Women as National Legislators
Janice Pratt and Robert Engelman | January 31, 2014

In late 2013, women accounted for slightly more than 21 percent of the representatives in the lower or popular chambers of national legislatures worldwide, according to the Geneva-based Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU).¹ Filling one in five seats of national legislative bodies represents progress for women, but it is hardly rapid progress: 15 years ago, slightly more than 13 percent of the seats were held by women.² (See Figure 1.)

Low levels of female participation in parliaments undoubtedly reflect similarly low levels of participation in other political institutions as well as in social, educational, and economic spheres generally. Data on gender gaps in these areas are less uniform and authoritative. The number of women in top national executive offices—including German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf—may reflect changeable political scenes in the world’s 193 U.N. member states more than actual trends in women’s influence in governance.

Figure 1. | Global Average of Men and Women in Parliaments, 1997-2013

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Source: Inter-Parliamentary

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There are great regional variations in the average percentages of women in parliaments. (The data average upper and lower houses or express percentages for single houses in unicameral national legislatures.) As of November 2013, the figures were as follows: Nordic countries, 42 percent; Americas, 24 percent; Europe (exclusive of Nordic countries), 24 percent; sub-Saharan Africa, 22 percent; the Middle East and North Africa, 16 percent; the Pacific, 16 percent; and Asia, 18.5 percent.3 (See Figure 2.) Where national legislatures have two houses, women tend to be better represented in the lower than the higher one—the house that in many countries has a less influential role in legislative action.

Six of the 10 parliaments with the highest number of female representation are found in developing countries, according to current data from the IPU.4 African nations ranked impressively among the top 25 nations, with the parliaments of Rwanda, Tanzania, South Africa, the Seychelles, Angola, Uganda, and Mozambique having strong female representation.5 Andorra, Sweden, Iceland, and Finland—the 4 industrial countries on the world’s top 10 parliaments with greatest female representation—were a huge contrast to other industrial countries, including France (25 percent), the United Kingdom (22.5 percent), Greece (21 percent), and the United States (18 percent), where female representation is still surprisingly low.6

Figure 2. | Regional Averages of Women in Parliaments, 2013

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Source: Inter-Parliamentary
Despite the slow progress, there is today at least the world’s first example of a woman-dominated national legislature: Rwanda, with at least 56 percent representation since 2008 and 57.5 percent in 2013. The post–civil war constitution of this small central African country specified that 30 percent of legislators must be women (by reserving some seats, for example, that only women can contest). Rwandans are now within range of doubling that constitutionally mandated percentage, easily surpassing Cuba (49 percent) and Sweden (45 percent) in women’s parliamentary representation.

Although no country has managed to achieve true gender equality across social, political, and economic sectors, many have taken steps to bridge the gender gap in government, as Rwanda’s constitutional effort attests. Thirty-five countries, including 9 in Africa, have so far managed to obtain 30 percent female representation in their parliaments. Twenty-nine out of the 35 have in place a quota system meant to enhance women’s participation in politics. In India, for example, following a 1993 amendment reserving one third of all seats in local elections for women, more than 800,000 women were elected to local village panchayats (a kind of village council), municipalities, and city corporations. Similarly, a surge of women candidates entered Brazil’s local elections in 1996 after a law required that at least 20 percent of each political party’s candidates be women. Other countries with some form of quota system (in some cases, simply commitments by political parties fielding candidates) include Argentina, Finland, Germany, Mexico, South Africa, and Spain.

A growing body of evidence suggests that women’s participation and representation in local and national governments has made a difference. A study on local councils in India found that female-led councils’ initiations of drinking water projects were 62 percent higher than those of male-led councils. And a study in Norway showed a positive relationship between the number of women elected to local councils and the number of childcare coverage programs implemented.

Lower levels of female representation in government have limited female input into how national, regional, and local priorities are established—which excludes women’s diverse and different approach to problem solving. A study conducted in the 1990s in Bolivia, Cameroon, and Malaysia indicated that if women had more say in family and community spending priorities, they would be more likely than men to improve health and education and to tackle poverty as opposed to military-related expenditures.

In 2005, the World Economic Forum assessed the gender gap by measuring the extent to which women in 58 countries have achieved equality with men in political empowerment and four other critical areas: economic participation, economic opportunity, educational attainment, and health and well-being. Findings showed that Oceanic countries had the highest average overall score by region, with New Zealand ranking first in political empowerment.
Although women account for more than half of the people in the world, well into the twentieth century many nations denied women the right to vote and run for office.¹⁹ New Zealand in 1893 and Australia in 1902 were the first countries to grant electoral rights to women, but these laws applied only to women of European descent.²⁰ Today only Bahrain, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates continue to bar women from full political participation.²¹ In Kuwait, the Emir Jabir al-Ahmed introduced a measure in 1999 to allow women to vote and run in elections, but the nation’s all-male Parliament rejected the plan.²² Although most countries now allow women to vote and stand for election, there is still a long way to go to achieve equal political participation. Current trends show that at the current rate of growth at which women enter parliament annually, gender equality in national legislatures may not be realized until 2068.²³

A number of international decisions have helped legitimize the political involvement of women. Relevant treaties include the 1952 Convention on the Political Rights of Women and the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979 and entered into force two years later.²⁴ All but 7 of the U.N.’s 193 member countries have ratified CEDAW; the holdouts are the United States, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Iran, and the two small Pacific Island nations of Palau and Tonga.²⁵

In 1995, the United Nations sponsored the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. With 189 governments and 2,600 nongovernmental groups in attendance, this was one of the largest U.N. conferences ever.²⁶ Delegates agreed to a set of strategic objectives and actions, including efforts to advance the role of women in politics and environmental stewardship.²⁷ The year 2015, the target year for achievement of the UN’s Millennium Development Goals, will also mark the twentieth anniversary of the Beijing Conference, potentially renewing attention to global efforts to empower women—not just in the world’s legislative bodies but in every sphere of human activity.

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Notes

2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 IPU, "World Classification" (table), in IPU, op. cit. note 1”.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
9 IPU, op. cit. note 4”.
10 UN Women calculation based on IDEA, Stockholm University, and IPU, "Global Data Base of Quotas on Women," at www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation/facts-and-figures#sthash.63LSmH0g.dpuf, viewed June 2013, and on IPU, op. cit. note 1.
11 Ibid.
20 Sheehan, op. cit. note 19; IPU, op. cit. note 1.
21 Ibid.
25 Ibid.