

REGIONAL WOMEN'S ROUND TABLE CONFERENCE on BALKANS ROAD TO EU INTEGRATION

Session II: HOW TO INCREASE WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

By Josephine Stone

7th December 2013 in Nynashamn, Sweden

In 1902 Australia was one of the first countries in the world to give women the right to vote **and** stand for election but was amongst the last to get a women elected, some 41 years later in 1943. As at November 2013 Australia had an average around 26% female representation in the federal parliament. Why is this figure still so low, particularly in a country where educational standards are high?

Women in government in the modern era remain under represented, despite an increasing number being elected as heads of state or government. Consequently, a number of countries are exploring mechanisms to increase female participation.

Briefly, some of the mechanisms used are as follows.

1. Education

Education at all levels is fundamentally important, not just in management and the political process but at the most basic level. As the Honourable Jose De Venecia, former Speaker of the Philippines, has noted recently (Seoul, Sept 2013), some 32 million girls of school age throughout the world are not allowed or able to go to school, by virtue of poverty, tradition or intimidation.

At a more adult level, education may take the form of conferences, seminars, information sessions, professional and in-house training. The more women know about their rights, options and opportunities the more they may be inclined to aim for political office. The more they can access professional training the more women may feel confident about seeking higher office.

I note that the conference sponsor, the Jarl Hjalmarson Foundation, holds regular seminars and information sessions aimed at promoting women and youths in politics, the democratic process and the market economy.

2. Mentoring

It is traditionally said that women are more critical of other women than men are. How many of us actively encourage and promote other women, in our personal relationships and our workspace? It is vitally important that women who have already succeeded assist those who wish to. Some of the ways we can "mentor" are encouraging women we work with to engage in further training and applying for promotion, putting their name forward to people who can

assist their career advancement, providing moral support and the more practical support of childcare.

3. Legislative reform

Legislative change is imperative for the enhancement of women. When gender equality becomes the law of the land, change follows at a quicker pace than by mere reliance on "goodwill". This is discussed further below.

4. Financing gender responsive programs

For example, in September I attended the Special Conference on Women's Leadership and Empowerment in Seoul, sponsored by the International Conference of Asian Political Parties (ICAAP). ICAAP has proposed the establishment of an Asian All-Women Anti-Poverty Bank which aims to provide small loans for micro-finance business, as low as \$US500 to \$US1000. It may not seem like much but it is considered this will help reduce poverty in rural areas and in the urban slums of Asia to assist poor women by giving them the opportunity for jobs and self-employment. We should not forget that when women enter the economic sector more fully, through paid employment and trade then political power comes more naturally.

5. Increasing the use of sex- disaggregated statistics in national research

This is an increasingly used and useful tool in letting both government and private organisations know the state of play with regard to female participation in their society, particularly in education and the workforce. For example, in Australia more females than men graduate university in law and yet their numbers in partnerships in law firms remains extremely low.

Female representation on company boards remains low. Those who have directorships tend to be qualified in law, accountancy or economics. The chairmen of boards tend to have scientific or engineering qualifications. Why is it useful to know this and how can the information be used?

6. Enhancing grass roots female empowerment movements

Again I must pay tribute to the IWDU and the Jarl Hjalmarson Foundation for their sponsorship of this conference.

The importance of networking cannot be overestimated. Our male counterparts do this brilliantly and have done so for millennia. But networking need not always involve a heavy financial cost or an elaborate venue. Networking occurs at the childcare centre where we have our children minded, at the schools they attend where we excel at fundraising and participation on the school board. It occurs at our workplaces where we can join the trade union or professional body, at the conferences we attend. It occurs in our social lives when we join a sporting or professional club, fraternise with neighbours or workmates.

Our male counterparts have always used such occasions to promote their suitability for advancement.

7. The Use of Quotas

I wish to speak a little about the use of quotas. I am aware that many of the countries represented at this conference already have a form of quota system in place but unfortunately my country, Australia, does not.

The usual argument against quotas is the “women of merit argument” ie only the best quality women candidates should be encouraged to stand for political office and that quota systems will encourage average quality women who may be elected and thus somehow demean the overall prospects of female enhancement in the community.

My response to that is that if it is demeaning for women to have quotas, it is more demeaning to see the slow and dismal numbers of women represented in parliament, it is more demeaning to be denied educational and economic opportunities, and it is most demeaning to be told that we need to be somehow better than our male counterparts in order to do the same job.

A quota is a mechanism which can be used to increase the numbers of female representation in government and thus allows women to obtain the share of political power they are entitled to.

There are three types of quotas currently in use. First, gender quota systems which are designed to implement a “critical value” below which is deemed an imbalanced government eg 25% of legislators, 50% of parliamentarians.

Secondly, legal quota systems which are designed to regulate the governance of political parties. Such quotas may be mandated by regular legislation eg Ecuador, or required by the country’s constitution eg Nepal.

Thirdly, voluntary party political systems where there is no legislative mandate but the political party embraces a voluntary policy of a quota system.

A quota system may be used at different stages of the political process: candidacy and subsequent nomination, where the quota system requires that a certain percentage of a party’s candidates must be female and, election, where a number of “reserved seats” must be filled by women.

