



RESEARCH NOTE

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Women in the Parliaments of the World

The presence of women in national parliaments is one of the clearest indicators of women's participation in political processes¹.

Inter-Parliamentary Union studies of women in the Parliaments of the world in June 1991 and June 1993 demonstrate starkly the under-representation of women. As at 30 June 1991 women made up 11 per cent of the world's parliamentarians. By 30 June 1993 the figure for women's participation had dropped to 10.1 per cent.

For its study, the IPU looked at the composition of the single or lower chamber of the parliament of each country (see table of selected countries). State or provincial parliaments, or upper houses of parliament, were not taken into account. Thus Australia, for example, appeared to have a lower representation than the 13.45 per cent for Federal Parliament achieved after the March 1993 election.

In 1993, only the Seychelles reached near parity in men and women parliamentarians, with 45.8 per cent of women represented in its monocameral parliament. Finland (39% in 1993) Norway (36% in 1993) Sweden (34% in 1993 and now 40%) and Denmark (33% in 1993) are countries with a third or more women representatives. A number of countries (Antigua /Barbuda, Belize, Bhutan, Djibouti, Jordan, Kiribati, Kuwait, Mauritania, Papua New Guinea, Saint Lucia and the United Arab

Emirates) have **no** women in their lower chambers. In Kuwait women do not have the vote nor may they be elected to parliament.

The objective of achieving parity of political representation for

women has received a great deal of attention internationally, including at the United Nations. Innovative affirmative-action methods of achieving greater equality for women have been embarked upon in a number of

Lower Chamber Figures

	30 June 1991	30 June 1993
Australia	6.7%	8.2%
Austria	21.8%	21.3%
Bangladesh	10.3%	10.3%
Belgium	8.5%	9.4%
Canada	13.2%	13.2%
Chile	5.8%	5.8%
China	21.3%	21.0%
Cuba	33.9%	22.8%
Czechoslovakia/Czech Republic	8.7%	10.0%
Denmark	33.0%	33.0%
El Salvador	8.3%	8.3%
Finland	38.5%	39.0%
France	5.7%	6.1%
Germany	20.4%	20.5%
Greece	5.3%	5.3%
Hungary	7.0%	7.3%
Iceland	23.8%	23.8%
India	7.1%	7.3%
Indonesia	12.4%	12.2%
Iraq	10.8%	10.8%
Iran	1.5%	3.4%
Ireland	7.8%	12.1%
Israel	6.7%	9.2%
Italy	12.8%	8.1%
Japan	2.3%	2.3%
Jordan	0.0%	0.0%
Malaysia	5.0%	5.0%
Netherlands	21.3%	29.3%
New Zealand	16.5%	16.5%
Nicaragua	16.3%	16.3%
Norway	35.8%	35.8%
Papua New Guinea	0.0%	0.0%
Philippines	9.0%	10.6%
Poland	13.5%	9.6%
Rep. of Macedonia (former Yugoslav)	..	4.2%
Romania	3.6%	3.5%
Rwanda	17.1%	17.1%
Singapore	4.9%	3.7%
South Africa	2.6%	2.8%
Spain	14.6%	16.0%
Sri Lanka	4.9%	4.9%
Sweden	38.1%	33.5%
Switzerland	14.0%	17.5%
Syrian Arab Republic	8.4%	8.4%
Thailand	3.8%	4.2%
Turkey	1.3%	1.8%
U.S.A.	6.4%	10.8%
Uganda	12.2%	12.6%
United Arab Emirates	0.0%	0.0%
United Kingdom	6.3%	9.2%
USSR	15.3%	
Vietnam	17.7%	18.5%
Yugoslavia	17.7%	3.0%

1. United Nations Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs. Women in Politics and Decision-Making in the Late Twentieth Century, A United Nations Study 1992.

countries. Practical courses of action which Parliaments can adopt to assist the progress towards full equality for women are likely to centre on the ratification and implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and adoption of the Inter-Parliamentary Union Plan of Action to correct present imbalances in the participation of men and women in political life.

A number of countries, or political parties in a number of countries, have already adopted quota systems to improve the representation of women in parliament. An Inter-Parliamentary Survey carried out among the 150 national Parliaments existing as of 31 October 1991 revealed that at least five countries had, in various forms and to differing degrees, included a quota device in their legislation to ensure the presence of women in the national parliaments, and 56 political parties in 34 countries had established a quota system either for legislative elections (22 parties) or for elections to posts in the executive structures of the party (51 parties).

Women may also sometimes sit in Parliament as a result of a system of reserved seats, filled by means of a separate election, although this is '...a very uncommon mechanism.'³ Bangladesh, for example, reserves 30 seats in its parliament of 300 members for women and the United Republic of Tanzania has 15 of 244 seats reserved for women. The phenomenon of appointment to Parliament is fairly widespread and

2. Some ideas which emerged from the Women Power and Politics Conference, Adelaide, October 1994.

3. Chapter 5 of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Women and Political Power: Survey carried out among the 150 National Parliaments ...*, 1992 details these measures.

How to increase the representation and effectiveness of women in parliament²

Proportional voting systems or multi-member electorates

In Norway and other countries multi-member electorates have resulted in higher numbers of women than in countries with different electoral systems.

Increase women members of political parties; increase number of women candidates preparing and presenting for party office and pre-selection; and reform of pre-selection processes

Equal numbers of women on selection panels, and an equal share of safe seats, together with more woman candidates so that lone women candidates do not stand against numbers of male candidates.

Reform of parliamentary procedures and sitting hours

The lack of creches in parliaments, family un-friendly sitting hours and patterns and the 'masculine', confrontationalist or antagonistic style of parliamentary debate can be disincentives to women.

Supporting organisations

Organisations such as WEL in Australia and the 300 Group in the UK or an 'Emily's List' (e.g. US, UK) which provides financial support.

Support by women in parliament for each other

Keeping the debate on the issues rather than on personalities increases respect and does not invite denigration of women.

Within Parliament, the need for a 'critical mass' of women

Parliamentarians from Scandinavian countries suggest that a 'critical mass' of women in Parliament is about one third of the total. At this stage it becomes easier for women to be pre-selected and elected and to influence the parliamentary agenda.

Use of the Protocol to CEDAW to make the case of discrimination against women in parliamentary representation

New Zealand women plan to appeal to the United Nations over the lack of equity of representation in the New Zealand Parliament.

has accounted for the appointment to Parliament of women in countries such as Dominica, Saint Lucia and Uganda.

In Australia, it is widely understood that the root of the problem of gender imbalance in political life lies with the major political parties. While political philosophies and ideologies obviously differ, parties generally view gender imbalance as a serious and electorally damaging issue, and the larger parties are developing strategies to address it.⁴ The Australian Labor Party is committed to having women candidates in 35 per cent of its 'winnable' seats by 2002. The Liberal Party

4. Note that the Democrats and Greens have had at least equal representation of women in Federal Parliament. The National Party at present has no women in either House.

has established a national Liberal Women's Candidates Forum to attract female candidates for Parliament: strategies focus on the provision of training, support and community education to encourage women candidates and potential candidates.

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