workplace.

The United Nations has established a comprehensive code of corporate conduct focused on empowering and investing in women worldwide. These principles provide companies with a set of goals to measure progress, and investors a set of guidelines against which to assess corporate performance on gender equality. The United Nations has also taken the lead creating a new Global Compact between business and society in support of development that benefits all. This partnership asks participants to embrace, support, and enact within their sphere of influence a set of core values in the areas of human rights, labour standards, environmental sustainability and anti-corruption.