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Impact of women's participation and leadership on outcomes*

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

Impact of Women's Participation in Decision-making *

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“Equality between women and men is a matter of human rights and a condition for social justice and is also a necessary and fundamental prerequisite for equality, development and peace. A transformed partnership based on equality between women and men is a condition for people-centred sustainable development.” (Beijing Platform for Action, excerpt from Mission Statement.)

Every human being has the right to participate in decisions that define her or his life. This right is the foundation of the ideal of equal participation in decision-making among women and men. This right argues that since women know their situation best, they should participate equally with men to have their perspective effectively incorporated at all levels of decision-making, from the private to the public spheres of their lives, from the local to the global.

The UN Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, recognizing this key condition for women's empowerment, which in turn is required for democratic governance, identified as one of twelve critical areas of concern in its Beijing Platform for Action (BPA), ***Women in Power and Decision-making***. For this concern, the platform recommends two strategies: First, “Take measures to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making” and second, “Increase women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership.” Both strategies are proposed to be addressed by “Governments, national bodies, the private sector, political parties, trade unions, employers' organizations, research and academic institutions, sub-regional and regional bodies, and non-governmental and international organizations.”

Many initiatives have been attempted along the proposed actions under these two strategies in the BPA. In many countries, the number of women elected and appointed at different levels of public decision-making has increased although the goal of 30 % representation (considered a level of critical mass for women to have an impact) in Parliament have been reached only in 11 countries, according to the review reported in the 49th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women in February-March 2005.

This paper examines the related question that is being asked: *as more women get into*

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positions of power, participating at various levels of decision-making, do they make a difference? The question has two components, namely, the kind of difference that women would make, and the ability of women to make a difference.

If more women participated in decision-making, what kind of difference would they make?

Many women especially in developing countries when asked if they would consider entering politics, i.e., consider becoming a candidate for an elective position in public office or appointed to a decision-making position in government, answer in the negative. Foremost among their reasons is that politics is reputed to be dirty, where methods employed include the illegal and the unethical to win in elections and assume power, and where the corruption of public service for personal and narrow group interests has been the accepted norm. They say that they are intimidated and threatened by these dark sides of politics which they are likely to be pressured to join as their entrance fee into mainstream politics.

Through numerous dialogues and networking at various governance levels from local to national, regional and international, many women in developing countries have come to some consensus that politics has to be transformed, and that political transformation needs the active involvement of women. Therefore, women who believe in serving the public trust and can commit to public accountability *should* enter politics to effect this transformation.[†]

What can we expect to be the political agenda of women in decision-making positions in public office? Can we presume that women who participate in decision-making in the public sector would be gender-aware and gender-responsive, and hence would espouse an agenda on priority gender concerns and advocate for gender-responsiveness in their political party platform and other decisions? Can we presume that women in politics would be more predisposed than men to give priority to social concerns and to the relatively disadvantaged population groups because women are usually socialized into more nurturing values? Can we expect women to have a stronger sense of fairness and justice, and to be less prone to corruption than men because women usually have a greater role in rearing their children in the moral values of society and hence would try to be models of morality, themselves? Can we presume that women, being nurturers, would favor the use of peaceful means over force for resolving conflict? That they will not only want to preserve human lives but also the natural environment that humans continue to exploit without real regard for sustainability of life on earth?

Unfortunately, we cannot say "yes" for sure! There *are* indications for doubt, particularly if we consider the following.

[†] These views were consistently expressed by women who participated in several conferences and many dialogues conducted by the Center for Asia-Pacific Women in Politics (CAPWIP) since its establishment in 1992.

- a) Most women have been socialized into traditional roles in a patriarchal society and have integrated these traditional values of inequality between women and men. It would be an exceptional woman who is a self-made, self-taught feminist. One or two sessions to raise gender awareness as part of women's leadership trainings may not be adequate to undo the deep socialization in traditional values of most women.
- b) Women do not form a homogeneous group defined by their sex alone. Their interests would also be a function of their socio-economic class, race, religion, ethnicity, and other demographic characteristics of age and location. This could explain why there is hardly any clear evidence of a women's vote in any country. In addition there is a greater probability that women who make it into the political mainstream are likely to come from the elite and hence may not be inclined to challenge the interests of their class especially when reinforced by traditional values of loyalty and gratitude to one's family and patrons.
- c.) When women become candidates for political office some of them and/or their political parties purposely avoid getting perceived by men voters as a threat to the interests of men. To get more votes, they decide it is not prudent to be perceived as championing priority gender concerns or favoring women as their constituency. They tend to choose commitments that appeal to the interests of the general public as if the public is a homogeneous group. Politicians' use of the rhetoric of national interests often ignores or intentionally obfuscates the reality of conflicting interests of various population sectors, making the differential impact of decision-making conveniently less transparent especially to those who could be adversely affected. Such lack of transparency or clarity enables a politician or political party to be held less accountable, should they neglect the interests of certain groups, notably women.
- d.) Since women in most countries do not have a critical mass in decision-making bodies including in their political party base, if any, then espousing a platform of gender issues such as equal rights for women and men could be threatening to the male majority and hence could discourage the women members from taking on such a heroic advocacy or confrontation where the chances of winning is doubtful. Where there is no strong constituency nor public opinion supporting such a gender agenda, women members in such bodies may de-emphasize women's concerns just to gain a stronger foothold on the political arena.
- e) Most critical is how power has an almost absolute potential to corrupt. And its potential to corrupt may be greater for people who had been marginalized, subordinated and oppressed, in other words, who had no such power before - which has been the lot of most women. Ideally, one's experience of subordination could transform one to reject becoming an oppressor or getting even with former oppressors, and we would hope that women elected or appointed to public office would choose this principled path.

