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**The Participation of Women and Men in Decision-Making:
The Parliamentary Dimension**

BACKGROUND PAPER

(Background paper prepared by the IPU, for the Expert Group Meeting on “Equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes, with particular emphasis on political participation and leadership” 24-27 October 2005, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.)

The Participation of Women and Men in Decision-Making: The parliamentary dimension

Introduction

This paper has been prepared for the United Nations Expert Group Meeting (EGM) entitled the "Equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes, with particular emphasis on political participation and leadership." It focuses on the quantitative aspect of women's participation in parliaments, primarily in the past ten years. It provides an overview of the gains relating to women's access to parliaments and executive bodies, and highlights some of the factors that influence women's access to decision-making positions.

As the world organization of parliaments, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) has more than 140 member parliaments, and it works for the enhancement of democracy through the institution of parliaments. It believes that genuine democracy cannot exist without the equal participation of men and women in politics, and for several decades it has been at the forefront of efforts to support women's political participation. The Programme for Partnership between Men and Women works to promote women's participation and input into parliaments through the following activities: (1) The IPU has been tracking the numbers of women in national parliaments since the 1970s, and has collected data on women's election results dating back to 1945. It produces surveys and reports, and publishes a monthly update on the status of women in parliament on its website. (2) In addition to this knowledge production, the Programme also facilitates contact between women parliamentarians and encourages them to exchange experiences through the organization of regular meetings. (3) It also develops technical assistance projects, and has recently worked in Rwanda and Bahrain in support of women parliamentarians and women candidates. (4) The Programme promotes the participation of women parliamentarians in the IPU's internal structures, such as in the delegations sent to the biannual IPU Assemblies.

The information provided in this paper focused on the IPU's knowledge production aspect and is the result of ongoing research into the status of women parliamentarians in more than 180 national parliaments. In January 2005, the IPU, together with the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (UNDAW) produced a global comprehensive map on women in politics covering nearly 190 countries. The statistics referred to here regarding the numbers of women in parliaments and the executive are taken from the map and form the basis of this paper, together with other analyses produced by the IPU during 2005¹.

Table 1: Women in Parliament 1945-2005

	1945	1955	1965	1975	1985	1995	2000	2005*
Number of parliaments	26	61	94	115	136	176	177	187
% women representatives (lower house or unicameral)	3.0	7.5	8.1	10.9	12.0	11.6	13.4	16.2
% women representatives (upper house)	2.2	7.7	9.3	10.5	12.7	9.4	10.7	14.8

*Data from 30 September 2005

Source: IPU, 2005. *Women in Politics: 1945-2005*. Information kit. <http://www.ipu.org/english/surveys.htm#45-05>

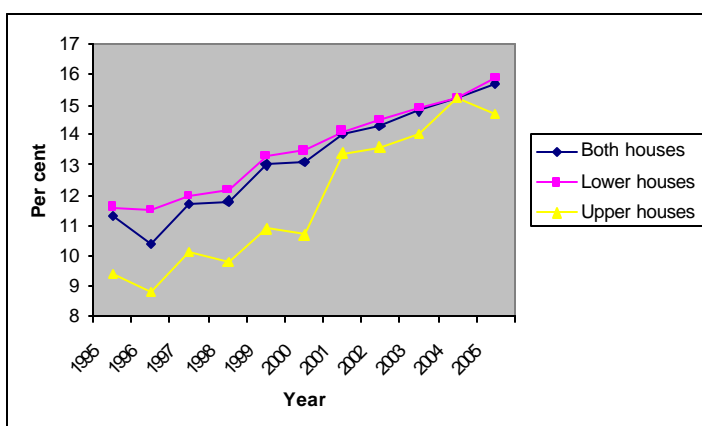
Women in Parliament: Averages in global perspective

¹ These include the IPU statistics on *Women in National Parliaments* from 30 September 2005, and information in IPU, Sonia Palmieri, 2005. Data Sheet No. 6, *Ten Years in Review: Trends of women in national parliaments worldwide*, Background information document.

The trend in terms of women's representation over the past decade has been one of gradual but steady progress. In 1975, at the time of the First World Conference on Women in Mexico City, women accounted for 10.9 per cent of MPs worldwide. Ten years later, in 1985, women's representation had increased by only 1 percentage point, to an average 12 per cent. In 1995, the number of women had actually decreased to 11.6 per cent but a new impetus for women's participation in decision-making found expression at the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, and the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA). By 2000, the number of women in parliaments had increased to 13.4 per cent of parliamentarians in lower houses of parliament.

