



RESEARCH NOTE

Number 21, 25 October 1995

ISSN 1323-5664

Women in the Parliaments of the World: Update

"On the threshold of the twenty-first century, it is greatly to be hoped that the Parliaments of all countries will become places where men and women work side by side in equitable proportion and legislate in a spirit of partnership and complementarity, for the common good of society as a whole".¹

Proportion of Women in Single or Lower House²: Selected Countries

	- % -		
	1991	1993	1995
Australia	6.7	9.5	9.5
Austria	21.8	21.3	23.5
Bangladesh	10.3	10.3	10.6
Belgium	8.5	9.4	12.0
Canada	13.2	13.2	18.0
Chile	5.8	5.8	7.5
China	21.3	21.0	21.0
Cuba	33.9	22.8	22.8
Czechoslovakia/Czech Republic	8.7	10.0	10.0
Denmark	33.0	33.0	33.0
El Salvador	8.3	8.3	10.7
Finland	38.5	39.0	33.5
France	5.7	6.1	6.4
Germany	20.4	20.5	26.2
Greece	5.3	5.3	6.0
Hungary	7.0	7.3	11.4
Iceland	23.8	23.8	25.4
India	7.1	7.3	8.0
Indonesia	12.4	12.2	12.2
Iraq	10.8	10.8	10.8
Iran	1.5	3.4	3.5
Ireland	7.8	12.1	13.3
Israel	6.7	9.2	9.2
Italy	12.8	8.1	15.1
Japan	2.3	2.3	2.7
Jordan	0.0	0.0	1.3
Malaysia	5.0	5.0	7.8
Netherlands	21.3	29.3	31.3
New Zealand	16.5	16.5	21.2
Nicaragua	16.3	16.3	16.3
Norway	35.8	35.8	39.4
Papua New Guinea	0.0	0.0	0.0
Philippines	9.0	10.6	8.8
Poland	13.5	9.6	13.0
Rep. of Macedonia (former Yugoslav)	..	4.2	3.3
Romania	3.6	3.5	4.1
Rwanda	17.1	17.1	4.3
Seychelles	16.0	45.8	27.3
Singapore	4.9	3.7	3.7
South Africa	2.6	2.8	25.0
Spain	14.6	16.0	16.0
Sri Lanka	4.9	4.9	5.3
Sweden	38.1	33.5	40.4
Switzerland	14.0	17.5	18.0
Syrian Arab Republic	8.4	8.4	9.6
Thailand	3.8	4.2	6.1
Turkey	1.3	1.8	1.8
U.S.A.	6.4	10.8	10.9
Uganda	12.2	12.6	17.4
United Arab Emirates	0.0	0.0	0.0
United Kingdom	6.3	9.2	9.5
USSR	15.3		
Vietnam	17.7	18.5	18.5

Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) studies of women in the Parliaments of the world in 1991, 1993 and 1995 vividly demonstrate their under-representation in decision making. At 30 June 1991 women made up 11% of the world's national parliamentarians. (In its 1991 study the IPU surveyed only the composition of the single or lower chamber of the national parliament of each country). By 30 June 1993 this figure for women's participation had dropped to 10.1%, but in 1995 women represented 11.6% of the parliamentarians in the single or lower chamber. In Australia women make up only 9.5% of the members of the House of Representatives, below the world average. In upper house or Senate percentages of women, Australia is one of the very few countries where women have a greater representation than in the lower house (22.4% of Australian Senators in 1995 are women compared with 9.4 percent of upper houses world wide).

In 1993 the Seychelles reached near parity of representation, with 45.8% of members of its unicameral parliament being women, but this dropped to 27.3% by 1995. Parliaments in which, in 1995, about a third of the representatives are women are those of Sweden (40.4%), Norway (39.4%) Finland (33.5%) Denmark (33.0%) and Netherlands (31.3% of the lower house). It has been claimed that the 'critical mass', the percentage required for women to significantly affect policies and procedures, is about 33%.

¹ Pierre Cornillon, Secretary General, IPU in Foreword to *Women in Parliaments 1945-1995, A World Statistical Survey*, 1995.

² IPU *Women in Parliament* maps of 30 June 1991, 30 June 1993 and 30 June 1995.

Some countries have shown marked changes in the representation of women in their parliaments during the 1991-1995 period of the IPU surveys. In South Africa, with the advent of multiracial democracy, the female membership of the National Assembly increased from 2.8% in 1993 to 25% after the 1994 elections.⁴ Some of the countries that were formerly part of the USSR have had a marked decline in the representation of women.

Twelve countries (Bhutan, Comoros, Djibouti, Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Kuwait, Mauritania, Papua New Guinea, Saint Lucia, Saint Kitts and Nevis, and the United Arab Emirates) have **no** women in their national Assemblies. In Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates 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 by the United Nations and IPU. Positive action to achieve greater equality for women has been adopted in a number of 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 1991 Inter-Parliamentary Survey of the 150 national Parliaments then existing 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).

³ Some ideas which emerged from the Women Power and Politics Conference, Adelaide, October 1994.

⁴ Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Women in Parliaments 1945-1995, A World Statistical Survey*, Geneva, 1995. Note that a woman became the Speaker of the new South African National Assembly.

How to increase the representation and effectiveness of women in parliament³

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-unfriendly 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.

Adherence to the CEDAW Articles to eliminate discrimination against women particularly in parliamentary representation, decision making and public life

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

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.

Women may also sometimes sit in Parliament as a result of a system of reserved seats. Bangladesh, for example, reserves 30 seats in its parliament of 300 members for women, Eritrea reserves 10 of 105 seats and the United Republic of Tanzania reserves 15 of 255 seats for women. The phenomenon of appointment to 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 problem of gender imbalance in political life must be addressed by the major political parties, particularly through reform of preselection processes. The Australian Labor Party is committed to having women candidates in 35% of its 'winnable' seats by 2002. The Liberal Party has established a 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. The National Party at present has no women in either Federal

House. The Democrats and Greens have to date had at least equal representation of women in Federal Parliament.

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