

Press



Release

On International Women's Day, Democracy Institute Urges Focus on Increasing Women's Political Participation Worldwide; Only 14.5 percent of Elected Parliamentarians are Women

“While significant advances have been made in many countries, the political participation of women in decision-making continues to lag behind men worldwide”, says Julie Ballington, gender project manager at the Stockholm-based Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA).

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against women, adopted by the UN Assembly in 1979 and signed by 165 countries, emphasises the importance of equality between women and men in public life. Yet over two decades later, women remain significantly under-represented in decision-making positions. While there are significant regional variations, today women constitute 14.5 per cent of representatives in lower houses of parliament worldwide.

Some Latin American countries made significant advances in the 1990s with regard to women's political representation. This was largely attributable to the adoption of various quotas systems that were introduced in eleven countries around the region. Argentina was the first country to introduce quotas in 1991, and today has the highest representation of women at 30 per cent. Yet at the other end of the scale, women constitute less than 10 per cent of elected representatives in Brazil, Guatemala, Honduras and Paraguay.

In Africa, women comprise nearly 13.0 percent of elected representatives. Topping the list in terms of numbers are Mozambique and South Africa, with 30 per cent representation of women. In these countries, the ruling parties have adopted informal party quotas requiring at least 30 per cent of candidate lists for election to comprise women.

The Nordic countries have been heralded around the world as a model of success for the inclusion of women in decision-making structures. The commitment of political parties to putting forward near equal numbers of men and women for election, and placing them in 'electable' positions (often by alternating men and women on party lists) serves as an example of how near parity between women and men in decision-making structures can be achieved. In Nordic countries, women account for nearly 40 per cent of elected representatives.

“Yet despite the advances that have been made in many countries, there are many obstacles that continue to hinder women's advancement to parliament”, says Ballington, who goes on to explain that the obstacles include factors such as the strength of the women's movement, patriarchy, discrimination, illiteracy and poverty and a host of other socio-economic problems that have a direct impact on women. “However, a key obstacle is the nature of the party political system, and the commitment of political parties to gender equality. The ten countries with the highest representation of women use a proportional representation electoral system, and

have parties that have formally or informally adopted a party quota to ensure women's election to parliament".

In Scandinavia, Denmark, Norway and Sweden count amongst the countries with the highest representation of women worldwide. In 2002, women constitute over 42 per cent of the members of parliament in Sweden, 38 per cent in Denmark and 36 per cent in Norway.

No constitutional clause or law in these countries requires that women constitute a certain percentage in decision-making structures. The high representation of women is largely attributable the strength of the women's movement both in political parties and sustained pressure exerted by activists on parties. Most political parties have adopted their own informal quota mechanisms to ensure a certain minimum representation of each gender on candidate lists for elections. The list proportional representation electoral system, together with the informal quotas adopted by political parties, contributed significantly to the increase in women's representation in the last 30 years.

In International IDEA's handbook "***Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers***" the authors note that for quotas to have the desired effect, there is a need for precise and specific regulations about quotas, and that more women need to be part of the active political process. Co-ordinated pressure from women's organized groups to lobby for implementation is also vital in this respect.

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Also please visit International IDEA's gender website at:

<http://www.idea.int/gender/index.htm>

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) exists to nurture, sustain and promote democracy around the world. Global in membership and scope, independent of specific national interests, and quick in its response, International IDEA is an intergovernmental organization with a unique mandate - to support the growth of genuine, sustainable democracy.

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