The bottom line is we cannot be too hopeful and depend only on the increasing number of

women in decision-making positions to transform the political agenda. **The reality of politics requires that there has to be a popular demand for the transformative goals that we aspire for. These goals include equality (including gender equality and equity), peace, sustainable development, democratic governance, and accountable and efficient government, the often cited basic goals for a paradigm shift to transform our society.** There is no short cut to changing our societies' core values through a small, though increasing, number of women in politics. They can assist it somewhat, or greatly, or they may not! What we will need is a critical mass of the general public to *want* that agenda of change in our core values and demand it of politicians and those sitting in public office! This is therefore the area of work where effective and sustained strategies are urgently needed.

Women's ability to make a difference

A most critical determinant of women's ability to make a difference is the nature of governance and the political mainstream where women are beginning to participate. Decision-making in public offices are supposed to be positions of public trust, i.e., those who assume these positions are responsible or accountable to the electorate or the taxpayers or the general public. But the degree of observance of public accountability varies among countries. The more feudal governance is with patronage well-entrenched as a tradition, the more accountability will tend to be defined by narrower personal, family or clan interests as well as those of one's political group and patrons. The interests of the greater public would be of lower priority, if not easily ignored, were it not for security concerns and insuring peace and order which could compel those in power to engage in the rhetoric of public service and welfare. On the other hand, the more democratic governance is, the more likely developed are the mechanisms for public accountability and the more politically mature are the citizens, who are aware of their rights and demanding accountability from public officials, and the greater the sense of accountability to the general public of those voted and appointed to public office.

The nature of the political mainstream also influences the nature of accountability of elected or appointed public officials. In more politically developed countries, distinct policy and program platforms of political parties are proposed and discussed as the bases for voter's choices in an election and those elected are held accountable for implementing the platform of the winning party. If there is enough popular demand for given gender concerns to be addressed then political parties would be sensitive to these needs and will try to integrate these into their political platforms. Women party members and candidates would have a better chance of negotiating the integration of such gender concerns into the party platform which becomes a commitment of the whole party. There could also be a positive multiplier effect on the platform of other competing parties who might be encouraged or pressured to match the inclusion of the gender concerns in the platform of a rival party thereby making the integration of gender concerns more pervasive in the over-all political agenda for a given election. With a well-established culture of accountability then those gender issues in the platform(s) of the winning party (ies) will likely be addressed.

But in many developing countries where the party system is not well developed nor the citizens politically mature, voters tend to be presented choices of personalities rather than distinct political platforms. Political parties and/or candidates for public offices may not have a coherent policy and program platform but rather a hodge-podge of campaign promises on which elected candidates could easily renege. Meanwhile, voters do not usually feel empowered to demand accountability from elected public officials. In a worst case scenario, the elected officials use the power of their position in public office to serve personal, family, party and patrons' interests above those of a wider constituency or the general public while the voters feel powerless in changing this situation and resigned to waiting out the completion of the officials' terms of office. If there is no effective culture of public accountability in public office, women's participation would not succeed in the inclusion and implementation of a transformative agenda in the platform of their political party.

The ability of women to make a difference may also be a function of what factors propelled them to public office. The circumstances of women's entry into positions of power will determine whether they will be politically marginalized or become key players in their political organization and in the decision-making positions in public office that they assume. Were they thrust into politics by luck of a dynastic prerogative when one carries the name and by some osmosis the reputation of a recognized national leader or a renowned politician as a wife or a daughter? Are they tokens selected by political parties, or the product of a calculation by political parties of the value that women could bring to the party as a response to some advocacy or legislation for more equal political participation by women? Or did they cut their teeth in political work and rose through the ranks of political parties on merit to become effective recognized party leaders? Or did they earn the confidence of a constituency with whom they have effectively worked and their commitment tested which led to their selection as the representatives of the said constituency?

Women who develop their skills in political work and prove their integrity and commitment in public service are likely to have the greater ability to make a lasting difference when given the opportunity to participate in decision-making positions in public office.

For women who make it to the top-most political position in a country as head of State – President, Prime Minister or Chancellor - their political clout in and support from their party, as well as their capabilities, would determine their ability to make a difference. Top political leadership could give a woman tremendous potential to make a difference. However, if a woman gets intimidated by the position and becomes perceived by her party and /or other powerful political players as lacking confidence then other men from her family or clan and her party could become the real power, relegating her to a figurehead.

For other public offices there is evidence in many countries that women tend to be given opportunities in areas of decision-making that parallel their stereotype traditional roles as

nurturers and caregivers in the domestic sphere of the family. In most parliaments, they are usually given roles in committees for social concerns of family and disadvantaged groups, and culture. Rarely would you find them heading committees for economic concerns like the budget, local government (or interior), foreign affairs, justice and defense, thereby giving them limited sphere of influence in the over-all concerns of a nation. This is also echoed in the executive branch where cabinet positions for the social sectors might be given to women but not for the other sectors. There is also a parallel tendency in the judiciary where women justices may be appointed to head the court for family and children but less likely to head or become members of the Supreme Court. One therefore sees similar patterns of marginalization and subordination that characterize women's common experiences in patriarchy in most other power structures such as the family, business enterprises, political parties, religious organizations, labor unions and media establishments.

This pattern of sexism is often justified by men as due to the lack of qualified women for the more important and powerful positions, long the domain of men, although we do see less qualified men being elected and/or appointed to these positions that are not usually accessible to women. In addition, men emphasize women's natural abilities (which are not natural but learned) and skills in this domestic-related work as if men cannot learn these skills and women cannot and have not learned new skills apart from those associated with the feminine gender.

In public offices where the number of votes determines outcomes as in legislative bodies, then more women forming a critical mass could strengthen women's ability to make a difference. Some have put this level at 30% at least. But alliances should also include like-minded men. As a matter of fact it is crucial for women in politics to work with or network with men as a very critical means to political effectiveness, and this might be the only viable strategy when women comprise a minority in a decision-making body.

The same review cited earlier also reveals that women tend to have better representation in "more alternative structures" particularly NGOs and grass-roots organizations which are at the periphery of the political mainstream and are often organizational attempts by the marginalized to protect their interests by accessing power through power from number – more translates to greater power.

These patterns continue to confirm the threat perceived by men and their resistance to sharing equal power with women. We should therefore assume that power especially in the public domain will not be willingly and voluntarily shared by men equally with women.

Note, however, that women already committed to the transformative agenda may still falter especially if the women and men politicians' and their parties' narrow vested interests will prevail over that of the greater public. Therefore once again **the ultimate determinant for any transformative agenda to be implemented with commitment by those in decision-making positions is for the general public to demand accountability of those entrusted by the public to do this, a demand made effective**

by institutionalized accountability mechanisms with the culture appropriate for it. This is not an easy task to develop but it is what is required in the long run. Its development will have to be given more serious attention than before because it is a condition for democratic governance which is a component of our transformative agenda.

Proposed directions for future work

Mainstream politics is where society's governance happens. Women, comprising half of any society, must exercise their right and responsibility to participate equally with men in governance. The impact of women's participation in politics can only be guaranteed by two conditions: a popular demand for their transformative political agenda and a developed system of public accountability in public office, two conditions that do not exist in most if not all developing countries. Hence, the following measures are urgently proposed:

1. We have to bring our transformative agenda of equality, sustainable development, peace, democratic governance, and accountable and efficient government, to the whole society for everyone to eventually take ownership of this agenda. This will require creative sustained advocacy and training across the board especially for those in their formative years.

Take the specific issue of gender equality included in the goal of equality. We have been assuming wrongly, particularly in developing countries, that most women, because they are women, agree with and want gender equality. We have neglected the need for widespread continuing dialogues to enable women across the board to reflect on their traditional roles and be convinced of the need to change these in favor of equality with men. Women and men need to know how a society characterized by gender equality might be like and whether it would really be preferable to the familiar one of traditional unequal gender roles, and know that they have a say in designing such a society. Women and men have to be convinced of such a vision because the successful pursuit of this goal will depend on their commitment to internalize and live by its values. Vigorous communication and education measures for the women will have to be undertaken in each country so they can get a handle for personal reflections towards committing themselves to this goal of gender equality. Experiences of other countries more advanced in their goal for a more equal society could help inform these reflections. The same will be needed for the men so that instead of being threatened they would truly become equal partners of women on this road to a transformed society. We could attain gender equality *de jure* but not *de facto* unless these values get woven into the fabric of society.

2. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which 180 member countries of the UN have signed to date, could be the main instrument for promoting gender equality. Signatory countries to this Women's Rights Convention should be systematically assisted to enable the various sectors in each country, starting with the state, to effectively undertake their respective obligations under this Convention. Vigorous communication and education measures

should be undertaken for girls and women, and boys and men on the whys and hows of the goal of gender equality so that every girl and woman will understand and appreciate gender equality, internalize these rights and claim their rights, and every boy and man will also understand women's equal rights, promote and protect these rights. Special training should be developed for parents and teachers on how to apply and teach the values of human rights, equality, especially gender equality, and democratic governance in the family and in schools. More work should be done to also advocate to and assist relatively hierarchical institutions like religious organizations on how the values of equality, including gender equality, can be enhanced in their structures, procedures and programmes.

3. There has to be equal if not more work done to develop responsible citizenship among women and men relative to the work done to promote women's leadership and participation in decision-making in public office. Democratic governance will not evolve from just the good intentions of enlightened women and men politicians who are constantly struggling with the unrelenting corrupting temptations of power among others. The only guarantee for the development and/or maintenance of democratic governance is the citizens' commitment to their individual responsibility to participate in governance, including constantly demanding transparency and accountability of all those holding positions in public office to uphold the public trust given to them.

Quality citizenship training materials should be developed and training made part of all school curricula as well as in continuing adult education. These trainings should include the basic human rights, the laws and international conventions enshrining these, the responsibilities of citizenship in democratic governance and the culture of public accountability for all those in public service. They should also include power and politics as elements in human relations that need to be guided by fairness and justice. Political participation should be taught as a wide range of activities beyond registration and voting in elections.

Effective advocacy measures on human rights as the foundation for citizenship rights and obligations have to be widely undertaken. The experience of UNICEF in its vigorous information campaign on the Convention on the Rights of the Child could provide some insights on this.

4. Promote and assist the development of a system of public accountability for positions of public trust at all levels of governance especially in the less politically developed countries. Effective public accountability mechanisms should be documented and disseminated proactively and widely for possible adaptation in various countries.
5. Related to the strengthening of responsible citizenship among women as well as men is the motivation of citizens to organize themselves into active interest groups or constituencies. Organized, they can better define their priority agenda and influence the political decision-making bodies in government to address these by ensuring their representation in these bodies. Such organized constituencies would be working in

partnership with their representatives who will in turn be accountable to them. This type of democratic process could be the basis for transforming politics to better serve the interest of the greater public and can be promoted at local level governance with the opportunities provided by the greater autonomy at local levels being encouraged by government policy in many countries. Women's greater participation in grassroots organizations and NGOs could be assisted to develop into active political constituencies that will strengthen public accountability as a culture in politics.

6. Modeling of creative mentoring of women who are suddenly thrust into positions of power without enough training and preparations should be undertaken. These should model a different type of politics characterized by the values of democratic governance where the women political leaders will have a covenant with some organized citizens' groups or constituencies on an agreed transformative agenda and a close partnership with each other to ensure the implementation of their agenda with mutual accountabilities.
7. All gender training materials and training courses for women's political empowerment should include a substantive component for effective gender sensitizing at the personal level, better understanding of power relations and structures in all institutions of society starting from the family, the principled use of power as guided by fairness and justice, democratic governance, and ethics in public office including public accountability from those holding positions of public trust. These areas have not been given as much emphasis up to now. These will help better prepare women to become the catalyst for the paradigm shift we are aiming for in politics and the rest of society.
8. Gender mainstreaming, the main strategy recommended by the Beijing Platform of Action that was endorsed by the UN member states in the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, has to be consistently linked to the goals of gender equality and equity embodied in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Gender mainstreaming has been encouraged in many countries for about two decades and yet the goal of gender equality is still far from being achieved and not even monitored adequately. Many especially in governments which have often been the main focus of assistance in this strategy seem already content with the gender mainstreaming being done thinking this is enough. But the impact of gender mainstreaming has to be assessed against the goals of gender equality and equity. It is also essential that other sectors in addition to governments should also be encouraged and assisted to undertake gender mainstreaming to widen the commitment among all sectors to the achievement of these goals.

Transforming politics and the whole society is a long and difficult process because we are changing power relations and we all have to take responsibility for ensuring that we bring it into our personal lives. But we should not be daunted by the task. We take small steps now, a quantum leap next time and perhaps backtrack another time. Whatever our progress we must commit to moving the process forward because our goal is for women

and men to have equal power to shape their societies!