In October 2005, a new global high was reached, as 16.2 per cent of the members of lower or single houses of parliament were women, and 14.8 per cent in upper houses, bringing an overall total average of 16.0 per cent in all parliaments. While steady, the progress has been slow. If current incremental rates continue, it will not be until 2025 that an average of 30 per cent will be reached, and not until 2040 that parity will be achieved.

Figure 1: World Averages in Perspective, 1995-2005



Source: IPU, 2005. *Women in Politics: 1945-2005*. Information kit. <http://www.ipu.org/english/surveys.htm#45-05>

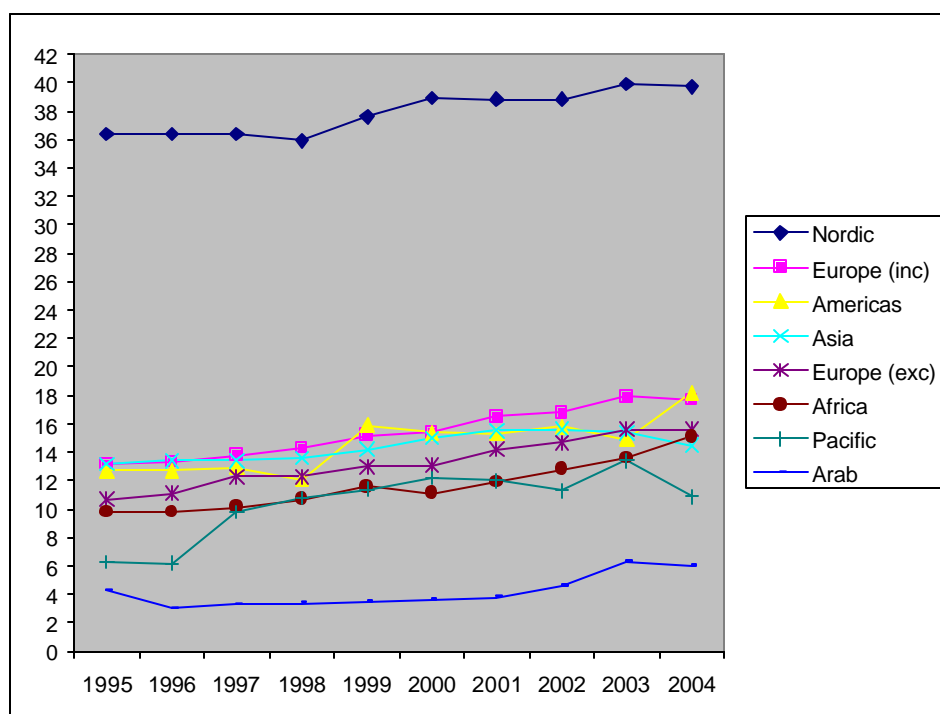
Compared with previous decades, in absolute terms the past ten years have seen the fastest growth in the numbers of women in parliament. The number of parliaments with female memberships less than 10 per cent has decreased significantly from 63 per cent in 1995 to 37 per cent today. There are several factors that account for this; they will be touched on later in this paper. But the increases are not present across all countries, and there are certainly significant regional variations.

Regional trends

Since 1995, the **Nordic countries** have always had the highest representation of women, with averages consistently over 38 per cent. In October 2005, they reached an average of 40 per cent women for the first time. Sweden has always been the top performer; it now has 45.3 per cent of its parliamentarians being women, followed by Norway, Finland, Denmark and Iceland.

In contrast, women are still least represented in the **Arab States**, where today the regional average in lower houses is 8.2 per cent. While this is half of the global average, it is in fact double the rate of eight years ago, when the average was less than 4 per cent. Much of this progress is attributable to the implementation of different types of quotas in some countries in the region, including in Djibouti, Jordan, Iraq, Morocco and Tunisia. Women remain woefully under-represented in the parliaments of the **Pacific Island States**. The average for the Pacific region (excluding Australia and New Zealand, where women's representation stands at 24.7% and 32.2% respectively) is 3.2 per cent.

Figure 2: Women in Parliament by Region: 1995-2004



Note: Europe (inc)=OSCE member countries, including Nordic countries.

Europe (exc)=OSCE member countries, excluding Nordic countries.

Source: IPU, 2005. *Women in Politics: 1945-2005*. Information kit. <http://www.ipu.org/english/surveys.htm#45-05>

In between these two extremes, women's representation has hovered between 10 and 15 per cent in the other regions. The most marked increases are found in Africa and Latin America where on average there has been a gain of more than 5 percentage points in the past 10 years. Research has shown that for the most part, the increase in these regions can be attributed to the adoption of quotas for women, although of course there have also been a number of other important factors. There have also been significant changes in the ranking of national parliaments. Perhaps one of the most remarkable changes was the unseating of Sweden as the top-ranked parliament in 2003 when Rwanda elected 48.8 per cent women in its first post-conflict elections.

Countries with a "Critical Mass" of Women

The number of parliaments with a female representation of 30 per cent or more has increased four-fold in the past ten years. In 1995, only in five countries did women constitute over 30 per cent of the legislature. Today there are 20 parliaments that have reached the BPFA target of 30 per cent, which is considered by some to constitute a sufficient "critical mass" of women deemed necessary by some to bring about real changes in parliament.

Table 2: Countries with 30% Women Representatives (in lower or single houses of parliament)

Level	Country	% Women	Quota
1	Rwanda	48.8	30% Reserved seats (indirectly elected) Voluntary party quotas**
2	Sweden	45.3	Voluntary party quotas
3	Norway	37.9	Voluntary party quotas
4	Finland	37.5	N/A
5	Denmark	36.9	N/A
6	Netherlands	36.7	Voluntary party quotas
7*	Cuba	36.0	N/A
7*	Spain	36.0	Voluntary party quotas
8	Costa Rica	35.1	Legislated quota of 40% women candidates on party lists

9	Mozambique	34.8	Voluntary party quotas
10	Belgium	34.7	Legislated quota of 33% women candidates on party lists
11	Austria	33.9	Voluntary party quotas
12	Argentina	33.7	Legislated quota of 33% women candidates on party lists
13	South Africa	32.8	Voluntary party quotas
14	New Zealand	32.2	Voluntary party quotas
15	Germany	31.8	Voluntary party quotas
16	Iraq	31.5	Legislated quota of 33% women candidates on party lists
17	Guyana	30.8	N/A
18	Burundi	30.5	Legislated quota of 30% women candidates on party lists
19	Iceland	30.2	Voluntary party quotas

N/A=Not applicable.

* Both Cuba and Spain have 36.0% women in parliament and therefore share seventh position, bringing the total number of countries in this table to 20.

** Quotas adopted on a voluntary basis by one or more political party, ranging from 20-40% women candidates. Source: IPU, 2005. *Women in National Parliaments*, <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>; and International IDEA and Stockholm University. 2005, *Global Database of Electoral Quotas for Women*, <http://www.quotaproject.org>

Table 2 shows the 20 countries with 30 per cent or greater female representation in parliament, and reveals different observations:

Firstly, one quarter of the countries are Nordic countries. It should be borne in mind that these countries have struggled for more than 50 years to obtain this level of representation. In the 1940s, women accounted for between 1.3 per cent and 14.5 per cent percent of legislators. Dramatic changes really started occurring during the 1970s, with profound social and political changes together with marked economic growth and the adoption of party quotas. This type of slow but constant progress in the number of women elected is what Drude Dahlerup has coined the **slow track** to women's representation in parliament.

Secondly, one quarter of the countries are so called "post conflict" countries (Burundi, Iraq, Mozambique, Rwanda and South Africa). These countries have been referred to as **fast track countries**, where in a relevantly short space of time, often in one election cycle, the representation of women has increased dramatically. For example, in South Africa the representation of women jumped from 2.7 per cent to 25 per cent in one election, and from less than 15.0 per cent to 48.8 per cent in Rwanda. An important part of the equation in these fast track countries is that they are countries in transition, and the process of establishing new constitutions and institutions and rewriting the rules of the political landscape provides a golden opportunity for women to influence the process and make their voices heard, especially in the drafting of electoral and political party laws.

Thirdly, nine of the 20 countries are developing countries, which demonstrates that **developing countries** are likely to be among the top performers in terms of numbers as are the developed ones.

The last point to note is that 16 out of the 20 countries use **electoral quotas**. Rwanda is the only country to use reserved seats, where 30 per cent of the seats in parliament are set-aside for female legislators. In Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, Spain, Mozambique, Austria, South Africa, New Zealand, Germany, Iceland (and formally Denmark), one or more political party, usually the ruling party, has adopted a voluntary party quota setting a target or firm percentage of the number of women candidates it fields for election. Costa Rica, Belgium and Argentina have legislated quotas, which specify that a certain percentage of candidates for election must be women. There are firm legal sanctions in place if the provisions are not met, such as rejecting electoral lists that have less than the statutory minimum number of women.

Developments in 2005

In 2005, the debate on universal **suffrage** continued in the Arab Gulf States. Although women in Saudi Arabia are still denied the right to vote, and neither men nor men have voting rights in the United Arab Emirates, Kuwaiti women finally gained full political rights when the all-male Kuwaiti parliament granted women the right to vote and stand for elections in May 2005. It is estimated that this will result in a majority female electorate for the 2007 polls.

Important elections in **post conflict states** have taken place recently, including in Iraq, Afghanistan and Liberia. In the Iraqi vote held in January 2005, which elected a Transitional Assembly, 31.5 per cent of the elected parliamentarians were women. This was in large part owing to the adoption of candidate quotas by the interim administration in Iraq in 2004, requiring political parties to nominate women to at least 30 per cent of their positions on candidate lists. In the September 2005 elections in Afghanistan, seats were reserved for women. Although the official figures were not announced at the time of writing, women will obtain at least 25 per cent of the seats in the parliament as guaranteed in the constitution. In September 2005, Liberia held its presidential and legislative elections. The presidential election was particularly noteworthy because of the popularity of female candidate Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, who is poised to become Africa's first female elected president. However, the adoption of special measures in the Political Party and Independent Candidates Registration Guidelines encouraging political parties to put forward 30 per cent women candidates was not enforced in practice, and it is likely that women will not constitute more than 14 per cent of elected representatives.

In **Bangladesh**, the negative trend whereby women's participation in parliament had been decreasing was finally reversed in 2005. Until 2000, Bangladesh had had a system which reserved ten per cent of the seats in parliament for women. However, this provision expired, in the 2001 elections there was a dramatic decrease in the number of female legislators to 2.0 per cent. In 2004, a new law was enacted increasing the size of the parliament to include an extra 45 seats reserved for women. These reserved seats were filled in September 2005, allocated to political parties in direct proportion to their overall share of the national vote they received in the 2001 election. In effect, the number of women has now surpassed the previous high; they now account for nearly 13.0 per cent of the membership.

No women, no change

In contrast to these positive examples, the number of parliaments with no women in them has not changed significantly. Most of these countries are in the Pacific. As of 30 September 2005, a total of eight countries had no women in their national parliaments: namely, the Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saudi Arabia, the Solomon Islands, Tuvalu and the United Arab Emirates. While Bahrain has no women in its lower house, six women have been appointed to the upper house.

This has been a decrease of two countries since May 2005. In Kuwait a woman, Dr. Masouma al-Mubarak, was sworn into office as Minister of Planning and Administrative Development Affairs in June 2005. She is an ex-officio member of parliament, making her the only woman in parliament, albeit not directly elected. The other country is Tonga. Although in the March 2005 elections, none of the six female candidates (out of a total of 64) were returned to the nine elected seats in the parliament, Ms. Lepolo Taunisila was elected in the by-election held on 5 May 2005.

Women in Top Positions of State

Turning to the number of women in the highest positions of State, including executive positions and presiding officers of parliament, the picture becomes more negative. Women have not reached the highest levels of decision-making in the same proportions as in parliaments. This demonstrates that serious obstacles persist.

Table 3: Women in Top Political Decision-making Posts, 1995-2005

Position	1995	2005*
Female elected Heads of State and Government	6.4% (12 of 187)	4.2% (8 of 191)
Women presiding officers of a house of parliament	10% (24 of 228)	8.3% (21 of 254)

* Information as of January 2005. In October 2005, the number of women presiding officers was 27 (out of 260 posts). Source: IPU, 2005. *Women in Politics: 1945-2005*. Information kit. <http://www.ipu.org/english/surveys.htm#45-05>

Table 3 reveals the following insights:

- In terms of **elected Heads of State and Government**, the number has actually decreased since 1995, when there were 12 women. In January 2005, there were only eight.
- Secondly, in terms of women **presiding officers**, the overall number has also decreased, from 10.0 per cent in 1995 to 8.0 per cent in 2005. Developing countries and countries in transition are more likely to have women speakers of parliament than developed countries. Nearly one-third of the women speakers come from Caribbean countries.

Table 3: Women in the Executive, January 2005

Position	Number of women
Women Ministers	14.3%
Ministerial portfolios held by women	858 in 183 countries

In January 2005, 14.3 per cent of ministers in the Executive were women. Sweden had the highest number of women ministers in the world ever, at 52.4 per cent, followed by Spain, with 50.0 per cent. Women held 858 **ministerial portfolios**, although it is extremely difficult to calculate this in terms of a percentage because of the lack of information on the total number of ministerial portfolios worldwide.

However, it is possible to examine the type of portfolios held by women:

- Of the 858 ministerial posts, 83 women (9.7%) held portfolios related to family, children, youth, disabled, and elderly;
- 69 women (8.0%) held ministerial portfolios related to social affairs;
- 63 women (7.3%) held ministerial portfolios related to women's affairs;
- 63 women (7.3%) held ministerial portfolios related to education;
- 60 women (7%) held ministerial portfolios related to the environment and energy.
- Women were least represented in portfolios related to parliamentary affairs, population and information.
- Only 12 women held defence portfolios, 20 on finance and the budget and 25 on foreign affairs.

Lessons Learned

The incremental change over the past decades clearly demonstrates that women have faced, and continue to face, persistent challenges relating to their political participation. The increase in the number of women in decision-making bodies was not an automatic result of the opening up of the political space and processes in many countries with the evolution of democracy since the 1990s. Rather, it has been the result of institutional and electoral engineering, such as the adoption of electoral quotas and reserved seats, political party commitment and will, sustained mobilization and the emphasis placed on achieving gender equality by the international community. This international discourse and the work of international organizations has been instrumental in concentrating efforts to support women's full political participation in the past ten years. Women's activism and mobilization at the country, regional and international levels have also been pivotal.

The slow pace at which change has occurred has prompted many parliaments and political parties to implement candidate **quotas** and other special measures to ensure women's presence in politics. It was noted earlier that 16 of the 20 top-placed countries in terms of women's representation use some form of an electoral quota. International IDEA and Stockholm University's *Global Database of Electoral Quotas for Women* has found that there is an increasing number of countries opting for quotas. In most cases this has had a positive effect on women's representation. Currently there are around 80 countries with their own types of electoral quotas: these may consist of reserved seats, candidate quotas or quotas adopted voluntarily by political parties. Ten countries reserve seats for women, around 30 countries have legislated quotas and 120 political parties have voluntary quotas. It is important to add however, that quotas do not work alone and have to be supplemented by a range of other measures. For example, as **political parties** play an ever-increasing role in the management of parliamentary politics, it is at the party level that the principle of equality must be put into practice. Political parties remain the gatekeepers to the advancement of women in politics.

International discourses have played an instrumental role. The equal participation of women and men in public life is one of the cornerstones of the 1979 United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Renewed pressure for the implementation of CEDAW provisions was generated at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, and the BPFA identified “inequality between men and women in the sharing of power and decision-making at all levels” and “insufficient mechanisms at all levels to promote the advancement of women”, as two areas of critical concern where action was vital for the advancement of women. International lobbying efforts intensified after 1995, with other international instruments, such as United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) making an impact. The MDGs recognize the fundamental role of women in development, with the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments being a key indicator in measuring progress on women’s empowerment. These international instruments, especially their provisions relating to the use of special measures, have proved pivotal for women’s movements worldwide.

International and regional **organizations** have also played their part. They have supported actors on the ground, through the provision of information and tools for reform, by working directly with political parties, by providing training to women candidates seeking election or those already in parliament, and through technical assistance projects. Promoting women’s participation within international organizations is also important. Indeed, the IPU is one of the only international organizations, if not the only one, that has adopted specific measures and mechanisms to promote gender equality within the organization. In October 2005, women parliamentarians accounted for 16 per cent of parliamentarians worldwide. In contrast, at the last IPU Assembly held in Geneva in October 2005, 32 per cent of participants were women, thus surpassing the 30 per cent target set by the United Nations. The participation of women at the IPU is strong, resulting from an important women’s movement and complemented by specific positive action measures or quotas. Underpinning all such efforts, however, is the need for political will, both within and outside parliaments and at the international, regional and local levels.

While this paper has focused mainly on the quantitative aspects of women in decision-making, the IPU also works with parliaments with the aim of making them more gender-sensitive and supporting women once they are elected to parliament. The IPU has previously undertaken different surveys on women’s experiences in parliament, and is currently working on a survey of experiences in decision-making, to be fielded among both male and female parliamentarians. It will seek to document the contribution of parliamentarians to the promotion of gender equality, with the aim of making parliament more gender-friendly. As the 50th session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women in 2006 will address this very question, the IPU is preparing a parliamentary event entitled *Gender Equality: Making a difference through parliaments* and is undertaking further survey research on the existence and functioning of committees related to gender equality and the status of women in parliament. Through these programmes and activities, the IPU hopes to achieve gender equality in parliaments worldwide. It is democracy in the making.

Further Reading

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