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Measuring Gender Equality

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Women in parliament: Thoughts on how to achieve *meri kirap**1

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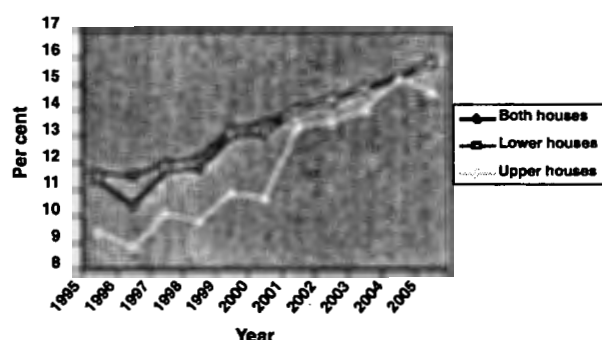
Introduction

The indicator for MDG3 — the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women with the priority being to increase women's share of seats in national parliaments and local governmental bodies — is change in the percentage of seats held by women in national parliament. This indicator seems to assume that increasing the number of women in parliament will improve women's empowerment, or at least help achieve equity. This paper considers whether this indicator is useful and does indeed accurately reflect the situation. It also suggests alternative indicators, and suggests ways in which changes to the political status quo could be achieved.

Women in parliaments: The data

There is accurate, up-to-date, readily available and generally comparable quantitative data on the number of women in most of the world's national parliaments from a common source, Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) 2006.² This is the source of the data that follows. This quantitative information provides a useful overview of the situation globally, including percentages of total members of parliament (MPs) and trends, as well as data on the number of women in the most senior positions.

**Figure 1: World average of women in parliaments
1995-2005**



Source: IPU 2005:2

Women members of parliament

As Figure 1 shows, globally, there has been a gradual but steady increase, from 10.9 per cent in 1975 to 16 per cent in 2005, with the fastest rate of increase being over the past decade (both houses combined). In 1995, 63 per cent of countries had less than ten per cent representation, and by 2005 the figure was 37 per cent. Sixteen out of 177 countries have reached the 'critical mass' of 30 per cent or more. Of the 20 countries with 30 per cent or more, nine are developing countries (including Cuba, Mozambique and Burundi). One country has exceeded 50 per cent (Sweden).

Women in two countries still do not have the vote (Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates), while Kuwait moved out of this category in 2005. In 2005 there were no female representatives in eight countries (including the Federated States of Micronesia, Saint Kitts and Nevis) and Papua New Guinea has been on the edge of this category off and on over the past 15 years.

The overall rate of increase is 0.5 per cent a year, but varies from 'slow (but constant) tracking' countries (including Japan, Swaziland and Kenya) to 'fast tracking' countries (such as South Africa and Rwanda which have leapt to more than 40 per cent since 2000). Progress is not necessarily even, with some countries slipping backwards at times.

Some clear patterns have emerged. Several regions have been consistently high in their rates including Scandinavia with a 40 per cent average in 2005, while others have been consistently low including Pacific island countries with a 3.2 per cent average, and Arab states with an 8.2 per cent average. Post-conflict countries tend to have relatively high levels of female representation for their new parliaments, including Eritrea (22 per cent), Rwanda (48.8 per cent), and Iraq (31.5 per cent). Most Caribbean countries have relatively high levels of representation including Cuba (36 per cent) and Grenada (27 per cent). Some countries with high levels of education and economies have surprisingly low levels of representation including the US (14 per cent) and the UK (18 per cent) but even Australia (25 per cent) and New Zealand (32 per cent) are low compared to the Scandinavian countries.

Women at the top

Women have not reached the highest levels of decision making to the same extent as they have become MPs, and progress has been erratic:

- in 2005, 14.3 per cent of all ministers were female;
- Sweden has the most (52.4 per cent in 2005) followed by Spain (50 per cent);
- in 1995 there were 12 female heads of state compared to eight in January 2005;
- there have been 44 female prime ministers (PMs) since 1960; and
- ten per cent of presiding officers in 1995 were women, eight per cent in 2005.

