

URBAN GOVERNANCE

WOMEN IN LOCAL LEADERSHIP



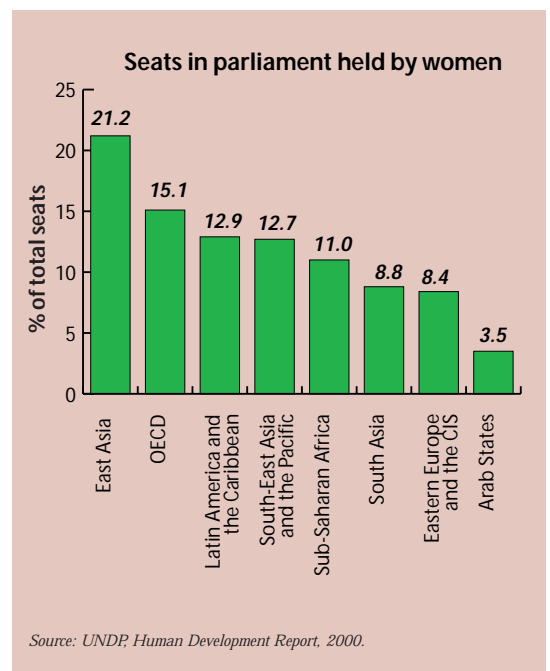
In Argentina, the Local Women and Local Governance Programme aims at empowering women - along with other sections of civil society - while incorporating a women's perspective into municipal policies. The project aims to strengthen women's leadership and participation in decision-making processes.

From suffrage to leadership

A century after receiving the right to vote, women still find themselves struggling for a political voice, and many of today's cities continue to exclude women from formal governance structures. Worldwide, women constitute half the citizenry, and nearly 40 percent of the labour force. Through their unique roles as mothers and homemakers, women constitute a formidable catalyst for social change, if only because they represent a disproportionately large share of the world's poor. Yet, economic disadvantage continues to act as a barrier to women's full participation as global citizens, while their concerns remain low among urban priorities.

A number of countries have passed ground-breaking legislation facilitating women's participation in decision-making processes. However, access alone to the political process does not solve all problems. While actual numbers of women in local government have increased, the issue goes beyond numbers. Women's multiple roles as wives, mothers, community workers and employees severely limit their time, while weak and undeveloped democracy can further hamper women's participation. In addition, women elected to public office often find it difficult to function in a male preserve, while poor urban women in particular continue to be excluded from decision-making processes. Around the world, legislation adversely affecting low-income women is still being passed,

notably in such areas as health, education, access to real estate and security of tenure. In addition to the need for more capacity-building opportunities for women, there is a need to strengthen the capacities of local authorities in the incorporation of gender-based issues in the governance process.





Bernd Decker

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Although women are found to be less corrupt and more responsive to the needs of communities, there is a persistent worldwide trend indicating low rates of political participation by women, both as voters and as candidates. Studies indicate that many women are not independent voters, but rather follow voting patterns suggested by male family members. The majority of such women are illiterate and lack information and political awareness. Worldwide, there is a need for women's education to instill confidence, clarity of purpose, priorities, commitment and the ability to present their case skilfully.

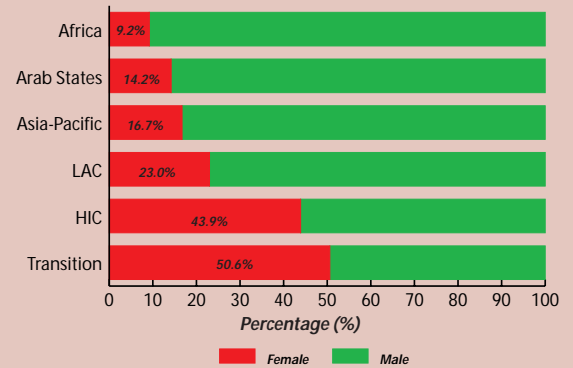
The political empowerment of women requires a transformation of existing political structures and systems, rendering them more responsive to women. The avenues available for women's political activity within civil society are often restricted, limited to organizations that are gender-typed, gender-segregated or politically less influential. For example, poor women tend to be associated with religious groups rather than trade unions, political parties or business associations with real political strength.

Gender differences

Sweden has the highest proportion of women in decision-making positions, both at national and local levels. This is not surprising, perhaps, since in Swedish political parties there is a 50 percent quota system for women. However, the social profile of Swedish women is different from that of the rest of the world. Swedish women tend to be more educated than Swedish men, and therefore more likely to become public sector decision-makers. There is an inherent bias in the Swedish system, however, as women are less likely to be found in the private sector. While many women entrepreneurs are running their own businesses, they are yet to be fully accepted in this almost all-male preserve. Jamaica is similar to Sweden - though with very different societal norms and at a different stage of development - since it too has comparatively many well-educated women. As in Sweden, Jamaican women tend to enter the public sector, with relatively fewer women going to the private sector. From these two geographically very diverse examples, it would appear that, in some countries, women are becoming better educated and moving into roles as decision-makers.

There is need for a new, critical look at governance, especially through the eyes of women. As has already been noted, women are less likely to be corrupt and more likely to be responsive to community needs than men, and women in leadership positions are better at fostering confidence and trust. An analysis of the Best Practices database reveals that in over 1,000 cases documented, less than 10 percent of women had taken a leadership role, though women figured as participants in approximately 40 percent of the them. Although this is a positive trend, women's participation in leadership positions is still limited. Political parties need to encourage women's participation, as well as seeking out and supporting potential candidates. The rise of women to positions of local leadership does not obviate the need to educate men to be more responsive to gender needs, as well as supporting women in their new roles and responsibilities.

Women's formal involvement in local government is higher in cities of transition countries



Women's involvement in formal urban politics is defined as the number of elected and of nominated local government representatives, per 10,000 metropolitan residents. It is shown in this graph as a percentage for both men and women in order to appreciate the gap between both sexes.

In most regions, gender equality remains a major challenge for participation in formal local government politics.

bestpractices

www.bestpractices.org

Social and Financial Empowerment of Poor Women, India

The Working Women's Forum (WWF) promotes social and financial independence of poor women through small enterprise development. Leadership development helps poor women influence public policy through collective action while improving their social standing. Evening classes for child workers and vocational training for adolescent school drop-outs provide alternative life options and help them reintegrate into mainstream society. WWF also builds awareness on the needs of the poorest, while mass inter-caste weddings are facilitated help to break social barriers. As a result, many women have been emancipated from exploitation, caste inferiority and male dominance.