Why have a quota system?

From the use of quotas across an increasing number of countries, it can be seen that quotas can produce marked changes in female representation in the political process. For example, Rwanda jumped from 24th to 1st place in 2003 when quotas were introduced. As at November 2013 (*) the top 10 countries (out of 142) with the greatest percentage of female representation in parliament were:

1. Rwanda, 63.8% (up from 56.3% since 2011)
2. Andorra, 50%.
3. Cuba, 48.9%

4. Sweden, 44.7%.
5. Seychelles, 43.8%
6. Senegal, 42.7%
7. Finland, 42.5%
8. South Africa, 42.3%
9. Nicaragua, 40.2%
10. Iceland, 39.7%

In comparison, the 4 English speaking countries rated poorly ie New Zealand with 32.2% (rated 25th), Australia with 26% (rated 43rd), the United Kingdom with 22.5% (rated 58th) and the United States of America with 17.9% (rated 79th). None of these countries employ the use of quota systems although 3 have had female heads of government. The conservative parties in all 4 countries remain opposed to a quota system. It is noted that women tend to be better represented in the upper house than the lower house of parliament.

The Scandinavian countries (Norway, Sweden and Denmark) have obtained a significantly increased percentage of female representation over the last 30 years, not through legislative changes, but by sustained pressure by feminist groups for political parties to change their candidacy processes.

This was particularly successful within the social democratic parties which introduced the quota systems, whilst the centre and right parties remained opposed. It would appear that it is time that the conservative parties across the English speaking countries embraced the significant successes achieved by the quota system.

The quota system places the burden of recruitment on those who control the recruitment process rather than on the individual woman. The political agency must actively seek and encourage female participation. It focuses the attention on the actual working conditions and culture of politics. This may also result in the use or increased use of the other enhancing mechanisms referred to above eg educational programmes.

Used in conjunction with the other forms of positive measures quotas are an effective means of achieving an equality of result. The traditional concept of equality was one of "equal opportunity", being the removal of barriers such as the right to vote. It is noted that some countries still deny this basic right to its female citizens. This places the burden on the individual women to pursue the opportunity. The practical difficulty with this notion is that men have had far longer to establish their credentials for political office, having had sole access to this role, together with education, finances, empowerment groups or networks etc, for centuries, whilst these tools are relatively new for women.

A more recent concept of equality is "equality of result". This is premised on the notion that there are numerous hidden barriers preventing women from obtaining their share of political power eg denial of fundamental rights, education, equal pay, social standing and cultural attitudes. Therefore, true equality will only be achieved when political representation is relatively evenly distributed between men and women.

Quotas may be a temporary or permanent measure eg in use until the barriers for female participation are removed. An interesting use of the quota system can be seen in India which used a randomly assigned quota system. Between 1992 and 2002 state governments held local council elections with a reservation of 33% of seats for women. As an experiment, the reservation quotas applied to randomly chosen cities to implement a women-only election. In the chosen cities, parties were required to nominate a women candidate or else not field a candidate at all. The reservation quota randomized the city so that the location was changed every subsequent election. This was designed to address the political discrimination of women at all levels: political parties were forced to give the opportunity for women to run, the female candidates were not disadvantaged by a male incumbent or general biases for male over female leadership, and the pool of female candidates was increased because of the guaranteed opportunity for female participation. The random nature of the quotas allowed for the election of a female candidate but kept the reservation for one election only. By 2002 it was apparent that given the opportunity to obtain a party ticket, create a platform and obtain the experience to run for political office the women were still able to hold their positions of leadership even after the quota was withdrawn.

The percentage of female representation required by a quota may be designated according to the needs of an individual country. In 1995 Uganda amended its constitution to provide that one parliamentary seat from each of its 39 districts must be female ie 13%. In India the 74th Constitutional Amendment requires that 33% of the seats in local municipal bodies are reserved for women. Nepal requires that 5% of candidates for each political party must be women. In France 50% of candidates on lists forwarded by each political party for election must be women. A national quota law was introduced in Finland in 1995 which requires that 40% of the governing bodies at local and national levels must be female. In 2007 Spain passed the Equality Law requiring political parties to include 40 -60% of each sex amongst its electoral candidates. This is an example of a “gender neutral” quota which does not focus on representation of one sex but on both.

Conclusion

Of course, the mere existence of a quota system does not necessarily ensure the objectives of increased female participation will be achieved. The quota system must be imbedded in the selection and nomination process from the very beginning for there to be reasonable prospects of success.

It may be difficult to find sufficient numbers of women who are willing or able to stand for political office. A quota system does not remove the obstacles of combining employment, family obligations and political activity that women face, usually a more significant issue for women than men. It is still the case, in most cultures, that women are the primary carers of children and family dependants and that women are generally more poorly paid than men.

It does not remove cultural attitudes or the long held attitudes of men, many of whom are reluctant to share political power. As seen in the Indian example, reservation of seats challenges the bias of voters who tend to vote for the male incumbent.

However, used in conjunction with other tools designed to facilitate increased female participation into politics, quotas can be a useful tool to break down traditional biases and enhance the political process.

Josephine Stone AM, LLB
IWDU, Vice Chairman (Australia & Asia)

*www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm