

Women in Politics (2001)

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"Asia and the Pacific has had the largest number of women elected as Heads of Governments during the past three decades among the regions in the world. However, women continue to be in the minority in the area of power and decision-making although progress in improving the proportion of women serving in politics and administration has been steady.

ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN AT NATIONAL PARLIAMENTARY LEVEL

Comparison of the latest available data with those of 30 June 1993 indicates that the proportion of women in the national legislature in 40 countries of the ESCAP region increased in 28 countries (70%), but decreased in 8 (20%).

In four countries, the proportion remained the same (10%). Among the 28 countries, a significant increase was observed in Australia (from 8.2 to 22.4 percent), Fiji (from 1.4 to 11.3 percent), Lao People' s Democratic Republic (from 9.4 to 21.2 percent), and Mongolia (from 3.9 to 10.5 percent). No country has the figure decreased significantly. Nevertheless, overall, women continue to be a minority in the national legislature in every country in the region. Among 44 countries where data are available, women hold less than 10 percent of the total seats in the lower chamber of the bicameral parliament or single-chamber parliament in 24 countries.

In 14 of these, including Japan, the Republic of Korea and Singapore, women' s representation is less than 5 percent.

Women constitute between 10 and 20 percent of the total seats in another eight countries, while in another six, all of which are in the South Pacific subregion, there are no women parliamentarians.

The six remaining countries with representation of women exceeding 20 percent are New Zealand (29.2 percent), Viet Nam (26 percent), Australia (22.4 percent), China (21.8 percent), the Lao People' s Democratic Republic (21.2 percent) and the Democratic People' s Republic of Korea (20.1 percent).

It would, therefore, appear that women fare better where they have been persistent in their claims and efforts to enlarge their political representation and have created, or were able to operate within, an enabling environment of the state, government and political party systems.

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

The term 'affirmative action' appears to be widely known and accepted, although there are differing views held by some countries. The quota system seems to bring significant progress if it is based on consensus among the parties concerned and is implemented robustly.

For example, in Bangladesh, through a special provision, there are 30 seats reserved for women in the Parliament to ensure their participation in politics, in addition to 300 elected seats. These measures have reportedly brought significant results.

Initiatives taken by the government can also be an effective tool. In Viet Nam, with government guidelines and provision of professional and managerial training given to women by various ministries and institutions, as well as with effective communications regarding elections to the National Assembly, women account for 26.22%

Quota systems appear to be effective in increasing the number of women in power and decision-making roles in local government. For instance, in India, constitutional amendments in 1993, which reserved for women one third of seats in local bodies as members and chairpersons, have had a definite and positive impact on the political participation of women.

Evaluative studies of the Panchayat Raj Institutions system have concluded that women entering local government in such large numbers have gained a sense of empowerment by asserting control over resources and officials and by challenging men.

Significantly, women also have different priorities, choosing to tackle such issues as water, alcohol abuse, education, health and domestic violence. Furthermore, the expansion of women's representation in decentralized government structures has given women as a whole increased access to redress grievances and to mobilize their active participation at a local level.

Other countries in the region have also seen an increase in female representation at the local level, attesting to the potential of women to transform administrative and political structures.

The Government of Nepal has a reservation policy of 20 percent for women in elections for village development committees as well as municipalities. Elsewhere, however, women remain as minorities in power and decision-making roles in the local government.

It has been reported that, even with quota systems, some obstacles still exist. It has been pointed out that entrenched power structures and traditional male-dominated social systems pose problems for elected representatives to exercise their rights, and that without social and familial support, women cannot avail themselves of the quota system.

MORE WOMEN IN DECISION MAKING

During the ESCAP High-level Intergovernmental Meeting to Review Regional Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action on October 1999, recommendations were made to promote further participation of women in politics and decision making... A regional meeting recently held by Center for Asia-Pacific Women in Politics (CAPWIP) entitled, ' AsiaPacific Women Parliamentarians' Conference on Transformative Leadership for Good Governance in the 21st Century,' reaffirmed the difference women decision-makers could bring for sustainable development and peace by ensuring equity, equality, social justice and transparency and people-oriented governance. Networking and solidarity building among women to support women decision-makers are equally important.

As stated in the Beijing Platform for Action, equal participation of women and men in decision-making will provide a balance that more accurately reflects the composition of society and is needed in order to strengthen democracy and promote its proper functioning.

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