Countries in transition are more likely to have women speakers than so-called developed countries. The first two women PMs were elected in developing countries (Sri Lanka and India in 1960 and 1966 respectively). Since 1974, 28 countries have had an elected female president, with some holding the position more than once, including Sri Lanka, India and Liberia.

Quantitative data

The indicator of the percentage of women in national parliaments therefore could be said to be useful (up to a point), providing trends, highlighting positive developments as well as highlighting those countries which have yet to move off first base (or even get there, in the case of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates). The data could be useful for demonstrating to the lower ranking countries how far they lag behind and act as a stimulus to action to redress the situation. But the same could be said for all those countries with less than 50 per cent representation. That some post-conflict countries have installed high quotas could be indicative of a positive change in global attitudes, or the influence of the UN in supporting the restoration of good governance. The data also shows those countries which have achieved a 'critical mass' which is presumed to enhance their effectiveness (this point is examined further below).

The quantitative data therefore shows that '*meri are kirap'ing*' in gradually increasing numbers, and in almost all countries have entered the portals of previously male-dominated power. But is this increase meaningful, in terms of enhancing women's empowerment?

It could be assumed that increasing numbers of women being appointed to ministerial positions is indicative of women increasing their access to power. However, the IPU data also shows that the majority of women MPs hold or have held portfolios related to 'soft' social areas such as social affairs, women's affairs and education — which tend to side-line women from the main areas of power. Relatively few have held defense, finance and foreign affairs portfolios.

The social sectors in developing countries, especially under structural adjustment programmes, have often been sorely under-resourced, which impedes their ability to be effective in managing their portfolios — making it a no-win situation. While some women definitely earn their ministerial positions, others are token appointments, to appease the gender lobby. A similar story goes for the type of committees they serve on, and their position in them. Another issue is whether they get to hold especially influential positions such as speaker, deputy speaker or whip; only one in ten have ever done so, with eight per cent holding such posts in 2005. Interestingly, of these, nearly one-third comes from Caribbean countries.

One feature of women PMs is that some obtained their positions because of family connections, rather than through their capacity or popularity. They could be considered to be continuing a male-led dynasty rather than demonstrating women power, examples of these include Indira Ghandi, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, Megawati Sukarnoputri and Benazir Bhutto. Consequently it cannot be extrapolated that having a woman as a PM is necessarily good for women, it may well be just a reinforcement of male power bases. Also, some PMs are commonly regarded as being 'more male than the men' and would never regard themselves as feminists and representing women in general.

This quantitative information is readily available and can be seen as providing some degree of commentary on the position of women MPs, as long as the type of ministry is analysed and there is some determination of the degree of tokenism in the appointments; the latter is not easy for outsiders to determine, however.

Impact

Quantitative data on women in politics has its uses. It does not, however, indicate the impact of women in parliament on promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women through legislative outputs which, if budgeted for and implemented, have the potential to improve women's lives.

It is widely assumed that once in parliament, women will work for women's issues. Once they are elected their supporters may expect them to effectively generate support for women's concerns, ensure that policies are translated into new patterns of service delivery, set new standards, and so on. Women in top positions, however, aren't necessarily interested in these issues (due to class or self-interest) or free to promote women's issues (because they may be beholden to the party leadership). What is more, their constituents may well have other more pressing issues.

It is also wrong to assume that only women promote women's issues and there is a need for data on the number of male MPs who promote issues which are advantageous to women; obviously over the years some achievements have been gained through the support of some male MPs.

There is some evidence to indicate that organisations representing women's interests outside parliament play a more effective role in bringing issues to the attention of parliament than the women MPs themselves may do.

Whether there is any impact in having increased numbers of women in parliament, especially after achieving a 'critical mass' is a key question to ask. The answer may depend on how cohesive women are, especially as an active caucus; it should never be assumed that this will happen. One study shows that globally, there appears to have been an association between the number of (cohesive) women in parliament and the promotion of abortion rights (UNRISD 2005). We saw this in Australia in early 2006 within the abortion pill RU486 debate. But, surprisingly, there is little evidence of a strong female lobby in regard to gender-based violence.

There is no systematic cross-national comparative data on the type of programmes supported by women MPs, although it is known that women are more likely to introduce bills that address issues related to women's rights, family or children. There are also some country-specific studies. For example in Egypt it was shown that political parties and constituencies influence the choice of focus, economic issues were most commonly focused on, followed by services (Karam 1998).

Conclusions on quantitative data

The global data is quite illuminating and should be a useful tool for lobbying gatekeepers about improving the situation for women candidates and MPs. To assume that the numbers of women MPs is an accurate and useful indicator of women's empowerment is only correct so far as individual women who are elected are concerned, and on grounds of equity. It is not an indicator of the likelihood of women's empowerment more generally. It also assumes that male MPs do not promote women's issues.

Increasing women's presence in parliament, however, does help to raise the profile of women, by reminding male MPs that women's issues are important and may be different to those of men. It also helps, gradually, to de-masculinise the culture, provide role models for other women and is likely to increase attention to women's issues.

More accurate indicators which could meaningfully reflect improvements in women's empowerment might be:

- extent of the increase in the amount of legislation which (if budgeted for and implemented) would benefit women/girls, such as abolishing school fees;
- extent of the increase in the number of women sensitive and positive budgets such as taxes on tampons and the imposition of hospital fees; and
- extent of the increase in the number of commissions, inquiries and so on which address women's issues, for instance, extent and nature of gender-based violence.

This data would more accurately reflect the situation within each parliament. The first two indicators would require some research and analysis whereas the latter could be included in normal annual quantitative reporting requirements.

Promoting women's representation and issues

There are a number of key points that may be useful for development agencies looking for best ways to support women candidates and MPs as well as male party officials and MPs to help women. Some of these are highlighted below, and laid out in Table 1.

1. Political parties are the key gatekeepers. They play an ever-increasing role in the management of parliamentary politics, and it is essential to influence them to implement the principle of equality, both pre-election and within parliament (IPU 2006).
2. Affirmative action plays a leading role in putting women into politics. Half the countries in the world use forms of affirmative action, such as electoral quotas, either reserved seats, voluntary party quotas or legislative quotas, including South Africa's 'zebra list' (ibid).
3. Regional pressure also exerts influence. The southern African countries, for instance, put pressure on its member countries with the South African Development Community declaration of 1997 that all member countries should have at least 30 per cent of seats held by women (SARDC 2005).
4. Campaign subsidies can be very helpful to women who often don't have a good supply of funds. Such support helps to reduce their dependency on party leaders and other influential males in their communities.
5. Violence and other forms of intimidation and bribery, especially against women candidates, can deter them from entering politics. Character assassination is also common, including in the media, which focuses on a woman's looks and/or private life, especially if she is single. Dealing with other candidates offering bribes is a very difficult issue to deal with, especially in poverty affected countries.
6. Few women want to stand for election because politics looks like more trouble than it is worth, being very difficult to get into and even more challenging once elected. One of the solutions to increasing women's representation is to change the character of politics, which would also help male MPs to live more balanced and satisfying lives.

Table 1: Enhancing the election to and effectiveness of women in parliament

Influencing factors	Tells us	Significance	Possible strategies	Information source
Constituencies factors: positive or negative, eg, media, male support, geography, culture, extent of violence and bribery, dual burden, type of economy, resources	Likelihood of being elected and issues which need to be addressed as much as possible during the campaign	Very high	Support NGOs and government to work with media, public education, training of candidates and provision of logistical support	Case studies
Characteristics such as education, income, class, personality, family support/connections	Capacity	High	Support of NGOs who are identifying and capacity building potential candidates, pitched at appropriate level, not just for highly educated	Surveys
Constituents' response to MPs' performance	Likelihood of being re-elected (but could be other influences eg, bribes and bad publicity)	High	Training of MPs to prioritise, strategise, work for tangible outputs, demonstrate results, use the media, logistical support for regularly visiting their constituents, use of legal mechanisms to deal with bribery	Election results and popularity surveys
No. of consecutive terms	Increased know-how, credibility	High	As above	Election results
Extent of outside influences eg, women's NGOs, international conference declarations	Strength of support network to lobby MPs on particular issues	High	Meetings, literature, financial support for INGO/NGOs to lobbys , support for MPs to participate in international meetings	Surveys
Number of women MPs in senior positions (ministerial, committee chairs, speaking)	They are closer to/part of where the real power resides	Medium	Indirectly by capacity building/ opportunities eg, training, study tours which build know-how and confidence	Donor and government reports
Extent of male MP support	Increased likelihood of getting women's issues through system	High	Training of male MPs on gender issues/tours, etc. and training of women MPs in strategising/ lobbying them	Surveys
Parliamentary culture	How hard it is for women to perform	Medium	Education of Speakers and other influential parliamentary staff on the issues, study tours to other parliaments eg Scandinavians	Surveys
Number of women MPs who actively promote women's issues, caucus together	Extent of possible pressure, likelihood of being effective if numbers constitute a critical mass	Medium	Training in strategic planning, focused study tours	Surveys of no. of women (and men) promoting women-related bills, asking questions, requesting information
Ability to learn the rules, use them and change them	The extent of their effectiveness	High	Capacity building of parliamentary staff to train MPs in parliamentary methods	As above
Persistence and having the 'hide of an elephant'	Likelihood of succeeding	High	Mentors who support candidates and MPs through difficult times	Surveys, media analysis

7. This paper has not explored the issue of how useful it is to have gained experience at local level before entering national politics but it is probably an important factor.
8. The ability and willingness of women to work together in a strategic manner on issues is very important (especially when they have a 'critical mass') as is obtaining the support of powerful male MPs.
9. Collecting data on the personal characteristics of women who do get elected may reveal interesting trends, such data might include age, education, class, income, professional background, experience in local government, personality and motivation, experience in leading a woman's organisation or success in business, and whether they are daughter, wife of another MP or other senior leader or businessman.
10. It is a reasonable assumption that the more terms a woman serves, the more likely she is to be effective. However, because so few women MPs have been in parliament long enough to have developed real expertise it might not be useful to measure their effectiveness at this point in time. Being re-elected may not necessarily reflect a constituencies' recognition of their MPs effectiveness.
11. There are other factors influencing female (and male) ability to make a difference within parliament. For instance, the budgets of some countries are controlled by international financial institutions rendering influence difficult because of a macro-economic focus to the neglect of the social. Aid dependency can also limit effectiveness of interventions, as can strong pressures to divert scarce resources to defence services in some countries.
12. Dominated by men for generations, parliamentary cultures tend to be very masculine, including on the floor of the house, in the bar and perhaps the golf course, where many deals are made. These factors present social constraints to women's effective participation and need to be addressed. Another important factor in terms of women MPs' well-being within parliament is the existence of supporting mechanisms, including the existence of female toilets, reasonable sitting hours and childcare facilities.

Conclusion

Changing the *status quo* requires a review of the major facilitating factors which help women to be elected, to survive in the culture and the system, and to be more effective in contributing to decision making and sharing what, after all, is a national burden.

If these factors were addressed it would help women achieve parity, if not equality, and then perhaps eventually there would not be a need for positive discrimination mechanisms in voting systems and legislative seat allocations. The influencing factors highlighted here provide suggestions as to the type of issues which need to be addressed and the type of support that political parties, male MPs, parliamentary bureaucracies, governments and development partners could give which would help to increase women's participation in politics. They should also include helping to improve the capacity of men to address women's issues more often and effectively. It is hoped that such reflections will be useful in helping *meri kirap* so that equity is attained within parliament and ultimately that ALL *meri kirap* as a result of positive legislative outcomes, from both male and female MPs.

Notes

- * This paper is dedicated to Aung San Suu Kyi and to the nine-year-old girl in Southern Highlands who was killed in cross-fire during the 2002 PNG elections.
- 1. *Meri kirap* is pidgin for women arise.
- 2. Exceptions are where there have been recent bi-elections so data is out of date, where countries don't release (or have?) such data and very new countries, where there are one or two houses and women in one but not the other, or both, and where a President appoints some MPs as in Zambia.

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